

Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Namasudras of North Bengal: A Changing Profile

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Abstract: *Since the beginning of the bosom of nature, hunger has been the first and foremost hindrance of man in his struggle for existence. In the era of food gathering in human civilization, nature itself has appeared before man with its forests full of flowers, fruits, animals and birds. Neolithic people learned to produce food through the introduction of agriculture. Food collection, food production, fear of nature, and fulfilment of their desires are at the core of the religious beliefs, customs, rituals, and worship that have evolved over the course of human life. Storms, earthquakes, steep, heavy rains, lightning thunders in the sky, and floods have attracted people's attention. To escape from the fear of these natural phenomena and to wish for food crops and good luck, cure diseases and healthy life, and fulfil various desires, people started worshiping nature by imagining various Gods and Goddesses and gave rise to various types of vows, from which various religious beliefs and practices of the aboriginal Namasudras caste of Bengal are born. In fact, Namasudras being agrarians, their worship, rituals, and religious beliefs usually revolved around nature, farmland, and agricultural crops, cows, and fruits. There is a proverb in Bengali "Baro Mashe Tero Parban" which still emerges through the various worship and religious beliefs and rituals of the Namasudras. Gradually their practices and religious beliefs are changing day by day; some worship practices and religious practices are on the verge of extinction at present. The present paper will find out the causes and circumstances of the changing scenario of the religious beliefs and practices of Namasudras community in North Bengal with the help of available sources of information.*

Key Words: *Agriculture, Caste, Community, Nature. Puja-Parban, Religion*

Introduction: India is a multi-linguistics, multi-castes, multi-communities, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. North Bengal is a region whose culture and traditions reflect the whole of Bengal as well as the whole of India. People of various castes and tribes, castes and religions have been living in North Bengal since ancient times to the present day. Some of them are permanent residents, while others have settled here for some time and moved elsewhere. Some have merged with the next human flow. The remnants of these human groups did not disappear completely. The combination of language, culture and population has created a mixed population. Among the people of North Bengal, we find many castes and tribes, like- *Santhal, Munda, Rabha, Toto, Boro, Mech, Rajbanshi, Namasudra, Brahmin*, etc. *Namashudra* is one of the largest Scheduled Castes in North Bengal. Most of these people who live in North Bengal are permanent residents of the region from East Bengal after the Partition. In terms of diversity, all communities

are unique in their language, culture, caste, and religion. Although the language, culture and worship of one community have influenced the language, culture and worship of other castes and communities. Among the rituals of the present second largest caste i.e., Namasudra of North Bengal is *Surja Puja, Gassi Puja, Deul or Del or Hazra Puja and Charak Puja, Gorakhnath Puja, Bura-Buri Puja, Tinnather Mela, Khestar Puja, Natai Puja, Hanchra-Panchra Puja, Bipadtarini Puja, Sumati Puja, Bastu Puja, Amabati or Amapoti Puja, Lus Puja or Dhanai-Punai Puja, Hori-Guru Puja* etc. But as a result of the change in the socio-economic condition of *Namasudra* society, various worships and festivals of *Namasudra* community are no longer seen as before, some worships have decreased a lot compared to before, and some worship have almost disappeared. Hence, we have tried in this research paper to record the *Namasudras'* own religious beliefs and practices of this caste and its changing scenario at present.

Aims and Objectives of the Paper: Our sole aims and objectives of writing this research paper on the changing religious beliefs and practices of the *Namasudras* of North Bengal are as follows:

1. To find out the actual religious beliefs and practices of the *Namasudras* at the beginning.
2. To find out what religious beliefs and worship ceremonies are observed by the *Namasudras* of North Bengal at present.
3. To search why most of the worship, festivals, and religious beliefs of the *Namasudras* are based on agriculture and nature.
4. To record the extent to which the *Namasudras* changed in some respects in their own worship and religious beliefs, and to inquire into the causes of these changes at present.

Area of Study: We have developed this research paper on the changing scenario of the *Namasudras*, the second largest caste of North Bengal, in their own religious beliefs and worship. Because their religious beliefs and worship are constantly changing due to various reasons and some are on the verge of extinction.

Methodological Approach: We have used analytical method, survey method, and comparative methods to prepare the paper. Various information regarding the past and present religious beliefs and worship of the *Namasudras* of North Bengal have been collected and researched through these methods. Through it is a comparative approach; we have presented with information on the evolution of the changing religious beliefs and worship of the *Namasudras*. Besides, we used census data through quantitative methods in this research paper. During the course of our research, we conducted surveys at various districts of North Bengal and directly interviewed the people of different *Namasudra* families of different districts, observed their *puja-parbans* and collected various data to investigate the nature of

their religious beliefs. Besides, we have collected various reference books and journals from the National Library and other district libraries of North Bengal.

