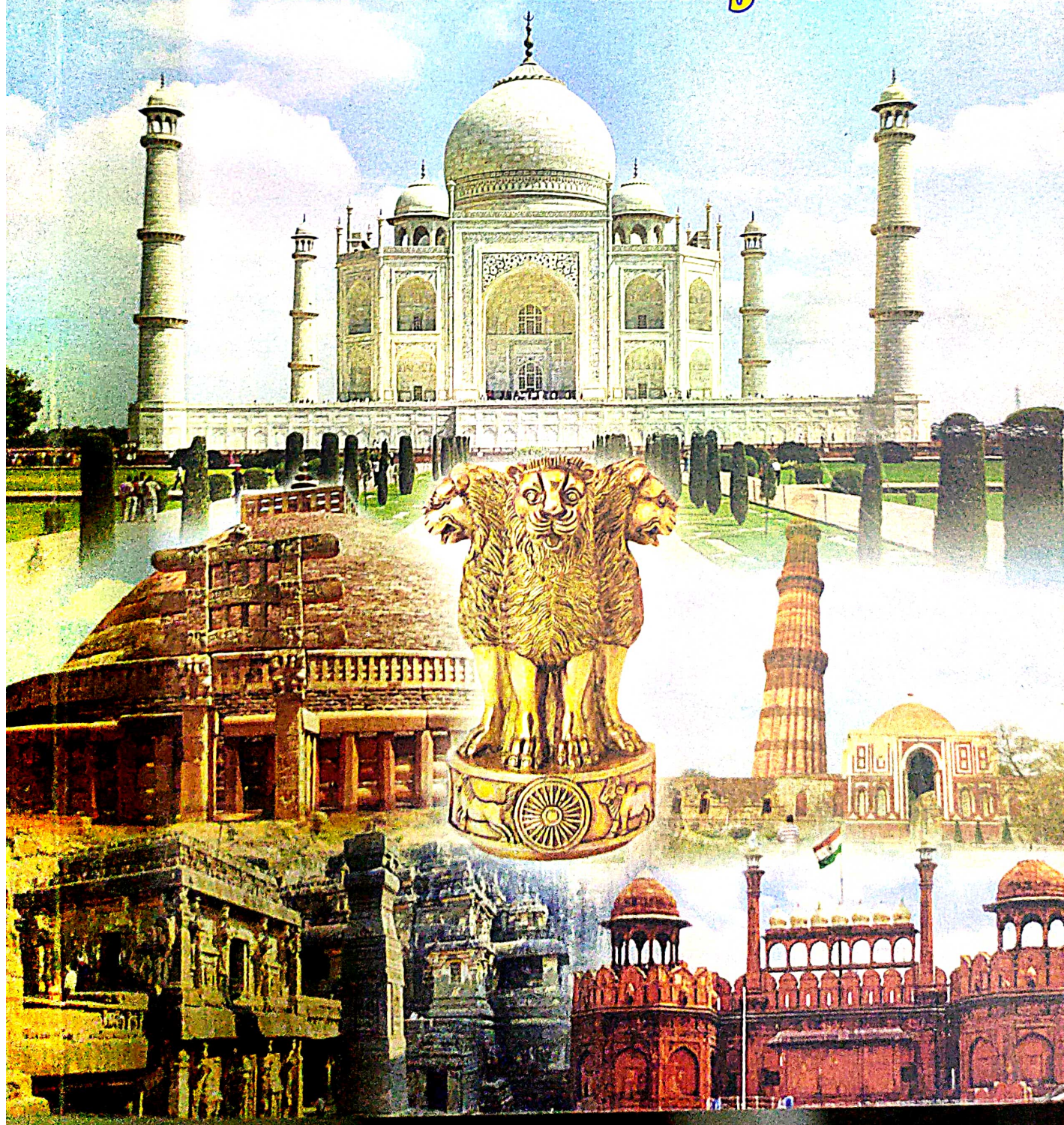


HISTORY, HERITAGE AND RELIGION: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

