

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 7 Lecture 40
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lectures, we talked about anti-caste movements in Northern, Western and Southern parts of India. A lesser known history of anti-caste movement is in Bengal. And this is significant because Bengal is considered an enlightened place due to the Marxist ideology. However, this seemingly aware space also hides many caste-ridden narratives. In this lecture we will learn about Bengal, Caste, and the Matua movement.

One of the most significant changes during the colonial period was the emergence and consolidation of the Aryan myth, which became central to Orientalist thought from the time of William Jones onward. This theory, based on a questionable leap from linguistic affinity to racial identity, shaped both colonial scholarship and nationalist discourses in profound ways. Over time, it became such an entrenched part of intellectual and political thinking that its influence is often overlooked, even in liberal discussions of cultural "integration," "unity in diversity," or "civilizational values." Paradoxically, even many anti-Brahmanical and oppositional theories of caste have, in various ways, engaged with or been shaped by this framework. With colonial modernity, "history" as a category became increasingly central to discussions of caste, but its critical potential was often undermined by essentialist interpretations rooted in race or ethnicity. A useful example of how colonial-era intellectuals reshaped high-caste justifications of caste can be found in Jogendranath Bhattacharya's *Hindu Castes and Sects* (1896). Written by a Nadia-based pandit and lawyer at a time when debates on caste in Bengal were rapidly intensifying, the text offers insights into the shifts taking place. Bhattacharya dismisses the traditional varṇasaṅkara theory of caste origins, which explained "mixed" castes through irregular marriage and illegitimate unions—an idea he finds implausible. He also acknowledges that occupational boundaries between castes had become increasingly fluid. However, caste, in his view, remained valuable as a social institution that fostered cohesion among different races and clans. He argues that the crisis of ancient India had designed caste laws not only to unify scattered tribal groups but also to assimilate successive waves of foreign invaders into Indian society. This perspective—of caste as a system that maintained unity through differentiation—was later elaborated upon by a wide range of Bengal intellectuals, including, for a time, Rabindranath Tagore. During the Swadeshi movement, this idea of a harmoniously stratified society was frequently invoked to justify caste as a form of cultural integration rather than exclusion.

Tagore subscribed to the idea of caste as the basic principle which informed the harmonious co-existence of the diverse constituencies that comprised Hindu society in India: In his writing, *Nationalism*, he mentions that, “[India’s] caste system is the outcome of [a] spirit of toleration. For India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, while fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as the circumstances permitted. This has produced something like a United States, a social federation whose common name is Hinduism.”

Caste, in this view, was not a rigid hierarchy but a system that allowed for social cohesion while preserving distinct identities. However, it would be an oversimplification to see these shifts in caste thought as merely a linear process of acculturation or passive adoption of Orientalist and colonial discourses. While colonial epistemologies undoubtedly influenced the ways caste was conceptualized, Indian intellectuals engaged with these frameworks in complex and often contradictory ways—sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes resisting and reinterpreting them to serve their own social and political objectives. The emergence of new historical narratives about caste in the colonial era, therefore, was not a straightforward process of Western imposition but rather a dynamic and contested space where multiple perspectives and interests intersected.

Dalits in Bengal were popularly known as the Namasudras. Sumit Sarkar in *Beyond Naitonalist Frames*, mentions, “‘History’ entered most of these tracts in ways that were highly diverse, but always crucial for the identities and arguments being projected. An exploration of the specificities of lower-caste handling, appropriations and inventions of history has some intrinsic interest: it can also help to raise a number of important methodological queries.” Thus, the community previously identified as ‘Chandals’ before the 1891 Census was reclassified as ‘Namasudra or Chandal’ in 1891, ‘Namasudra (Chandal)’ in 1901, and simply ‘Namasudras’ from 1911 onward (Faridpur District Gazetteer, Calcutta, 1925, p. 47). However, it is important to note that officials generally showed little sympathy toward such reclassification efforts and often echoed the prejudices of the upper castes. For instance, E.A. Gait, the Bengal Census Commissioner in 1901, rejected most of these claims, while his successor, L.S.S. O’Malley, dismissed petitions from some Namasudras seeking recognition as Brahmins as “extraordinary,” remarking, “Thus do the pretensions of the low castes grow.”