The Origin of the *Namasudras*: In ancient times the present *Namasudras* were known as 'Banga'. '*Bangabhumi*' is named after this 'Banga' caste. This 'Banga' caste belongs to Austric race. The history of this Austric caste in Bengal is about 65 thousand years old. *Bangabhumi* was not included in Manu's *Aryabarta*. The Aryans arrived in India about 1500 BCE, but the history of the 'Banga' in Bengal goes back almost 4500 years (Biswas, 2021, p.13). In the *Dasamandala* of the *Purushukta*, depicting the Vedic period, Aryans society was basically divided into *Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras* (Smith, 1911, p.14). It was probably the Brahmin scholars who first identified this "Banga" aboriginal caste as '*Chandal*'. In the first census of 1872 A.D., the '*Bangas*' were written as *Chandals* and referred to as 'Semi-Hinduized Aborigines' (Census, 1872: CXII-CXXIV). In the census report of 1911, this '*Chandal*' is replaced by the word *Namasudra*. In 1824, Christian missions were established in Faridpur district in Bengal. The name *Namasudra* was first officially recorded in place of the name *Chandal* in the 1911 census report by Gurchand Thakur, son of Sri Sri Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua Religion, with the help of Mead Saheb, head of the Christian Mission at Faridpur. According to the *Matua* religion, all are entitled to equal respect and dignity irrespective of caste and religion and untouchability and discrimination are the greatest sins. Hence in 1911 CE, Guru Chand Thakur appealed to the British to use the honorific term '*Namasudra*' instead of *Chandal* and *Sudra* against the caste and caste system (Roy, 2022, p.83-84). The *Chandals* of the Gangetic delta were mentioned as 'Out Caste' in the 1891 census (Census, 1891, p. 255-262). Dr. Upendranath Biswas in his book "*Vote Bank: Matua Nay Namashudra*" has termed the *Namashudras* as '*Bangas*', who are the aboriginal caste of Bengal (Biswas 2021, p. 5-23). In the Bengal District Gazetteers published from Faridpur in East Bengal in 1925, O'Malley referred to the *Namashudras* i.e. *Chandals* as the 'primitive natives of the land of East Bengal' (O'Malley, 2016, p.47 & 87). S. P. Chatterjee in his book "Bengal in Maps" mentions *Namashudras* as descendants of tribals of deltaic Bengal (Chatterjee, 1984, p.44). Prof. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar in his book '*Bangladesher Itihas*' has mentioned 'Banga', '*Shuma*', '*Shabar*', '*Pulinda*', '*Kirat*' and *Pundras* as an aboriginal caste similar to the tribes of Bengal. He has very nicely shown in his book that the *Kol, Shabar, Kulinda, Hari, Dom, Chandal*, etc. races of Bangladesh are the descendants of the tribals of Bengal (Maumdar, 1988, p.14). Similarly, Nishit Ranjan Roy in his book '*Banglar Katha*' mentions that in ancient times Bengal was inhabited by a powerful caste called 'Austric' who belonged to the non-Aryan caste. And the ancestors of the primitive races like *Haris, Doms* and *Chandals* were the descendants of the Austric (Roy, 1960, p.66). The *Chandals*, the original inhabitants of Bengal, were mainly agriculturists and lived in villages (Bharatkosh,1964, p.4).

So, it is easily proved that 'Banga' i.e., *Namasudras* of Bengal are the people of the Austro-Asiatic or Austric linguistic group. These ancient "Banga" tribes of East Bengal were non-Aryan people and original inhabitants of Bengal and were called 'Out-Castes' as well and now they are called *Namasudras*. Bengal was also divided when the country was divided on the basis of Hindu Muslim religion in 1947 CE by the conspiracy of some power-hungry leaders. East Bengal is a part of Pakistan and West Bengal is a part of India. When the persecution of non-Muslims began in East Pakistan, many people of the *Namasudra* caste were forced to migrate to West Bengal, Assam and Tripura in India due to partition. Even before partition West Bengal had a large population of *Namasudras* but their numbers were much less than in East Bengal. Anyway, in this research paper, we have tried to show how far the various rituals and cultures of the indigenous agriculturist *Namasudra* Caste in ancient Bengal are still seen in present-day North Bengal. In undivided Bengal, *Namasudras* were mostly living in districts like Jessore, Khulna, Bakherganj, Dhaka, Maymonsingh and Faridpur. But as a result of the partition, a large number of the *Namasudras* were forced to leave East Bengal and move to West Bengal and North Bengal in particular (Ghosh, 2007, p.114).

The Religious Beliefs of the *Namasudras*: The *Namasudras* of North Bengal are ardently believed and practices the following rituals. But the most interesting thing is that their rituals are changing day by day.

***Amabati* Worship:** The rural *Namasudra* families of North Bengal usually perform *Amabati Puja* in the Bengali month of *Asada* every year. This worship is usually celebrated for three days or seven days. This worship is called *Basumati* or *Dharitri Puja*. The *Namasudra* folk community does not touch the ground with any object like a spade, sickle, or plow till the seven days of worship. They believe that this is the period of Maa *Vasumati's* menstruation, so no harm can be done to the ground at this time, Maa *Basumati* will be hurt if not. Agricultural *Namasudras* earn their livelihood by tilling the soil and tilling the land throughout the year. So, they give special status to Mother *Vasumati* or Earth through this worship (Roy, 2016, p.110-111). On the day of Puja, the younger children of the family build a temporary small temple of banana peel near the house and worship there and they enjoy collecting dates or market vegetables or chocolates, etc. This worship is still prevalent among the Rajbanshi community like the *Namasudra* community of North Bengal (Interviewed with Mandal Lalita: 06.07.2022). But at present, this worship is on the way to extinction in *Namasudra* society. Because a section of *Namasudras* have changed their agrarian livelihood and the influence of Brahmanism has deeply affected this society, *Amabati Puja* is no longer celebrated as it used to be. At the beginning soil and agriculture were the only means of life and livelihood of *Namasudras*, so they worshiped soil as mother. But at present people of this society are engaged in various professions apart from agriculture, and the influence of this

worship among them has gradually decreased (Interviewed with Bhuba Bala: 29.08.2023).

