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The Namasudras and the Invited Missionary: Caste, Recognition, and Agency in 19th and 20th Century Bengal

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by

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This project is dedicated to Sarah Seager.

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Introduction

Next month, India will go through its general election, putting the title of the world's largest democracy into action. As with any major election, different political parties are working overtime to sway members of the electorate to vote for them, providing insight into all kinds of social and political dynamics at play. For example, there is currently the issue of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a law which would grant citizenship to non-Muslims who came to India from neighboring Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan prior to 2015.[1] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya's article, "Does BJP's Revival of the CAA Issue Reflect the Party's Desperation in Bengal?" discussing the issue, provides insight into the socio-political significance of this law. Bhattarcharya frames the CAA's alleged reemerging relevance as being a manifestation of electoral politics; he claims the legislation is being used as an overture by the Bharatiya Janata Party, known as the BPJ, the current ruling party in India, aimed at the Matua-Namasudra community. He notes that "The Matua-Namasudra support is essential for winning the Bongaon and Ranaghat Lok Sabha seats of southern West Bengal and can play a significant role in the Barasat and Dum Dum Lok Sabha seats," as they make up about 4% of the population of the West Bengal state.[2] The significance of the CAA to the Namasudras is that it would help them in their struggle for integration into Indian society; having arrived in West Bengal around the time of the Partition of India, their status is complicated–Bhattarcharya notes that while many have citizenship and the documents that go along with it, they "face difficulties in getting police

[1] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Does BJP's Revival of the CAA Issue Reflect the Party's Desperation in Bengal?" *The Wire*, December 4, 2023, thewire.in/politics/does-bjps-revival-of-the-caa-issue-reflect-the-partys-desperation-in-bengal.
[2] Ibid.

verification reports for passports, jobs and caste certificates when they are asked to produce records of their or their parents' name in India's pre-1971 voter list."[3] The CAA would help address this issue, integrating the Namasudras into Indian citizenry in a more complete manner. The BJP is weaponizing this issue as a way of bringing the Namasudras on side. They are simultaneously implying that without the CAA the Namasudras are not full citizens, and that the CAA would provide them with a clean slate. This is despite the long and complicated history of the Namasudra identity that would be nigh impossible to erase. It also works to widen divisions between Namasudras and their Muslim counterparts in the region. This is because the BPJ is giving the Namasudras the options of either aligning them and so being welcomed into the in-group, or remaining part of the out-group along with Indian Muslims in West Bengal. This maneuver is not new to the Namasudras. It is the continuation of an ongoing theme in their history.

The position of the Namasudras at this juncture conjures some sense of deja vu. Throughout their history, they have frequently been the target of overtures by different groups for religious and political reasons–particularly, since the turn of the 20th century, upper-caste and upper class Hindus have rallied behind the banner of intra-Hindu solidarity for political ends; likewise missionaries attempted to gain the loyalty of the Namasudras through various modes of aid. In essence, the Namasudra has taken on a kingmaker role, having their own interests and goals sidelined by some *other* attempting to mold and use them as a tool for their own ends. Despite this status, which can lend itself to reading the Namasudras as passive figures in other

[3] Bhattacharya, "Does BJP's Revival."

people's histories, the Namasudras have found ways of working toward their own goals, utilizing their position as kingmaker to bend their wooers' missions to better suit their own means.

This work seeks to preserve and highlight the agency of the Namasudras, counter to traditional historical narratives of issues of caste and missionary activity in the Indian subcontinent. In particular, by looking back at the ways that the Namasudras navigated the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we can gain greater insight into both the motives and methods in which they exercised agency, and the ways in which missionary activity interacted with colonized communities. This will in turn provide alternative narratives and understandings to traditional histories of subaltern communities and missionary work, and provide insight into the modern-day position of the Namasudras. The Namasudras exercised their agency in a variety of ways, utilizing different modes of protest and aligning with different interest groups as it suited their interests. Their invitation of missionaries is a particularly potent demonstration of that agency. It is this invitation of missionaries, and the following interactions between the two, which allows us to rethink and recenter the Namasudras as the primary actors in their history.

As previously stated, the Namasudras are a *Dalit*–which is to say low-caste community indigenous to what is now the western portions of Bangladesh. They emerged as a community in the mid-nineteenth century, made up of many sub-caste groups of people living in the wetlands of the Bengal delta. Over the course of the nineteenth century, they were slowly consolidated into one collective caste identity–that being the Namasudra identity–not by their own hand, but primarily by British ethnographers.[4] They were additionally shaped by other factors, such as the effects of land reclamations which led to the permanent settlement, in turn transforming those

[4] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), 5.

communities into lower class tenant-farming peasant communities, which created additional modes of solidarity between these previously separate caste groups. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay sums this shift up well when he writes, "Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, the Namasudras had emerged as a settled, but disgruntled, peasant community, with an up and pushing group to provide it with the necessary leadership to launch a social protest movement."[5] This up and pushing group were what Bandyopadhyay describes as the Namasudra Elite; those who were able to exercise some sort of economic mobility–though they were able to shift economic class, they held a common caste status, and so were still bound together through mutual struggle and kinship to the Namasudras.

The Namasudra identity and community continued to shift and evolve over the twentieth century, as they became a community whose allegiance gained value for practically all parties involved in the Indian nationalist movement, from the British government, to the Hindu elites, to the Muslim communities in Bengal. Despite gaining this leverage, the status of the Namasudras remained low, primarily because while they were strategically important for electoral and other political ends in Bengal, none of the groups interested in utilizing them were willing to see them as truly equal partners in the religious and political projects into which they sought to conscript Namasudra support. To use the terminology that Nancy Fraser developed in her article "Rethinking Recognition," the Namasudras were misrecognized by even those most sympathetic to their plight, for one reason or another.