The 1925 Faridpur District Gazetteer recounts a police report that documents a stark instance of caste-based discrimination and the subsequent assertion of resistance by the Chandal community. In this case, a wealthy Chandal from Amgram village in Bakargunj district extended an invitation to a funeral feast, only to be met with outright rejection from the Kayasthas and other high-caste groups. Their refusal was not merely passive but accompanied by taunts and reproaches that reinforced the prevailing social stigma against the Chandals. The incident highlights the deeply entrenched caste hierarchies that governed social interactions, where even an act of hospitality from a lower-caste individual was met with disdain rather than acceptance.

In response to this humiliation, the Chandals, particularly those from the neighboring Gopalganj and Maksudpur police stations in Faridpur, mobilized a large-scale economic and social boycott. Organized through a meeting of village headmen, this collective action involved a complete withdrawal of agricultural labor and other services from both high-caste Hindus and Muslims. The implications of this boycott were far-reaching, as the cultivation of fields belonging to these groups was largely dependent on Chandal labor. The report specifically notes that “at present, fields belonging to Mahomedans and other castes are cultivated by Chandals, who for their trouble take half the produce....” By refusing to provide their labor, the Chandals sought to disrupt the agrarian economy, using economic leverage as a means of protest against social oppression.

Beyond the economic dimension, the movement also sought to enhance the social standing of the community through stricter self-regulation. One of the measures undertaken was the prohibition of Chandal women from visiting markets, ostensibly to preserve respectability.

This aspect of the movement underscores a recurring pattern in caste mobility efforts, where attempts to elevate a community's status have often been accompanied by the imposition of stricter patriarchal controls over women. By restricting women's movement in public spaces, the leaders of the boycott reinforced existing gender norms, making social upliftment contingent upon the regulation of female behavior.

Furthermore, the Chandal village leaders formally lodged complaints with the police, detailing the injustices they endured at the hands of upper-caste Hindus, with particular grievances against the Kayasthas, whose treatment of them was described as intolerable. Their demands extended beyond immediate social and economic concerns to include prison reform. Specifically, they sought to abolish the practice by which Chandal inmates in jails were automatically assigned to sweeping duties—a policy that reflected and reinforced their low social status. By challenging this practice, the Chandals not only protested against their treatment in the broader caste society but also within institutional structures that perpetuated their marginalization.

This episode serves as a significant example of lower-caste assertion in colonial India, where economic withdrawal, social regulation, and formal petitions were used as strategies to challenge caste oppression. At the same time, it also illustrates the complexities of such movements, particularly in their intersections with patriarchal norms, highlighting the ways in which social mobility was negotiated within the constraints of both caste and gender hierarchies.

A significant political intervention was made through the Matua movement. The Matua Movement is a socio-religious and political movement that emerged in 19th-century Bengal, primarily among the Namasudras, a historically oppressed Dalit community. The movement was founded by Harichand Thakur in Orakandi (now in Bangladesh), advocating for social equality, self-respect, and spiritual upliftment outside the Brahminical hierarchy. Harichand rejected caste-based discrimination and emphasized direct devotion to God, without the need for priests, rituals, or Sanskrit scriptures. His teachings encouraged the oppressed masses to pursue education, economic self-sufficiency, and community solidarity, laying the foundation for a strong Dalit consciousness in Bengal.

After Harichand's death, his son Guruchand Thakur took the movement forward, expanding its institutional and political reach. He established schools and educational institutions for Dalits, challenging the upper-caste monopoly over knowledge. Under his leadership, the Matuas became more organized, demanding government representation, legal rights, and social justice. Guruchand's activism played a crucial role in securing separate electorates and reservations for Dalits under British rule. By the early 20th century, the Matua community had become an important force in Dalit assertion and identity politics in Bengal.