Hanchra Panchra Worship: Apart from the worship of various mythological Gods and Goddesses in India, the *Namasudra* society also worships various types of Folk Gods and Goddesses. One such worship is the *Hanchra Thaikaran Puja* of the *Namasudra* farming community of North Bengal. On the first day of the month of *Paush*, the young girls of the village plant a banana sapling at the foot of the *Tulsi* temple with their small children build the altar of *Hanchra Thaikaran* and they perform *Hanchra* worship every day in the Bengali month of *paush* (Interviewed with Chhobita Sarkar:15.01.2022). During worship every morning and evening around the small banana tree on the altar of *Hanchra Thaikaran*, all the pilgrims pick a handful of *durba* grass from the field and tie it, and offer it to the Goddess. Five types of flowers including *shimul*, and mustard flowers are picked from the field and offered to the goddess. Worship is performed with *batasa*, incense and burning lamps. No Brahmin priest is required in this worship and there is no idol of *Hanchra Devi*. To appease the Goddess, *Namasudra* girls sing *bandana* songs and they act as priests. In the morning and evening the elder sister would take her younger siblings in her arms and sing *Hachara Devi Bandhana* in a beautiful voice, it was a beautiful morning and evening full of affection and love. This compassion towards younger siblings is full of human qualities. One great songs of this worship are mentioned below (Roy, 2016, p.19):

*'Ebar tumi jaore thaikron
Khoch pyanchara niya
Samner bochor aiso tumi
Shankho shari poira.
Tumi thaikron valo
Amar bhayere raikho valo
Tumi thaikron valo
Amar boinere raikho valo.'*

In the *Namasudra* society of North Bengal, this *Hanchra Panchra Puja* has almost disappeared at present. Once upon a time, children in the rural areas of East Bengal and North Bengal suffered from malnutrition which caused sores and rashes on their bodies, but in absence of modern medical facilities at that time they believed that this worship would cure their children. So, in their rural society, all the children of the village would gather at someone's house and plant a banana tree to worship *Hanchra Panchra*. But now a day, due to the change in their socio-economic status and the advent and spread of modern medicine, they abandoned their religious beliefs and seek treatment from the nearest hospital or drug store, as a result of which rashes on the body are no longer seen as before. Naturally, this worship gradually died out among the children of the *Namasudra* society.

Surya Puja: *Surya Puja* is performed from *Sripanchami* of the Bengali month *Magh* to *Maghi Purnima* day. Worship is usually on Sunday or Thursday. Surya idols are made of clay in the courtyard of the house. The idol is made vertically in the north-south direction and the idol is made so big that twenty to twenty-five devotees can worship the idol together facing east. The idol is decorated with garlands of marigold flowers. Besides, devotees beautify all places of worship by cutting different types of *Alpanas* around the altar. Various forms of primitive worship emerged in Sun worship. Sun worship was popular in different countries under different names, "*Ra*" in Egypt, and "*Remi*" in Mexico. We will find many deities of the Vedas in other *Bratas* and *worships*. Through different seasons, different events have attracted people's thoughts, and based on these events, different concepts of deities and deities have arisen. Various pujas have originated in the society to pray for crops, good luck, wealth, and well-being among all Aryan and non-Aryan people. Sun is the source of all the energy of the earth. So, man cannot deny the majesty and magnificence of the Sun. It is clear that the sun worship performed by the women of the *Namasudra* society is also a repetition of primitive culture. Naturally, the *Surya Puja* of the *Namasudra* society expresses the desires of the female mind, love, joy, marriage, procreation, prosperity, etc. desired by unmarried girls. Since *Namasudra* society was agrarian, the desire for children seems to have merged with the desire for crops through creation and fertility-centered sun worship (Kumar, 2013, p.19).

The materials require for the worship are lamps, resin, resin pot, ghee, and branches of five types of dry trees, '*jagdumur*', banana, honey etc. This worship is usually performed on three days. Most of those who worship Surya are unmarried women and brides. It is said that unmarried women worship the Sun to get the groom of their choice and newlyweds to get children. On the first day every worshiper has to abstain from food. They eat fruits during the day and at night they may take vegetable food, which is usually prepared in the house where the puja is taking place. In the evening of this day, they all made an idol of the god "Surya" out of clay. On the second day, this prayer can be divided into two parts. One is the morning session and the other is the evening session. Before sunrise, all the devotees take a bath in the river and stand in front of the sun image for worship till the sun rises. At this time, they have a light (lamp) in their hand. After the sun rises, the lamp is lowered and the worship is completed. Similarly in the afternoon, the worship starts before sunset and the worship is completed after sunset. On the third day, the fourth or final phase of Surya worship begins early in the morning. All the devotees take a bath in the river and take water from the river in a resin vessel and put it all over the body of the "Sun" idol to cool him down. In the local language, it is called "*Thol Thanda Kora*". After giving water, the whole ceremony ends. In the *Namasudra* society of North Bengal, the practice of *Surya Puja* is not seen as before. Due to the touch of modernity, improvement in the medical system, social freedom and women's freedom to choose husband of their choice and free