Fraser's article provides a valuable lens of analysis in attending to the dynamics of the Namasudra case, as she critiques modern identity politics. She argues that the politics of

[5] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 6.

recognition have by-and-large displaced the politics of economic redistribution in the modern era.[6] For the purposes of this work, recognition refers to socio-political recognition. In other words, politics of recognition center the acceptance and incorporation of any given identity into mainstream society. Fraser points to feminism as an example of a movement which is focused on recognition–i.e. raising the status of women to equals in society–rather than economic redistribution.[7] She also criticizes identity politics, arguing that they reify identities because identities have to be concretely defined to engage in identity politics.[8] Looking to current events, the BJP is attempting to placate and sway the Namasudras through a politics of recognition. They are essentially offering recognition in exchange for electoral support. Given the fact that the Namasudra identity is tied both to caste and class, this is a manifestation of the displacement of the politics of redistribution in favor of recognition. This is not to say that the issue of recognition is irrelevant to the case of the Namasudras. Fraser posits that misrecognition–which is when one does not recognize an other as a peer in the social realm–is a mode of status subordination which I find recurs throughout the history of the Namasudras.[9] The concept of misrecognition provides another critique of the BJP's approach to the CAA issue. The BPJ is using misrecognition as a form of coercion. The recognition the BJP is offering belies a coercive dimension; even if the Namasudras gained recognition via the CAA, they wouldn't assume the status of peerhood in Indian society, as that recognition is only available on the condition of loyalty. Again this is a position that has recurred in Namasudra history time and time again.

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[6] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3, (May-June 2000): 107-108. http://newleftreview.org/II/3/nancy-fraser-rethinking-recognition.
[7] Ibid., 107.
[8] Ibid., 108-109.
[9] Ibid., 113.

Throughout their history this has been a perpetual struggle; the Namasudras have struggled to gain unconditional recognition.

By the time of the partition of India in 1947, the Namasudra's political movement had functionally dissolved; the collective Namasudra identity was subsumed by other identities that Namasudras fell under, such as Indian, or Hindu.[10] The Namasudra identity up to that point was a truly complex thing–for example their relationship to Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam amounted to a nebulous religious identity, with the aforementioned Matua sect being the most prominent religious affiliation to speak of. They likewise held complex class and caste positions rooted in their fractionary history prior to the formation of the Namasudra identity. With the subsumption of the Namasudras into other identities many of these complexities were smoothed over in favor of homogenization, as they became Indians, Hindus, et cetera. The contemporary reemergence of the Namasudras is therefore all the more striking, echoing back to their position a century ago after a period of irrelevance, and revealing the ways in which this subsumption was an impermanent band aid rather than an actual homogenization. Since these complexities and issues still remain relevant for the Namasudra community, so much so that their identity is still being negotiated in the arena of electoral politics, it therefore merits looking back at the way they navigated their position at the turn of the 20th century as a way of shed light on their current position, all the while exploring themes and subjects such as the politics of recognition, missionary activity, and subaltern agency.

The first chapter discusses the emergence of the missionary society during the 18th and 19th centuries, examining the different institutions and realms of activity that shaped and were

[10] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 8.

shaped by the missionary endeavor. Missionary societies, by and large, developed as populist organizations, and lacked the backing of their respective church or state institutions. Because of this, efforts of conversion were often closely tied to attempts to 'civilize' heathen communities through schooling and social reform, as a way of building an indigenous population of missionaries. This was a way that missionary societies intended to make the endeavor sustainable in the long term. This had a somewhat unintended consequence of developing a symbiotic relationship between missionaries and subaltern communities looking for opportunities to improve their status. This is reflected in the presence of the 'Invited Missionary,' a term I use to describe a pattern of behavior in which subaltern groups invited missionaries into their communities for a variety of reasons. By discussing these facets of missionary activity, we may better understand the mechanics of Namasudras agency and their strategies of navigating through the 19th and 20th centuries.

The second chapter investigates in more detail the history of the Namasudras in order to trace the ways they exercised agency, and the reasons they adopted the tactics and modes of organization that they did. A variety of factors, primarily economic and social, engendered identity coherence for the Namasudras. These factors shaped Namasudra identity into one of protest, and effected the modes of action the Namasudras partook in. This chapter includes a discussion of their relationship with Hindus, Muslims, and the British colonial government. Understanding these relationships will then provide the context for the third and final chapter of this work.

The third chapter is comprised of an in-depth investigation of the Namasudras and their Invited Missionary. It looks at the moment of invitation, the motives for the invitation, the

material impact of missionary activity, and the long term effects of that activity. This will elucidate the core ideas of this work. By looking at the Namasudra's Invited Missionary, the motives and methods in which they exercised agency, and the ways in which missionary activity interacted with colonized communities will be better understood. This will present a history that is counter to how histories traditionally have depicted both subaltern agency and the role of missionaries in the colonial period.

The conclusion briefly recapitulates the primary themes of this work. It then returns to the modern period, looking at contemporary Indian politics through the lenses of misrecognition and agency for subaltern communities. It argues that the concept of the Invited Missionary undermines major Hindu Nationalist talking points, and returns agency to the Namasudras and other communities.

This work establishes and contextualizes the Invited Missionary in the Namasudra community in the early 20th century. Through this, greater understanding of their agency and the role of missionary work in the colonial period is gained. These understandings upend traditional histories of the interactions between missionaries and subaltern communities, opening up the topic for greater discussion, investigation, and reinterpretation through those lenses.

The Rise of the Invited Missionary

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an understanding of missionary societies in the 19th century, as well as defining and delineating the Invited Missionary as a concept and occurrence. To this end, I trace the factors which influenced the development of missionary societies and their actions. Understanding the strategies that missionaries used in proselytization provides insight into the emergence of the phenomenon of the Invited Missionary. Specifically, the missionary society movement operated as a populist force separate from both major church institutions and colonial governance and administration, and efforts of conversion were often closely tied to attempts of "civilization" of heathen communities. Because of their extra-institutional nature, missionaries had to find alternative modes of acquiring resources and operating, developing modes of self sufficiency that in turn shaped the way they operated. In particular, schooling and social reform became primary channels of operation, as missionaries looked to produce indigenous missionaries because they were expected to be both more effective in their work, and more cost-effective in comparison to foreign missionaries. These efforts in turn provided the proselytized access to resources and opportunities they otherwise would not have had. Unintentionally, this environment shaped the missionary endeavor, causing the presence of missionaries to be seen as a potentially significant boon and advantage to oppressed communities or people looking for advantages throughout the process of being colonized. The perceived benefits of missionaries thus led to the rise of the Invited Missionary.