After India's Partition in 1947, large numbers of Namasudra refugees migrated to West Bengal, where they faced severe discrimination and neglect. The Matua Mahasangha, a socio-political organization formed to protect their interests, fought for land rights, education, and recognition as Scheduled Castes. One of the darkest chapters in their history was the Marichjhapi Massacre (1979), where Dalit refugees were brutally evicted and killed by the West Bengal government while trying to settle in the Sunderbans. Despite these struggles, the Matua movement continued to grow, and in recent years, it has played a major role in West Bengal's electoral politics, influencing Dalit voting patterns.

Today, the Matua Mahasangha, led by descendants of Harichand Thakur, continues to be a strong voice for Dalit rights, refugee rehabilitation, and political empowerment. The movement has transformed from a religious sect into a powerful social and political force, shaping Bengal's anti-caste discourse and ensuring that the struggles of marginalized communities remain central to state and national politics.

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's book, *Caste, Protest and Identity: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* explores the social and political struggles of the Namasudra community in colonial Bengal, highlighting their fight against caste oppression and demand for political representation. He examines how the British caste-based census classifications reinforced marginalization but also gave the Namasudras a collective identity, leading to organized resistance. Bandyopadhyay argues that their political consciousness evolved over time, stating, "The Namasudras moved from social protest to political assertion, engaging with both nationalist and communal politics to safeguard their interests." He also highlights the contradictions in Dalit political strategies, as leaders like Jogendra Nath Mandal initially allied with Ambedkarite ideals but later collaborated with the Muslim League, only to be disillusioned after Partition. The book underscores how Partition displaced Namasudras into West Bengal, where they faced continued discrimination and economic struggles, leading to refugee resistance movements. As Bandyopadhyay notes, "The tragedy of the Namasudras lay in their exclusion both in their homeland and in the new nation they were forced to embrace." Through a detailed historical analysis, he presents the Namasudra movement as a crucial yet often overlooked chapter in India's Dalit resistance.

Commenting on the literary productions by the Namasudras that often served as an assertion of identity against the Census, Sumit Sarkar notes, "The emergence of lower-caste authors and readers obviously pre-supposed a certain spread of formal education. A link can be suggested also between the widespread assumption in early-twentieth-century caste tracts about the need for 'historical' arguments, and the new importance given to history in schools of the 'modern' or colonial kind. History of any sort seems to have been absent from the curricula of the traditional pathshala, which had concentrated on practical training in language, arithmetic and accountancy, plus bits of religious, moral, and grammatical instruction. The printed Bengali textbooks which the Calcutta School Book Society began bringing out from 1817, in contrast, chose history as a principal subject, and this pattern was only intensified over time, with Vidyasagar, for instance, himself bringing out a vernacular adaptation of a well-known textbook on Indian history. But it is possible to exaggerate the specific importance of what is usually described as modern, Western, or English education—alternately hailed in historiography as harbinger of renaissance modernity, or denounced as key instrument of cultural subjugation—in creating the conditions of possibility for lower-caste writings and affirmations. What was involved at best, so far as such subordinated groups were concerned, was in any case not English but vernacular schooling, and even there literacy rates remained abysmally low."

The key transformations of this period were not merely broad societal or political changes but were closely tied to the emergence of print culture and the rise of vernacular prose. With the expansion of print technology and the increasing affordability of printed texts, access to knowledge and participation in public discourse grew. This shift enabled the gradual formation of what Jürgen Habermas calls the literary public sphere—a space for discussion and debate that was, in principle, more open than the earlier scribal culture, which had been controlled by elite, high-caste men. In the Indian context, this meant that groups historically excluded from intellectual and literary spaces—such as a growing number of women and lower-caste men—now had at least a potential avenue for engagement. One of the most