friendship between boys and girls through education, the practice of *Surya Puja* is almost extinct among *Namasudra* girls of North Bengal. Some women of the *Namasudra* community now participate in the *Chhat Puja* of the Biharis instead of the *Surya Puja*. Sun God is worshiped by Biharis through *Chhat Puja*. Once upon a time no Brahmin was needed for this puja. But nowadays in the houses where this *Surya Puja* is still performed, they call the Brahmin for the *jagga* and *mantra* chanting during the puja on the morning of the second day of the worship (Interviewed with Lakshmi Sarkar: 10.02.2022).

Bastu Puja: In Bengal Hindu folk society, there are various reforms in relation to housing, the Gods and Goddesses of *Bastu* are created from the desire for the well-being of things. *Bastu Puja* is held in Bengali *Poush* month. *Bastu Puja* is basically the worship of natural energy. No Vedic or mythological Gods, no mantras or priests needed. In recent times, however, in some houses, this ritual is performed with the help of priest chanting. An altar is made out of the soil that comes out of this fireplace excavation. Right in the middle of the altar, a hand-sized piece of jute stick is buried and garlanded with marigold flowers and given the form of *Bastu Thakur*. Mother and the daughter-in-law of the house performed the worship with conch, bells, *kanshar* and *uludhoni*. This worship is done for the Agni God and Goddess of land (Interviewed with Sadasi Sarkar: 10.03.2021).

Most of the people of *Namasudra* society lived in mud houses. So, their house often caught fire due to various reasons. As a result, many times have to be destitute. Therefore, through this worship, they pray to the fire god and earth goddess for the stability of the house. At the end of the puja, fruits, and pies are distributed as prasad to everyone in the house and the neighborhood. In some places, this worship is done by burying the branch of *jiol* tree in *Bastu* worship place. This worship by applying oil-vermillion-sandalwood to the *jiol* tree is actually a part of the nature worship of the primitive people. The root leaves from the branches of the tree, but the fruit does not grow from the fruit. So, from that point of view, the tree is a symbol of permanence. There is no mantra or story of *Bastu Puja* in Aryan civilization. When people entered the agricultural age from the hunter-gatherer stage, they had a special need to live permanently. But at that time, due to natural adversity, they often had to change their residence, which was difficult in the socio-economic context of that time. So, it is natural to believe in *Bastu Puja* in the hope of permanent residence. Nature worship is actually a primitive instinct of man, in this regard; Sir James Fraser mentions different concepts in different parts of the world. Tree worship is common almost everywhere in the world. The conventional wisdom is that the primitive ancestor lived on trees when the earth was not fully habitable. Fruits, clothes and wood were collected from this tree. So before learning agriculture, this tree was the only way of life for people. And still, people make houses and furniture with the help of trees. So, the role of trees in folk society is undeniable. On the other hand, the sound of breaking leaves and branches of trees

used to frighten people. As a result, tree worship was originally created to remove the evil eye of the deity and evil deity. Another thing that may be associated with tree worship is that various valuable herbs are prepared from trees and vines which save human life. But in Namashudra society, this *Bastu Puja* is not only tree worship, but this worship is for the fulfillment of worldly and non-worldly desires such as protection of *Bastu*, wealth, desire for sons, prevention of diseases, etc (Sarkar, 2013, p.34-36). But this worship is also on the way to extinction today. As the financial condition of the Namasudras of North Bengal is somewhat better than before, their houses are no longer thatched houses many have replaced thatched houses with tin houses and paved houses. As a result, the tendency of houses to burn down due to fires in rural areas has also decreased. Apart from that, mud houses are no longer visible

Gorakhnath Puja: Agriculture is the backbone of the Namashudra society's livelihood. Abundance of agrarian culture can be observed in this society. And since cow rearing is important in the agricultural society, it can be observed that there are various vows in this society centered on cows. One of the most important festivals as part of folk culture is the worship of *Gorakhnath*. It can be seen in the society of North Bengal that when the house cow gives birth to a new baby, a lot of *nadu with kheer*, *nadu* and rice powder is made from the milk of the new cow and some *nadu* is made and offered to *Gorkhanath Thakur*. Needless to say, there is no statue of Gorkhnath Thakur. '*Daon*' and '*Nori*' are worshiped as symbols of *Gorakhnath*. Here '*Daon*' means the rope tied around the cow's neck which is kept in the cowshed, on the other hand, '*Nori*' is the stick for driving the cow. Here the similarity of '*Daona Puja*' with '*Dori*' *Puja* of Jhargram Sub-Division of West Medinipur district can be noticed. Ropes are made in this region by a type of tall grass called *babui* grass, which is the livelihood of the common people of this region. This grass rope is sold in every market. Therefore, the rope is closely related to the economic life of this region. So, the rope has become a mundane deity. Even in the Namashudra society '*Daon*' and '*Nori*' have come to be worshiped as secular deities. At one end of the worship ceremony in the courtyard of the house, the village boys or shepherds sit in a row and the *kirtans* and other people sit in a row and the worship begins (Poddar, 2021, p.63-64). At the beginning of the worship, the *Kirtanya* rhymes and the little boys of the village in the role of shepherds sing together '*hechcho hechcho*' (Interviewed with Debendranath Sarkar: 24.08.2017) like:

'Gurkhernara – Hachcho ...
Ami Duailam Gai - Hechcho
Bhanglo Hari - Hechcho
Maa Duailo Gai - Hechcho
Bhorlo Hari - Hechcho
Jore Bolo - Hechcho

Sukhe Achhi - Hechcho
Asilo Gorkhnath - Hechcho
Dilen Bor - Hechcho.'

At one time the economic life of the people of the *Namasudra* society was completely dependent on agriculture. And cows were needed for agricultural work. So, they worshiped the cow as the Gorakhnath deity. On the other hand, as various dairy foods are prepared from cow's milk, manure is prepared from dung; the cow has been worshiped since ancient times in the *Namasudra* society for the purpose of drinking milk as a nutritious food. However, along with grazing land, the area of current agricultural land has also decreased. Apart from this, the decline in inclination towards agricultural work among the new generation of children and the increase in the tendency to join various professions, dream of getting educated and taking government jobs and the change in their socio-economic status have reduced this worship in the *Namasudra* society today (Interviewed with Nimai Mandal: 24.07.2023).

Bhagwati Puja: On the first day of the Bengali New Year, *Baisakh*, almost every *Namasudra* farming family worships their cow herds. In the morning the cattle are bathed and *Alpana* is painted on the cows with rice flour which reveals the sweetness and beauty of a special farm life. It is noteworthy that this puja does not require a Brahmin priest. Housewives worship cows with flowers and *durba*. After the *pies* and *pitha* are cooked, they are fed to cows on banana leaves and the white pita is made from rice flour and fed to cows during *puja* (Interviewed with Biswajit Mandal: 16.01.2023). Here the cow is the symbol of *Maa Bhagwati*. So, in the house of *Namasudras* this worship is known as *Bhagwati Puja*. The cow house is a form of temple of Goddess *Bhagwati*. The agrarian *Namasudras* community reveres bulls and cows as deities, because at the beginning of human civilization, when humans started farming, cows were their best friends and the main driving force of agricultural civilization (Roy, 2016, p.109) However, many families of children of *Namasudras* who have left agriculture and taken other professions or are highly educated and have taken various government jobs have given up agriculture and cow husbandry as their profession, so this puja is no longer performed in their homes.

Natai Puja: In order to know the sociological nature of Bengali culture, it is necessary to discuss Bengali women's own style of *puja-parban* and vow ceremonies. The worship of *Natai Thakur*, a folk culture of North Bengal, especially in the *Namashudra* community, is conducted exclusively by peasant women (Sarkar, 2013, p.45). *Pithas* are made with home made fresh rice flour and *Alpanas* are painted in the courtyard. A small pond is cut into the courtyard and the pond is filled with milk and water. A pot of water, an *amrapallab* i.e., a Mango branch tip with five leaves, *durba*, *tulsi*, *kochu pata*, or *venda pata* and a small *pitha*

made of new paddy rice are offered as worship rituals. Only new paddy rice powder's *pitha* is offered as an offering for this worship. On the first, second and last Sunday of the month of *Agrahayan*, *Natai Puja* is held in the evening in the house of the householder. No Brahmin is required in this worship. This worship is done with *Kanshar*, bell, conch, *uludhoni*. When the worship is over, the small children of the house run to the cattle house with their backs decorated with *kochu* leaves in front of the *Thakur* and throw some of the backs into the cow's rice and eat some themselves (Interviewed with Anita Mandal: 11.12.2022). On the last day of this worship, the housewives of each Namashudra family prepare a variety of *pitha* at night for everyone to eat. From this worship and its rules, it is easy to infer that the agrarian Namashudra community took the new rice *pitha* without first eating it themselves after offering it to their food God *Natai Dev* (Interviewed with Suparna Biswas: 27.11.2022). This worship also proves that the important contribution of the Namashudra community to the agricultural economy and culture of North Bengal in Bengal has been flowing through the ages. *Natai Puja* is still practiced among the rural families of the Namashudra community in North Bengal. But those who have become city dwellers for the need of livelihood do not perform this worship anymore.