The Invited Missionary is a phenomenon in which a community invites a missionary society to work in their community, to proselytize to them. This often occurred in communities that were looking for amelioration of their status. Motivations for engagement were varied; some sought competitive advantage over neighboring communities, whereas, other, historically oppressed, communities sought ways of escaping their oppression. As has been established in this chapter, missionary activity could provide much material benefit, particularly with regard to education. However, the result of this invitation varied drastically from total conversion to nominal conversion to no conversion at all. In the South African context, particularly in the case of the Tswana people documented in Stephen Volz' "Written on Our Hearts: Tswana Christians and the 'Word of God' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," there was genuine interest in conversion, and the introduction of Christianity to the region was a collaborative effort between missionaries and the Tswana people.[11] On the other hand, there is the case that is central to this work, that being the case of the Namasudras. The Namasudras requested the presence of the Southern Australia Baptist Missionary Society (SABMS) at the turn of the 20th century. To understand the intricacies of this interaction, a greater understanding of the mechanics of missionary societies is necessary. This chapter traces the development of the missionary society from its inception to establish the factors that gave rise to the Invited Missionary.

Man on a Mission

Much of the lineage of the missionary society can be traced back to William Carey, who, in 1792, published the influential pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to*

[11] Stephen Volz, "Written on Our Hearts: Tswana Christians and the 'Word of God' in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 38, no. 2 (2008): 112–114, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27594458.

Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens (hereafter*, An Enquiry*), in addition to founding the first modern missionary society, the the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). Carey was himself a Baptist minister, controversial for his contributions to the development of the missionary ideology and theology, as the ideas he developed went against theological beliefs in the Baptist Church at the time.[12] Particularly, the 'Great Mandate,' which is to say the belief that it was the Christian duty to save souls through proselytization and conversion, was contradictory to Baptist theology. *An Enquiry* therefore defines the missionary project, and offers a comprehensive defense of its core tenets, by incorporating theological and humanitarian arguments, historical and statistical analysis, and outlining the model which Carey seems most inspired by: the trade company. Understanding the humanitarian and trade company elements are essential to understanding the emergence and function of the Invited Missionary.

Following what he refers to as "a Survey of the present State of the World," which features the population, size, and faith of all the nations of the world to his knowledge, he begins to construct his argument for missionary work as a duty of the good Christian. As he put it, "It must undoubtedly strike every considerate mind, what a vast proportion of the sons of Adam there are, who yet remain in the most deplorable state of heathen darkness, without any means of knowing the true God."[13] He decries the state of the world as one in dire straits–the majority of people who had no access to his God and lived lives in and of darkness. Of particular note is the use of the word considerate; by using that word Carey is framing this issue as one with a moral imperative based in Christian values, and addressing this issue is a kindness of the heart. He

[12] Roberto Catalano, "Missionary Societies in the Evangelical Churches: Origins and Characteristics," *Annales Missiologici Posnanienses* 19, (2014): 113-114, https://doi.org/10.14746/amp.2014.19.5.
[13] William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, (Leicester, England: Ann Ireland, 1792), 62, https://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/enquiry/anenquiry.pdf.

characterizes these heathens as often being cannibalistic, practicing ritual and even human sacrifice, "destitute of civilization" and lacking in true religion. All is not lost, however, as he notes that "barbarous as these poor heathens are, they appear to be as capable of knowledge as we are" meaning that they have the capacity to improve and learn–that destitution of civilization and religion is not a permanent condition.[14] The state of the world as he describes it thus "calls to Christians, and especially to ministers, to exert themselves to the utmost in their several spheres of action, and to try to enlarge them as much as possible."[15] In other words, the situation at hand begs for action on the part of Christians to both ensure that those in Christian realms are upholding the highest level of piety, while also expanding the Christian world as much as possible.

In writing about the motivation for the mission, Carey provides little tidbits which amount to binding the religious and humanitarian. He frames the benefits of conversion as being twofold: first, the saving of souls, the liberation of souls trapped in heathen darkness as described above; second, the civilization and westernization of those same heathen populations. He argues that proselytization could be a tool to civilize and incorporate these populations into colonial systems, framing his concerns with rhetorical questions: "Would not the spread of the gospel be the most effectual mean of their civilization?" and "Would not that make them useful members of society?"[16] Both questions are interested in addressing the ignorance and destitution rampant in heathen regions; in other words they are questions that outline a connection between the religious work of the missionary and the humanitarian benefit which results from that work.

[14] Carey, *An Enquiry*, 63.
[15] Ibid., 64.
[16] Ibid., 70.

Therefore the missionary is doing good, motivated by their duty as Christians who must toil to save the souls of people, and their duty as humans to ease suffering and bring enlightenment to those living in uncivilized darkness. These questions also provide insight into how Carey imagines both the missionary society and the missionary as fitting into the colonial order. By arguing that civilization and the incorporation of converts into society would be an intended and beneficial result of the Mission, he is essentially presenting the Mission as a complementary element to other colonial institutions in maintaining British institutions and values. From its most influential articulation then, the missionary society has a dual purpose, to convert and to civilize, under the twin banners of religious mandate, and humanitarian duty.

Mission Impossible

This thus raises the question of methods and logistics; it is one thing to know the issue at hand, and another to address it. He outlines a few potential barriers to being able to do missionary work: "Their distance from us, their barbarious and savage manner of living, the danger of being killed by them, the difficulty of procuring the necessaries of life, or the unintelligibleness of their languages."[17] Carey addresses these issues in this order, and through his addressing of these issues, he begins to articulate the components and ideas that made up the missionary society throughout the 19th century. The form of the missionary society follows its functions, and its functions are defined and restricted by the barriers that Carey delineates; in many ways, his ideology and theology are therefore direct responses to those barriers. Thus, much can be understood about the ways in which the missionary society came to act by understanding Carey's theoretical construction of the society.

[17] Carey, *An Enquiry,* 67.

This first issue of distance does not phase him, as he notes that "men can now sail with as much certainty through the Great South Sea, as they can through the Mediterranean, or any lesser Sea,"[18] because of technological improvements. Because of these improvements, the potential barrier of distance would not be an actual issue, with access to all parts of the world within reach. In fact, he saw the developing travel and colonial infrastructure created by burgeoning trade companies as a direct invitation on the part of God to embark on missionary work, in essence offering new venues to test and fight for faith against heathens and barbarians. In part this was because wherever trade companies went, they revealed additional cases of heathenry which were to Carey siren songs, which were meant to be addressed through missionary work.[19] This inspiration and opportunity provided by the trade company is a common theme that recurs throughout the rest of his writing, it is therefore important to acknowledge the ways in which Carey looked to it as the primary enabling force and inspiration for the missionary society.