significant impacts of print culture was the expansion of public argumentation beyond traditional caste and religious elites. Previously, debates about caste and social mobility were largely confined to localized interactions, caste councils, or religious institutions, where high-caste scholars and the ulema dominated discussions. With print, however, these debates spilled into the public sphere, reaching a much wider audience and becoming more difficult to control. Caste, in particular, became a highly contested issue around the turn of the twentieth century, as printed texts allowed marginalized communities to challenge long-established hierarchies, assert claims to higher status, and mobilize collective action. To fully grasp the transformative power of print, it is useful to compare it with earlier methods of documenting caste mobility. Before the rise of print, information about caste status and social shifts was largely preserved through oral traditions, inscriptions, and handwritten manuscripts, making it difficult to trace systematic patterns. For example, historian Hitesranjan Sanyal's pioneering study on social mobility in pre-colonial Bengal relied on indirect textual evidence. He had to compare caste lists found in two Sanskrit upapuranas from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with scattered references in later Bengali literature to reconstruct how certain groups, such as the Sadgops, sought upward mobility. Such fragmented sources highlight the limitations of pre-print documentation—caste status claims were fluid, inconsistent, and often left little trace in historical records. By contrast, print allowed caste groups to document, circulate, and institutionalize their social claims more effectively. Pamphlets, periodicals, and books became tools for articulating grievances, asserting caste pride, and resisting discrimination. This new medium also enabled community leaders to shape public narratives about their caste history, often creating genealogies, myths, or reinterpretations of religious texts to justify their claims to higher status. Print thus provided a means of consolidating identity and influencing broader public perception in ways that were previously unavailable. From a Habermasian perspective, the spread of print in colonial India contributed to the formation of a public sphere, though one that functioned differently from its European counterpart. In Europe, the rise of print and literacy facilitated the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere where middle-class citizens engaged in rational debate, largely independent of the state or aristocracy. In India, however, this public sphere was deeply shaped by caste divisions, religious affiliations, and colonial structures. While print did help democratize access to knowledge and expand public debate, participation remained highly unequal. Upper-caste and middle-class men dominated much of the printed discourse, and while lower-caste groups and women did enter these spaces, they faced considerable structural barriers. Furthermore, while print culture opened up new spaces for resistance and self-assertion, it also reinforced existing inequalities in some ways. Many caste mobility movements, for instance, sought upward mobility by emulating high-caste norms rather than challenging the caste system itself. This often meant adopting Brahminical customs, reinforcing patriarchal controls within their communities, and distancing themselves from groups deemed lower in the hierarchy. As a result, while print helped amplify marginalized voices, it did not necessarily lead to a radical transformation of social structures; instead, it often facilitated negotiations within the existing caste framework. In sum, the arrival of print culture marked a fundamental shift in how caste was debated, contested, and redefined. It enabled greater participation in public discourse, allowed caste groups to assert their identities more effectively, and created new possibilities for resistance. However, these changes unfolded within a highly stratified society, where access to the public sphere remained uneven and often reproduced existing hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. The Namasudra movement in Bengal, as explored by historians like Sumit Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, reflects a long struggle against caste

oppression, marked by social, economic, and political assertions. Historically labeled as 'Chandals,' the community was reclassified as 'Namasudras' over successive colonial censuses, though British officials often dismissed their claims to a higher status, echoing upper-caste prejudices. Instances like the funeral feast rejection in Bakarganj illustrate how caste hierarchies dictated social interactions, prompting the Namasudras to mobilize economic and social boycotts against upper castes, using labor withdrawal as a form of resistance.

A significant intervention in this struggle came through the Matua movement, founded by Harichand Thakur in the 19th century. Rejecting Brahminical rituals, it promoted self-respect, education, and economic independence for Dalits. His son, Guruchand Thakur, further institutionalized these efforts, advocating for Dalit rights, separate electorates, and reservations under British rule. After Partition (1947), many Namasudras migrated to West Bengal, facing discrimination and state repression, notably during the Marichjhapi Massacre (1979), where refugees were violently displaced. Despite such hardships, the Matua Mahasangha continued to push for Dalit empowerment, and today, the Matua community remains a crucial political force in Bengal, influencing electoral politics and shaping the region's anti-caste discourse.

In the next lecture we will talk about women's movements and writings.