Khestar Puja: *Khestar Puja* is performed on any Tuesday or Saturday in the Bengali month of *Agrahayana*. The women of the Namashudra family perform *Khestar Puja* by picking up an arrangement *Binna Chhuba* like a *Kash* forest from the river bank or field and burying it in a corner of the courtyard at that place. However, there are some differences in the rules of this puja depending on the place and family. Many families perform this puja on the side of the road (Interviewed with Puspallata Singh: 03.12.2022). *Bichikala* i.e., one kind of banana, *chaul bhaja* of new paddy i.e., rice fried of new paddy, jaggery and ginger are prepared as prasad and the offering is arranged *khoi muri*, *mua* and *bichikala* are given in the *kula* (*kula* i.e., rice threshing). The rule of making offerings on eggplant leaves. At the end of the worship, prasad decorated with brinjal leaves is sprinkled on the rice of the house and the following rhyme is recited along with it –

“*Chhatu Muri Khaiya Jao*
Dhanratna Diya Jao
Dhan Chail Diya Jao
Khet Fasole Bhoira deo. ”

This puja is done for the happiness of the household - prosperity - cure of diseases etc. (Sarkar, 2013, p.49). In the dynamics of society, this worship is not seen as before.

Bura Buri Puja: *Bura Buri Puja* is performed in the afternoon during the *Sankranti* of *Chaitra* and *Kartik* months. According to Nagen Roy, a worshiper informant, *Bura-Buri* is actually a variant form of Shiva-Parvati. Another worshipers Subhash

Siddha and Pushpa Siddha, is said that Shiva-Parbati comes in the form of old people to see whether people revere old man and women, or whether they are unusual in the society. Flowers, fruits, *durba* grass, bel leaf's, *Siddhi* or Gaza, *khoi*, *muri*, *nadu* and moa are used as worship rituals. A priest is not required in this worship. The invitees of the society brought rice and pulses etc. and offered them to *Bura-Buri* God-Goddess. According to folk belief, worshipping *Bura-Buri* will fulfill the child's wish of the barren woman. This worship is done for the peace and well-being of the society and the family, for progeny and financial prosperity. Almost the same type of *Bura* is worshiped by the local Rajbanshis and Rabha communities in Chikliguri village of Kalchini police station in Jalpaiguri district. They consider Bura Thakur as Shiva God (Sarkar, 2013, p.50). This *Buraburi* worship is restricted only to certain families of the *Namasudra* society which is practiced even today.

Hari Guru Puja: The most modern own style of worship practiced in the *Namasudra* community is Hari Guru Worship. A large section of *Namasudra* society people do this worship. Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur introduced the Matua religion against the immorality, adultery, discrimination and untouchability of Brahmanism in undivided Bengal. Hari Guru is worshiped in the house of those who believe in Matua religion in *Namasudra* society. For hundreds of years, the *Namasudras* sought a way out of the oppression, deprivation and untouchability of the upper castes. As a result, with the advent of Buddhism in Bengal, people from various lower caste communities started taking initiation into Buddhism against Brahmanism. Thus, with the arrival of Muslims, some sections of the *Namasudras* were converted to Islam. In the 18th century, *Namasudras* and other untouchables began to convert to Christianity due to the advent of colonial rule in India and the influence of Missionaries of Charities in various places. In such a social and state environment in colonial India, Harichand Thakur established the Matua religion in the middle of the 19th century against the arrogance, hatred and untouchability of the Brahmins and upper caste Hindus towards the lower-class people. Harichand Thakur's son Guruchand Thakur popularized this religion in the *Namasudra* community. From this time a large section of *Namasudras* all over Bengal started worshipping Hari Guru in the name of Harichand and Guru Chand Thakur, which spread among the *Namasudras* of North Bengal after the partition of the country. However, there are 12 precepts observed by Hariguru worshipers who believe in the *Matua* religion; (Roy, 2016:130) like-

*“Always speak the truth.
You will see the other's wife as a mother.
Give love to all the creatures of the world
Follow this Mahabani of Matua.
Don't castes discriminate against people of good character?”*

Worship parents with devotion.
Always beware of lust, anger, greed, infatuation, madness, violence.
Condemning paganism is tantamount to sin.
Abandon the external saintly dress of the body.
Say 'Haribol' with your mouth and do the work with your hands.
Establish Sri Hari Mandir at home.
Bow your head and pray every day.
People, surrender to Shri Hari.
All twelve commandments are possible if obeyed”.

In the mid eighteenth century, Sri Sri Harichand Thakur founded the Matua Sangha to propagate Matua Dharma. The origin of which is mainly from Orakandi. By establishing this association, he went ahead with the conviction of building a society free of truth, love, tolerance, gender equality and caste discrimination. *Baruni Mela* was held on the birth anniversary of Hari Chand Thakur in Orakandi of Faridpur district, present day Bangladesh. After partition, Harichand Thakur's grandson Pramatharanjan Thakur and thousands of Matua devotees migrated to West Bengal. The Namasudra of East Bengal lived mainly in the districts of Bakuhorganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, but they were also scattered in other districts of East and Central Bengal such as Daka and Tyasul (Bandyopadhyay, 2014, p.2). Both Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and his wife Shanti Devi are equally vulnerable to them. Pramatharanjan Thakur established the headquarters of the Matua Sangha in West Bengal at Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas district and started preaching throughout India. The *Namshudra Matua* worships Guru Chand Thakur, son of Harichand Thakur, as their Guru and deity. Both Sri Harichand Thakur and his wife Shanti Devi are equally revered by Namasudra Matua's. To them, Shanti Goddess herself is Goddess Lakshmi. Their pursuits centre on domestic life. Because Matuas are engaged in agriculture. Therefore, the tension of the daily life of the agricultural family, their happiness and sorrow, tears and hopes and disappointments of the family life has been given importance in this religion. *During Hari Guru Puja*, worshipers gather in groups and dance masse with loud '*Haribol Haribol*', '*Haribol Haribol*', *kasha-ghanta and dongkas*. Some carry large flags with red flags in their hands that carry the message of social liberation. At the end of the puja, they recited some message of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur in tune (Interviewed with Sanatan Bala: 29.08.2023), like-

'Khao Na Khao Tate Khoti Nnai
Chhele Meyeke Lekhpora Shikshao.
'Hate Kam Mukhe Nam.'