With regard to the alleged barbarity and savagery of heathen populations, Carey–though he initially framed it as a deterrent–counters that it is in fact a reason to engage in missionary work. As he puts it, "can we hear that they are without the gospel, without government, without laws, and without arts, and sciences; and not exert ourselves to introduce amongst them the sentiments of men, and of Christians?"[20] Again, the religious and humanitarian missions appear to go hand-in-hand in Carey's writing. He uses this dual mission to address the issues of fear of death at the hands of the heathens, day to day survival, and the language barrier in the missionary endeavor. To Carey, this work is the great calling that good Christians must respond to without fear or anxiety. With regard to language, he does still provide practical advice, namely, taking the

[18] Carey, *An Enquiry,* 67.
[19] Ibid., 67-68.
[20] Ibid., 70.

time and having the patience to learn the language of the people they are proselytizing to. With the issue of day to day survival, Carey has a few additional suggestions to address it, though the true significance of his thoughts would end up being much more vast and impactful than they appear on the page. He argues that missionaries should not go on missions by themselves, rather they should be accompanied, ideally by their families and particularly by their wives, so that the missionary can preach and proselytize, while the wife and family can focus on satisfying their needs.[21] While this seems like a rather limited and insignificant function in the missionary endeavor, the role and responsibility of women in the Mission can not be overstated, and will be discussed in depth later in this work. In discussing the presence of women in the mission, it is important to note that their presence can be traced back to Carey's pamphlet. Simply put, women have been essential to missionary societies since their inception.

The Mission(ary Society) Brief

Having addressed these issues, Carey goes on to outline the profile of the perfect missionary, and proposes his plan for the form of the missionary society. In describing the missionary, he lists the characteristics and actions that would lead to the most effective proselytizers. Of note is his description of the ideal relationship between the missionaries and the indigenous heathen population, and the actions and attitudes missionaries should take in their work. He instructs missionaries to "endeavour to cultivate a friendship with them, and as soon as possible let them know the errand for which they were sent. They must endeavour to convince them that it was their good alone, which induced them to forsake their friends, and all the

[21] Carey, *An Enquiry*, 73.

comforts of their native country."[22] In other words, the task of the missionary is to convince those he is proselytizing to that he is a friend on a mission, tasked to rescue them from the darkness and ignorance of heathenry. He has traveled across the globe to aid them at the cost of the comfort and safety of his own home. Once more the missionary-as-humanitarian appears to reinforce the idea of the missionary as not only a religious figure, but also a civilizing figure. With this framework, Carey begins to develop the missionary as a figure with whom the downtrodden can take refuge, and as an advocate for the oppressed.

Carey begins his articulation of the missionary society by once again returning to trading companies for inspiration. In particular, he recounts their aggressive spread into the least hospitable and most dangerous conditions, always expanding to their limits and then further in their profit seeking. His primary critique is that they are focused on worldly issues, which engender anxieties and fears of failure, noting that "their souls enter into the spirit of the project, and their happiness in a manner depends on its success."[23] He thus posits that a Christian Mission would be able to replicate the spread of trade companies and in fact exceed their scope, as "Christians are a body whose truest interest lies in the exaltation of the Messiah's kingdom,"[24] meaning that worldly worries would not affect the ability of the Mission to operate, unlike trade companies. Having established his difference, he writes:

> Suppose a company of serious Christians, ministers and private persons, were to form themselves into a society, and make a number of rules respecting the regulation of the plan, and the persons who are to be employed as missionaries, the means of defraying the expense, &c. &c. This society must consist of persons whose hearts are in the work, men of serious religion, and possessing a spirit of perseverance; there must be a determination not to admit any person who is not of this description, or to retain him longer than he answers to it.

[22] Carey, *An Enquiry*, 75.
[23] Ibid., 82.
[24] Ibid., 82.

> From such a society a committee might be appointed, whose business it should be to procure all the information they could upon the subject, to receive contributions, to enquire into the characters, tempers, abilities and religious views of the missionaries, and also to provide them with necessaries for their undertakings.[25]

With this quote, he lays out a plan that retrofits the model of the trade company into a religion company of sorts. This would prove to be the base upon which missionary societies would develop and elaborate on throughout the 19th century and onward. This once again reinforces the shared cultural and ideological roots that both trade companies and missionary societies held, while also laying the groundwork for the tension that would develop between the two as they engaged and evolved over time. The implications of this are seen best through the historical application of missionary societies.

The Mission in Action

As noted earlier, the Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1792, not long after the publication of *An Enquiry*, by Carey along with twelve others. This precipitated a wave of missionary societies, all founded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. There was one issue which Carey had not directly addressed in his pamphlet which emerged, namely, the challenges in finding people to go on the Mission. Roberto Catalano, in his "Missionary Societies in the Evangelical Churches: Origins and Characteristics," characterizes the missionary society movement as being based in "spontaneity, lay involvement and voluntarism," pointing to Carey's accelerated timeline as a manifestation of that spontaneity.[26] This spontaneity, along with theological and ideological tensions between the BMS and other missionary societies and their

[25] Carey, *An Enquiry*, 82-83.
[26] Catalano, "Missionary Societies," 124-25.

respective Churches, led to a dearth of volunteers from the clergy.[27] This meant that early on, lay people made up the vast majority of missionaries, and the enterprise of missionary societies was rather populist as a whole as they operated without the institutional support of their Churches. This meant that the doctrine found in missionary work did not necessarily align with Church doctrines, rather they developed as an amalgamation of choices made by necessity caused by the conditions of the Mission, along with the skills and capabilities of those on the Mission.