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C O N T E N T S

1. **Dr. Anirban Banerjee**
History, Heritage and Religion : Problems and Perspectives
1-33
2. **Dr. Rupendra Kumar Chattopadhyay, Swati Roy and Shubha Majumder**
Recent Explorations in Search for 'Sacred Spaces' in the Burdwan District of West Bengal. 34-69
3. **Dr. Rohidas Mondal**
Rituals, Prejudice and Protest in Colonial Times : An Overview of the Namasudra Movement in Bengal 70-79
4. **Dr. Susanta Mondal**
Commercialization of Indian Agriculture in the Colonial Period 80-86
5. **Bishnu Goswami**
The Relevance of Some Ancient Dominant Texts in Modern Biodiversity Management 87-93
6. **Bhumika Ghosh**
History and Development of Science and Technology from Prehistoric Time to Gupta Age 94-106
7. **Saurav Ghosh and Anirban Banerjee**
Explaining Tribal Religion : A Study of Santal Religion
107-123
8. **Dr. Rangana Dey**
Rubber Plantation in Tripura : An Alternative Way of Socio-Economic Development of Tribal People 124-136
9. **Ranjan Paul**
Tea Cultivation in Plain Area Uproots the Traditional Plants: A Microstudy at Mekhliganj Block, Cooch Behar District
137-143

Rituals, Prejudice and Protest in Colonial Times : An Overview of the Namasudra-Movement in Bengal

Dr. Rohidas Mondal

I

The Namasudra community was the second largest Hindu group of people in Bengal. The rituals in this community were not different from the main stream of the Hindus in Bengal, but their occupations and activities were different from those of the main stream of the Hindus. They were mainly peasant community but did all kind of works including removing filth. Though there was no instance of practicing untouchability in Bengal but the Hindu gentries generally kept them separate from this community since the time of Sen rule in the matter of socio-religious interaction. Ballal Sen was the first ruler of Bengal who, following the pan Indian Hindu caste system, made an arrangement to designate the Namasudras as untouchable due to the socio-religious conflict. Raghunandan Bhattacharchya was the first educated Brahman who made social categorization of the Hindus in Bengal. Hence, the Namasudras were designated as untouchable. The social conflict between the Hindu gentries and the backward Hindus increased during this time and it has been continuing till today.

A number of scholars studied on this social conflict and social movements of the backward Hindus in Bengal. During colonial rule, European scholars began scientific studies, for the first time, on caste and communities of Bengal from the beginning of the nineteenth century (1807-1814). It was started by Francis Buchanan Hamilton (1762-1829) under the supervision of British East India Company. Later many scholars contributed to this field of study. William Wilson Hunter¹ for the first time wrote history of origin, social practices and status of lower castes of Bengal including Namasudras. In 1883, Wise² had described the origin, social status and some customs of various castes and races of

Bengal. It was the same time when (1891) H. H Risley had done an outstanding work.³ Uptil now it stands as the most significant work ever done on the history of castes in Bengal.

Niharranjan Ray⁴, among the Indian scholars, analyzed the anthropological features of various castes of Bengal. He found a similarity between the anthropological features of Namasudras and the upper castes of Bengal. He criticized the views of Risley and his description regarding the Namasudra community of Bengal. Naresh Chandra Das wrote on the history of the community. He pointed out that the social degradation of Namasudras began in the time of Ballal Sen, who tried to dominate his opponents and made arrangement to be lowered in social position for the non-compromised group of people.⁵ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay⁶ has done most extensive research work on the Namasudra community. Monosanta Biswas is one of the recent scholars who studied on Matua movements and pointed out many of the aspects of religious activities of the community.⁷

Many scholars have contributed to the study on the socio-religious movements of Namasudra community. They have analyzed different aspects of the community in details but their studies are not exhaustive. This paper attempts to explore how the Namasudras tried to move against the traditional socio-religious discriminations and change their community during colonial times.

II

The Namasudras have originated from Bengal and have been as a specific group of people in Bengal. There was no distinctive social difference between the Hindu gentries and Namasudras of Bengal in colonial times. It was considered that primarily the Namasudras were tribal people of Bengal. Gradually they merged with the mainstream⁸. They became depressed, helpless and aimless due to social conflict between the dominative Hindu gentries and the backward Hindus.⁹

Their movements against prejudice of the Hindu gentries began after the census of 1872 bringing the backward Hindus together. It was initiated after a social conflict occurred during the funeral ceremony of the father of a Namasudra leader at the village Amgram in Bakerganj district in East Bengal. This leader invited some of his Hindu gentries neighbor for dining at the ceremony of his father's sradh or ritual after