Hari Guru Puja opposes all forms of untouchability, prohibits blasphemy of other religions, respects parents, gives equal status to men and women, respects women, promotes world brotherhood instead of violence, lights education, enjoins observance of religion with family responsibilities and health awareness. Based on these, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Matua religion is the best humanistic and practical religion section the world. Presently there are Hariguru temples i.e., *Hariguru Ashram* at Kuakandor village in Khoribari block of Darjeeling district and Asuragarh village of Goalpukur-II Block in North Dinajpur district where the Matua sects of North Bengal meet and worship on a particular day every year and fairs are held (Interviewed with Kiran Majumdar: 17.08.2023).

Deul, Hazra and Charak Puja: In the Bengali month of *Chaitra*, *Deul Puja* is celebrated in the agricultural village of Namasudra. *Deul* means temple. But here *Deul* is the symbol of Mahadev. *Deul* is usually made of neem wood. No Brahmin priest is required for *Deul* worship. On the day of *Chaitra Sankranti*, they perform various magical feats while performing *Deul Puja*, which is an outward manifestation of the primitive form of their subconscious scientific consciousness. After performing *Deul Puja* in the last week of *Chaitra* month, on *Chaitra Sankranti* late at night, *Bala* performed *Hazra Puja* at the cremation place with devotees i.e., monk. The next day they worship *Charak* by burying long trunks of trees in the middle of the field. Both worships are closely associated with Maheshwar or Shiva. Some similarities are observed in the worships like *Hazra Puja* or walking on the burning fire, worshipping a long piece of neem wood as *Deul* or *Mahadeva* and worshipping long tree trunk as *charak* etc. (Roy, 2016, p.130-132). Many families of the Namasudras who perform *Deul Puja* in their homes usually have titles of *Bala* and *Sannyasi*. They are based on the ideas of primitive society. Nirmal Kumar Basu in his book, '*Hindu Samajer Garan*', mentions that among the tribal Munda community, there is a practice of walking over fire during special worships (Basu, 1931, p.29). Also, the Munda community bury tree branches in the ground in the middle of the field and perform *Karam Puja* there. Similarly, Santhals also perform *Sarana Puja* by burying branches of *sal* trees in the ground at a specific place in the village. From this, it can easily be inferred that the people of Namasudra society like the *Adibasis* also believed in the worship of nature, which changed somewhat in later times. This worship is still prevalent in the Namashudra society. However, due to the prevalence of primitive magic spells in this puja and the performance of some brutal games, the educated Namashudra society opposes some of the customs of this worship, as a result of which this worship is slowly on the way to extinction.

Nabanna: Gathering food, producing food and preserving it has been the sole pursuit of man since prehistoric times. Therefore, various Worship and festivals have been developed among the agriculturist *Namashudras* and people of various ethnic groups cantered around food production. *Nabanna* is one such festival of

Namasudras. This Nabanna festival is celebrated in the Bengali month of 'Aghran' in the houses of agricultural *Namasudras* of Bengal. This festival is a celebration of the joy of bringing home the new harvest from the field. *Pitha, pies* and various food items are prepared for *Nabanna* by new rice. Local and folk dances are organized in some places centred on *Nabanna*. Fairs are held in some places around this festival (Roy, 2016, p.12). Apart from the *Namashudra* community, the people of the Rajbanshis, Santhal, Munda and Oraon communities also observe Nabanna festivals and worship. *Namashudra* farmers celebrate *Nabanna Puja* and festivals to bring home their new crops. The worship and festivals are still equally popular among their peasant families, but among those who have retired from agriculture and taken up other occupations, the *Nabanna Puja* festival is gradually declining and being replaced by the Brahminical universal *Durga Puja*, once reserved for the Brahmins, Jotedars and Zamindars and upper castes people (Interviewed with Jayanta Sarkar: 17.11.2022) realised the importance of *Nabanna Puja* festival, the current West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee after coming to power shifted the main administrative centre of West Bengal from the Writers Building to Howrah and renamed it as Nabanna.