To give more insight into the details of the founding of the BMS, Catalano provides a succinct summary of the early days of the society, from its initial founding to its first Mission, writing that "the specific goals of the newly-founded society was to collect funds in order to send and to support missionaries overseas and, above all, to invite volunteers for the missions. A month after establishing the Society, an amount of money was already collected. The third meeting decided to open a mission in Bengal not far from Calcutta."[28] This is more evidence of the quick pace with which Carey and his compatriots worked. Carey arrived in India in 1793, as the first missionary from the BMS, whose supporters had raised enough money to send him out within a year of its founding. In 1800, Carey was joined by Joshua & Hannah Marshman and William Ward,[29] members of the BMS, in the founding of the Serampore Mission, in many ways the flagship mission of the BMS.[30] Catalano outlines the three major areas of activity that missionary societies came to engage in: learning the languages needed for effective conversion and translation of scripture, establishing and maintaining schools to teach reading and writing in

[27] Catalano, "Missionary Societies," 126.
[28] Ibid., 113.
[29] Carey, Joshua Marshman and Ward came to be known as the Serampore Trio and will be referred to as such throughout.
[30] M. A. Laird, "The Contribution of the Serampore Missionaries to Education in Bengal, 1793-1837," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 31, no. 1 (1968): 92. http://www.jstor.org/stable/612005.

order to make scripture more accessible to the population being evangelized to, and, finally, "social change," which involved efforts to reform practices considered backwards by the missionaries as well as developing medical systems and any other efforts to civilize and make them "useful members of society," as Carey put it.[31] These align with what Carey suggests in his pamphlet, and are reflected in the activity of the Serampore Mission.

M. A. Laird's "The Contribution of the Serampore Missionaries to Education in Bengal, 1793-1837" provides insight into the ways in which those different aspects of missionary work manifested in the Serampore Mission. Laird notes all the work that the Serampore Trio–Carey, Marshman, and Ward–accomplished with regard to the use of languages, from Carey's tens of bible translations and dictionaries, to Marshman's work with Chinese languages, and Ward's establishment of a printing press at Serampore.[32] He also emphasizes the throughline of schooling and education throughout their work, which were rooted in a few different motivations. Firstly he points to the persistence of the humanitarian imperative that animates Carey's argument, writing that Carey believed that "they were evangelists with a passionate commitment to advancing the total well-being–spiritual, mental, and material–of the people among whom they worked" and because of this commitment engaged in translations and education as a mode of advancement.[33]

Another motivator Laird points to was financial–the BMS did not have the financial capacity to cover all of their expenses, and so the Trio turned to establishing schools. Though the initial focus of the most profitable early schools were oriented toward the children of European colonial agents as they had the means to pay, by 1810 the Mission was running many schools

[31] Catalano, "Missionary Societies," 118.
[32] Laird, "The Contributions," 93.
[33] Ibid., 93-94.

including ones for local Bengali children.[34] Finally, Laird notes that by 1802, the Trio was developing a document titled "Plan for the Education of the Children of Converted Natives, or youths who have lost cast." This document and its substantive arguments were born from the realization "that the conversion of India to Christianity could only be effectively carried out by Indian Christians, and this plan was designed to give them a suitable education for the purpose." [35] Laird doesn't discuss the cause or reasons for this realization, as such one can only speculate that factors such as finances, scope, and language and cultural barriers might all have contributed to its emergence. In any case, education was the method of choice for the Serampore Trio to develop Indian Christian missionaries, and therefore it was yet another reason why they then were so interested in developing schools as part of their Mission.

These intentions only tell part of the story, since the schools proved to not accomplish all the aims that the Serampore Trio had hoped to achieve. Laird mentions that "many had feared to lose caste if they attended the mission schools, but by now they were coming to realize that their fears were unfounded; they could take the education but leave the Christianity."[36] In other words, there was an evolving understanding on the part of Indians about the consequences of what they could access through Mission schools. The access to better conditions that schools offered were not necessarily tied to conversion, even if one were reading Christian texts as part of the missionary education program. This dynamic is one that is essential to the Invited Missionary phenomenon, as it speaks to the ability for communities to take advantage of missionaries, holding on to whatever helped them while casting aside anything irrelevant, such as the religious aspect of missionary work. That being said, there was an awareness on the part of the Trio of this

[34] Laird, "The Contributions," 94.
[35] Ibid., 95.
[36] Ibid., 96.

issue. Laird describes their relationship with teaching English, noting "their disapproval of individuals who learnt a smattering of the language for no higher purpose than to get an office job in Calcutta."[37] They were conscious of how some were taking advantage of their work, using the resources provided by the Trio for non-Christian purposes. This was not a total deterrent for the Trio though, as for those students who they considered committed enough to their education, they still believed that access to English language literature would be a valuable educational experience. Additionally, over time, the content and landscape of education in the Bengal region where they were located fluctuated in many regards, including the influence of the Baptist Missionary Society and the amount of religious material in schools; that being said, the dynamic emphasized above still persisted, and one of the largest facets of missionary activity was schooling.

(Wo)man on a Mission

One thing mentioned but not yet discussed in depth in this work is the presence of women in missionary work. The role and impact women had in missionary work can not be overstated–understanding their work is therefore essential to understanding the operations of missionary societies. As noted earlier, Carey recommends that missionaries should be married, potentially with family, as the family then becomes a support system for the missionary as he tirelessly works to convert the local population.[38] This responsibility was quite significant. As noted earlier, one of the major challenges of the Mission was financial stability. Therefore, women played an important role in maintaining the operation of the Mission. Catalano concurs,

[37] Laird, "The Contributions," 105.
[38] Carey, *An Enquiry*, 73.

noting, "Women in the different missions became so crucial that they had to be replaced not only at their death, but even whenever they were absent."[39] Additionally, through their gender, they had a certain advantage that their male counterparts did not. As Geraldine Forbes argues in her article "In Search of the 'Pure Heathen': Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India," missionary women, particularly in India, were able to access exclusive spaces in societies. Through accessing women-only spaces, they were able to proselytize to a whole population that would otherwise not be available for conversion.[40] The proselytizing was often done in tandem with educational work, as schooling for girls and women were done by wives of missionaries. Catalano notes this relationship, writing, "missionary schools, in fact, were instrumental in female education, which was practically absent in the first part of the 19th centuries in the areas reached by the missionary societies. This was due also to the fact that, often being married, missionaries brought wives who then took care of girls and the education of young ladies."[41]

This unique status has also been documented in other regions where missionary societies were active, particularly in the South African region. Wendy Urban-Mead's "Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwena Women and E. L. Price of the London Missionary Society, 1853-1881" provides deeper insight into the role that women had in missionary activity. The case Urban-Mead investigates is one in which Elizabeth Price, the wife of a missionary, provides a unique and parallel channel of proselytization. Price was involved in her husband's missionary work as a teacher and homekeeper, while also maintaining relationships with some of the most powerful women in the region, advising them on matters of Christianity. Urban-Mead contrasts

[39] Catalano, "Missionary Societies," 127.
[40] Geraldine H. Forbes, "In Search of the 'Pure Heathen': Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 17 (1986): WS2. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4375592.
[41] Catalano "Missionary Societies," 121-122

Price with her mother, Mary Moffit, who was likewise the wife of a missionary. She describes how Mary's "role, she determined, was to be Robert's 'help-meet'; her ministry, to provide a 'civilized' home where Robert could be restored and renewed, both spiritually and physically."[42] In both cases, this responsibility of maintaining the home still fell on the wives, and both Mary and Elizabeth also spent some time teaching; their students included some of the children of the King of the kingdom that was the primary target of their missionary activity.[43] Elizabeth, however, was able to carve out a unique position through her teaching responsibility, building friendships and relationships with the royal Kwena women mentioned in the title of the article, who were her and her mother's pupils. Urban-Mead documents how, in the case of Elizabeth, the relationship built between her and the daughters of the King through teaching and a shared identity of womanhood proved to be important and influential, as it shaped their, and therefore the relationship of the elite women of the kingdom's, approach to Christianity.[44] This is all to say that women missionaries worked in parallel with men, often in the realm of education, all the while accessing spaces and building relationships not accessible to men.

The Mission in the Company of the Empire

Missionary societies had a complicated and often tenuous relationship with trade companies. In some ways, they had mutual interests and aims, but in the early development of the missionary society, Catalano notes that "the norms, dictated by the different trade companies, were originally quite strict; they required missionaries to be expelled when they exercised their

[42] Wendy Urban-Mead, "Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwena Women and E. L. Price of the London Missionary Society, 1853-1881," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 51.
[43] Ibid., 51-52.
[44] Ibid., "Dynastic Daughters," 52-58.

ministry outside the expatriate community," though often this was not heavily enforced, as many of the administrative officers in trade companies were themselves Christians and did not want to antagonize missionaries.[45] Much of this tension was relieved in 1813 with the Pious Clause of the East India Trade Company's Charter which allowed for more interaction between missionaries and Indians. In addition, the effort to get the Pious Clause introduced shifted inter-missionary society dynamics. Catalano writes that "the struggle to change or modify the Act regulating the trading companies and the role of the missionaries, however, helped the other Societies to join together in order to pressure the Government for a new solution. So, the Anglican-trading company relationship brought the Evangelical missions into a more positive relationship with the Government authorities and with each other."[46] That being said, the Pious Clause did not totally remove the tension from these relationships.

In her book, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal*, Parna Sengupta presents additional complications to the relationship between the British colonial government in India and missionary Societies. She argues that "in spite of the best efforts of evangelicals, the colonial state and local society always regarded mission schools as foreign institutions working to propagate Christian norms and belief."[47] In other words, while missionary activity was tolerated and sometimes aligned with either colonial forces or local populations, their status as missionaries kept them from being totally assimilated into the ecosystem of colonial Indian society. Nevertheless, Sengupta notes that "the colonial state consistently held up missionary institutions as models to which other kinds of local and

[45] Catalano "Missionary Societies," 127.
[46] Ibid., 128.
[47] Parna Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal*, 1st ed., 5. University of California Press, 2011. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp39t.

indigenous schools had to compare themselves. Thus, not only were mission schools attended by large numbers of Indians but also the schools themselves became connected to the funding (and thus the legitimacy) of other institutions."[48] In essence then, missionary societies were in a kind of limbo–not quite mainstream enough to be incorporated into the colonial apparatus, while being a standard bearer for schooling preventing their total rejection by that same colonial apparatus. This granted missionary Societies a status as an alternative mode of potential social mobility and power from other, more established institutions as a populist alternative to both Indian religious elites, and the colonial government.

The Invited Missionary

The Invited Missionary was the result of a variety of factors. Many of these factors were rooted in William Carey's *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, which set the model for the modern missionary society. The application of Carey's theory sprouted a plethora of unintended consequences. These included the centrality of education for financial and pragmatic purposes, the development of the role of women in the Mission, and the complex relationship between missionary societies and trade companies which made missionary societies a separate vessel for social mobility separate from colonial endeavors. The confluence of all these factors transformed missionaries into a potentially powerful tool for non-Christian communities looking to find an edge in the complex dynamics of the colonial period. Among those attempting to capitalize on the Invited Missionary were the Namasudras; to understand why this was the case, we must turn to their history.

[48] Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion*, 10.

The Rise of the Namasudras

Introduction

As established in the introduction of this work, the Namasudra caste identity was a tenuous and complex one. The formation of the Namasudra identity fundamentally shaped their approach to navigating the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In part, this was because of how the identity was formed. Primarily defined by others, the relationships Namasudras had with other communities were rarely on their own terms, drastically reducing the range of behaviors and attitudes they could have towards a given *other*. In other words, though a range of contextual factors–caste, economic class, each indexing a range of relational possibilities, from solidarity to exclusion–constituted Namashudra identity, few were squarely in their control. By understanding Namasudra identity, their relationships with their interlocutors will be better understood, and likewise, understanding those relationships will contextualize and elucidate the conditions in which the Invited Missionary appears in their journey. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* is in many ways 'the book' on the Namasudras–it's one of the most in-depth and comprehensive texts discussing their history, and Bandyopadhyay is likewise one of the preeminent scholars on the subject–and this chapter will thus use this text as a starting point to explore the factors that led to the Invited Missionary appearing in Namasudra communities in Bengal in the beginning of the 20th century.

Forming the Namasudra Identity

First, we must begin with names. The peoples who came to be known as the Namasudra were actually a variety of communities and groups known historically as 'Chandalas'–that name

being a derogatory term–living in the swamplands of the Bengal delta. Bandyopadhyay notes that "a single caste identity for the Namasudras was certainly not a given thing, as they were both differentiated in terms of status and divided in matters of internal organization. There were about twelve endogamous sub-castes among the Namasudras of eastern Bengal, six in central and eleven in western Bengal."[49] Bandyopadhyay contends that in precolonial times, this fragmentary nature meant that they did not all reside at the very bottom of the caste hierarchy. Rather, these communities occupied various low to middling positions in that hierarchy as would be implied by their heterogeneity, depending on factors including population size–larger caste groups fared better than smaller ones.[50] This shifted during the 19th century, as land reclamation projects led primarily by upper caste Hindus and elite Muslims disrupted ways of life. The shift was reflected in work patterns, turning those 'Chandala' castes into peasant tenant-farmers, working the land of those aforementioned Hindus and Muslims. This, in turn, gave these communities a common class status which previously hadn't existed, creating cohesion within previously fragmentary groups.[51] They likewise had a variety of origin stories and myths–one of the more popular and significant for our purposes was that these communities were descended from the union between a Sudra man and a Brahmin woman.[52] However, Bandyopadhyay argues, as quoted earlier, that there was no certainty to the creation of a united Namasudra identity–I argue that understanding the ways in which it was formed will help elucidate the nature of the identity and the behaviors linked to that identity.