Lakshmi Puja: From the moment of birth in the bosom of nature, man is engaged in the struggle to survive in this world based on food collection and production. Hence various worships, festivals, rituals, weapon making and magic emerged around this food production and animal hunting. In addition, primitive people used to draw pictures of animal hunting on the walls of mountain caves focusing on hunting animals and birds. They strongly believed that this would make it easier to hunt animals and gather food to satisfy the god of hunting. Gradually with the evolution of society, the method of food production or collection has changed in human society. In primitive hunter-gatherer and agricultural civilizations, footprints of birds or aquatic animals on wet soil along rivers or near water bodies once guided humans in search of food. These symbols gradually became symbols of various *puja parbanas* to the agriculturists. Their faith in *Alpana* will attract divine blessings. In the evolution of time, the practice of drawing grains of rice and Goddess Lakshmi's footprints (Sarkar, 2019, p.95-96) in *Lakshmi Puja* of today's agrarian *Namasudra* society has come from that belief since ancient times. Lakshmi-Narayana we know in literature is the mythical Goddess Lakshmi. But Goddess Lakshmi, who is worshiped in the *Namasudra* or agrarian society, is the goddess of harvest and prosperity created by human imagination. This worship is called *Lakshmi Puja* of 'Ghatolakshi'. Although today it has evolved into '*Lakshmi Sara*' as a portrait of Goddess Lakshmi. This rural *Lakshmi Puja* is organized on a specific day in the Bengali month of 'Ashwin' or *Kartikin* the hope and belief of producing more crops and paddy. On that day, a small boat and a bowl of rice are made from banana peels by cutting some new paddy stalks from the paddy fields in each house of the *Namasudra* community. This worship is done with flowers, fruits, *durba*, coconuts and rice grains. On this day, in every house of the

Namasudra society, rice grains and Goddess Lakshmi's footprints are painted with rice flour. Brahmins are not required in this worship. Lakshmi worship is done by the girls of the house. In *Namashudra* society this worship is equally prevalent even today, but under the influence of Brahmanism, many families now call a Brahmin priest for worship, though their number is very small (Interviewed with Fulmala Sarkar: 17.10.2022).

Findings of the Study: From the above study and analysis, we found the followings:

In ancient times the Namasudras were known as *Banga*. According to the name of this caste, the land of *Bangabhumi* was derived. Thousands of Namasudra families have been migrated from East Bengal to North Bengal during Partition and as their socio-economic status changed, their own religious beliefs and worship practices also began to change somewhat.

It is also found that to escape from the fear of natural phenomena and to wish for food crops and good fortune, to cure diseases and healthy life and to fulfil various desires, people started worshipping nature by imagining various Gods and Goddesses from which various types of vows were born, from which the various religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous Namasudras of Bengal originated. In fact, as the Namasudras were agrarians, their worship, rituals and religious beliefs developed generally centred on nature, farmland and agricultural crops, cows and fruits, which is still somewhat prevalent in their society and some changes have occurred.

The worship practices and religious beliefs of the Namashudra community of North Bengal are still constantly changing and some of the practices and religious practices are currently on the verge of extinction. For example, worships such as *Hanchara Panchra Puja*, *Lus Puja*, *Bhagwati Puja*, *Bastu Puja*, *Amabati Puja*, *Gorakhnath Puja*, *Sumuti Puja*, *Natai Puja*, and *Khestar Puja* are not seen much anymore. Rather the women of the Namashudra community, the tendency of sun worshipers has decreased considerably and some women now participate in the *Chhata Puja* of the Biharis instead of the *Surya Puja*. The importance and popularity of *Nabanna Puja* and festival, which was popular with Namashudras, gradually it's decreasing and, in its place, came the Brahminical universal *Durga Puja* at present.

The emergence of modern irrigation system and non-dependence on nature for agricultural work, spread of education and political awareness and social and financial improvement have led some people of Namasudras to join professions other than agriculture, such as teachers, professors, lawyers, doctor, soldier and other professions in private institutions. Today most of their worship is influenced by Brahminism as a result of the lifting of the ban on their Brahmin worship in independent India. Besides, due to the advent and spread of modern medicine, the

people of rural Namasudra community of North Bengal have started consuming modern medicine instead of relying only on nature for curing diseases, which has affected their religious beliefs. As a result, many of the Namasudra's own religious beliefs and worship practices are constantly changing and some are on the verge of extinction.

Concluding Remarks: Based on the comprehensive study we have come to the conclusion that the Namashudras of Bengal were the aboriginal caste. This caste has been dependent on agriculture since early times. And agriculture was dependent on nature. Hence, the religious beliefs and worship practices of the Namashudras centred and created around nature and agricultural production, which is proven through their worship of *Amabati Puja*, *Surya Puja*, *Nabanna*, *Lakshmi Puja*, *Deul Puja*, *Bastu Puja*, *Garukhnath Puja*, and *Surya Puja*. New paddy, cows, plants, fruits, sun, earth, and rivers have taken place in these worships of Namashudras. These worship and rituals also prove that the Namasudras were descendants of primitive nature worshipers such as the proto Australoid race. Their ancestors were the bearers and bearers of the Harappan civilization. But in the course of time, due to their coming in contact with various races, their society and culture became mixed with various currents and their worship underwent some changes, although they did not completely abandon their primitive religious beliefs and worship. The emergence of modern irrigation systems and non-dependence on nature for agricultural work, the spread of education and political awareness, and social and financial uplift have led to some people in this community joining professions other than agriculture, such as teachers, professors, lawyers, doctors, soldiers and other occupations in private institutions. As a result, many of them have started living in urban areas due to work. Much of their worship today is influenced by Brahmanism as a result of the lifting of the ban on their Brahmin worship in independent India.

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