[49] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 19.
[50] Ibid., 16-17.
[51] Ibid., 20-25.
[52] Ibid., 13.

The formation of the Namasudra as a united identity had a few causes, primarily a confluence of pressures from colonial ethnographic work and mutual interests between caste groups which bound them together in a culture of protest. Colonial actors perceived caste to be vast and immutable, and it is this attitude that in many ways formed the cast in which the Namasudra identity was set. Bandyopadhyay points to authors such as Herbert Risley, whose ethnographic works such as *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* shaped British colonial policy and understanding of caste, as having "ignored the subtle variations, suggested by his own data, in the rank of the Chandalas"[53] It therefore follows that when the Namasudras were articulating identities in a post-permanent settlement, colonized environment, the discourse and understanding of the colonizer impacted the ways in which they could or felt the need to articulate those identities. In this case, it meant that these heterogeneous caste groups had to, at least in outer appearance, homogenize themselves into one Namasudra caste. This process was additionally aided, in Bandyopadhyay view, by the material conditions of these caste groups, which provided them with solidarity through common interests.

Bandyopadhyay builds this case, noting that a major factor was economic class. He writes of these caste groups that "in almost all parts of Bengal their low social position coincided with their subordinate economic status *vis-a-vis* the higher castes."[54] Looking to the colonial era land reclamation and its effects, he traces how very few members of what became the Namasudra were able to capitalize on this newfound land, as high caste Hindus and elite Muslims gained ownership over the vast majority of that land. Bandyopadhyay emphasizes this disparity by pointing out that at the time of the 1911 census, well after the majority of land

[53] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 16.
[54] Ibid., 20.

reclamation which had taken place throughout the 19th century, "95.71 per cent approximately," of the Namasudras, "were tenant-farmers."[55] For that remaining 4.29 percent of non-tenant-farmer Namasudras, a portion of them were able to accrue some wealth and power; however they were not able to translate that into mobility in other realms. Instead, that portion developed into what Bandyopadhyay characterizes as an "up and pushing Namasudra elite, who, bound together by common struggle against caste, provided makeshift leadership and often were the voices of their less fortunate brethren.[56] One of the major manifestations of this phenomenon is seen in literacy rates in the Namasudras–those being 3.3% in 1901, and 4.9% in 1911–demonstrating the exclusivity and inaccessibility of education to the vast majority of Namasudras.[57] This division added additional complexity to the development of a Namasudra identity which was already made up of a variety of caste groups having been grouped together during a time of great change. Bandyopadhyay points out that these tensions did not evaporate even as these sub-identities were subsumed into the Namasudra identity–he notes that calling for unity and solidarity among the Namasudras was a refrain from the earliest days of the Namasudra movement to its later days; an indication that this unity and solidarity was not an organic and self-evident process, rather it was a balance that had been struck for the benefit of this coalition created by outside perceptions and common struggle.[58] He describes how "community solidarity, in this context, seemed to be the most natural alternative source of power that could enable them to challenge the dominant classes and thus to rework the existing relations of power. It was within this context that in the late nineteenth century their transition

[55] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 21.
[56] Ibid., 8-9.
[57] Ibid., 27.
[58] Ibid., 20.

from Chandala to Namasudra identity took place," with this transition being a manifestation of the emerging solidarity and evolving understanding of caste within these communities.[59]

By the end of the 19th century, the Namasudra identity had been, by and large, articulated as a caste formed through a common struggle and outside labeling. This meant that fundamentally it was a community oriented toward liberation against the oppression of caste, and a fight for the improvement of their status. Bandyopadhyay notes that the emergence of the Namasudra identity coincided with the emergence of Uplift meetings, the main venue in which Namasudras discussed and organized action against the structures of caste. The above quote outlines the way in which their solidarity was the primary source of power for the movement. It is a statement indicative of how directly tied the Namasudra identity was to this struggle.[60] By exploring the variety of relationships that developed between the Namasudras and other communities and identity groups operating in the Bengal region, the methods that the Namasudras used to exercise that power will be contextualized, and therefore more fully understood when discussed.

The Navigating Namasudra

At the time of the rise of the Namasudra identity, which is to say the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the situation in Bengal was a complex and multifaceted one. On the one hand you had the Namasudras, whose primary interest was freedom from their oppression under the caste system. Meanwhile you had the British colonial administration which was navigating how to maintain control over the region and throughout India, and Hindu and Muslim elites engaged in a

[59] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 28.
[60] Ibid., 28.

variety of different nationalist and liberatory struggles against the British and each other. Christian missionaries, as established in the previous chapter of this work, were also a major presence, complicating the dynamics of an already complex and volatile web of relationships. The Namasudras found themselves at a crossroads of sorts–they had reasons to align with each of these different forces, and each force gained to benefit significantly from the allegiance of the Namasudras, a benefit which is still resonant in current day Indian politics.

The most directly adversarial relationship was between the Namasudras and the *bhadralok*, the upper caste Hindu elites in Bengal. This is because they were the standard bearers of caste-based oppression, and were the primary perpetrators of day to day oppression that the Namasudras faced. They made up the large majority of the landlords who owned the land the Namasudras farmed on, and ostracized them through their untouchable status, even if that untouchability wasn't as strict as in other regions. This was complicated by the rise of the Nationalist movement in the early 20th century, as exemplified by the interactions between the Namasudras and the leaders of the *swadeshi* movement, as those leaders, who were upper caste Hindu nationalists, made overtures to the Namasudras in an attempt to sway them to the nationalist cause. The *swadeshi* movement was one of the primary facets of the nationalist movement in Bengal, in response to a 1905 decision by the British colonial government to partition the province of Bengal in two, with one half being majority Muslim, and the other majority Hindu.[61] In response, Hindu nationalists started a campaign to boycott foreign goods and build political power in a variety of ways. It is in this way that the relationship between the

[61] Chanchal Chowdhury, "Discrimination, No-confidence and Protest: The Namasudras of Bengal during the Swadeshi Era (1905-1911)," *Journal of People's History and Culture* 8, no. 2 (December 2022): 2, http://gsmp.in/vol8num2.html.

Namasudras and the Hindu elite gains additional complexity, as the Namasudras become a major demographic of interest and potential lynchpin to the *swadeshi* movement.

Bandyopadhyay outlines *swadeshi* leaders' attempts at swaying the Namasudras to join the movement. He looks to the actions and words of people like Ambika Charan Mazumdar and Aswini Kumar Datta, who were among the leaders of the *swadeshi* movement in the region. Both leaders campaigned to the Namasudras for their support–this was done via a multitude of strategies such as direct pleading for them to join the boycott of foreign goods, making proclamations against the conditions of the Namasudras, offering aid on the condition of joining the boycott, and otherwise acting more benevolent toward them as a whole.[62] This is again indicative of the perceived value of the Namasudras to the *swadeshi* campaign, and therefore to the Hindu nationalist movement. Bandyopadhyay notes that this was a conscious targeting, pointing to a *swadeshi* conference in 1908 in which a resolution was made to increase education accessibility for the Namasudras; the explicit reason for this was because "there would be no success in the political arena unless the condition of the Namasudras improved."[63] Despite this awareness, however, the large majority of efforts made to sway the Namasudras proved ineffectual, as they rarely addressed the fundamental inequalities of caste and class that the Namasudras faced.[64] Instead they found themselves in opposition to the *swadeshi* movement.

This was for a few reasons: economic, political, and caste issues all played a part in Namasudra responses to *swadeshi*. As Chanchal Chowdhury points out in his article "Discrimination, No-confidence and Protest: The Namasudras of Bengal during the Swadeshi

[62] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 65-68.
[63] Ibid., 74.
[64] Ibid., 75.

Era (1905-1911)" *swadeshi* put additional economic stress on the Namasudras.[65] Indian goods were on the whole more expensive than British goods, and so to boycott British goods would only exacerbate the already poor economic situation the Namasudras were in. Chowdhury also notes that the Namasudras generally perceived British rule relatively favorably, and wanted to maintain the good graces of their colonial overlords.[66] Additionally, anti-*bhadralok* sentiments were a cornerstone of the Namasudra identity. This was because both economically and socially, their *bhadralok* landlords were their primary oppressors. As was previously discussed, the Namasudra identity was formed in part in response to economic and caste-based pressures which engendered communal solidarity. Functionally then, the Namasudra identity was partially defined as being in opposition to those upper-caste landlords. Opposition to *swadeshi* went part and parcel with opposition to the *bhadralok* as a whole, and consequently the Namasudras opposed *swadeshi*.

Namasudra-Muslim relations were likewise complex: on the one hand they worked together in opposition to *swadeshi*, while on the other hand, their proximity led to tension and violence between the two communities. Similarly to the Namasudras, Muslims found themselves in opposition to *swadeshi*, though this was because it provided them with the socio-political advantage of having a region where they held a demographic majority.[67] Thus a tenuous alliance developed between the two, insofar as they both opposed *swadeshi*, and so found benefited from collaboration. Chowdhury states that "both the Muslims and the Namasudras were aware of their overwhelming numerical superiority over the rest of the Hindus in Eastern Bengal, and they were confident enough that any movement against the British government would be nosedived without

[65] Chowdhury, "Discrimination," 13.
[66] Ibid., 14.
[67] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 64.

their active participation."[68] This demonstrates a potential benefit of a Namasudra-Muslim coalition: the combined populations well outnumbered the rest of the Hindu population in the region. This could have translated into collaboration on other socio-political issues. Additionally Bandyopadhyay points out that they both held similar attitudes toward the Hindu elite, seeing them as oppressors–another way in which the Namasudras and Muslims of Bengal were able to find common ground.[69]

However even this alliance was unbalanced as within that coalition, the Muslims held a distinct numerical advantage over the Namasudras.[70] This disparity is noteworthy, as despite their aligning interests, tensions would still flare between the two communities. Bandyopadhyay summarizes the causes leading to tension, writing that "In the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries an articulate community-consciousness had developed both among the Bengali Muslims and the Namasudras. Two large compact bodies of people, both sensitive about the honour of their communities, were thus living side by side. Each considered themselves to be superior to the other and slightest offence was regarded as an affront to the entire community which required immediate redress."[71] This implies a mutual misrecognition between the Namasudras and Muslims. This misrecognition and volatility was a threat to any sort of long term partnership between the two communities. Despite this, the two were still able to align when necessary, but it was out of pragmatic interest rather than any sort of mutual liberatory recognition.

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[68] Chowdhury, "Discrimination," 11.
[69] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 65.
[70] Chowdhury, "Discrimination," 11.
[71] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 61.

In many ways, British colonial rule was tied to radical changes for the Namasudras, from the land reclamation projects that led to permanent settlement, to the upending of longstanding systems of power. While the British were by no means the first 'foreign' conquerors–one has to look back not that far to the Mughals of the 16th century as another example of a non-indigenous rulership–they differed from many of their predecessors in their modes of intervention. The primary issue that sparked the *swadeshi* movement, for example, was the redistricting and partition of Bengal into a majority Hindu province, and a majority Muslim province. This helps explain both Namasudra and Muslim responses–for Muslims, this partition afforded them a region where they had power, while for the Namasudras, they generally opposed the higher castes and supported the reduction of their power and influence. Additionally, Bandyopadhyay points out, the British census was seen as a major opportunity for social mobility and redefinition of social categories, as responders could attempt to claim that higher social status in their response, therefore potentially attaining it in the eyes of the government.[72] Therefore the nationalistic push of the Hindu elite did not resonate particularly with the Namasudra, as British rule saw opportunities for progress that previously had been inaccessible to them.

In many ways this complex web of allegiances and conflicts represents a shrewd adaptability and pragmatic agency the Namasudras carved out for themselves–as Bandyopadhyay put it when describing their manner of navigating the politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, "when the Muslims or the colonial government helped them in their quest for honour, they were their friends; when they did not, they were their foes."[73] This agency is one that is rarely afforded to subaltern communities in history books–they are often written

[72] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 58.
[73] Ibid., 63.

about as passive parties, victims and recipients of suffering and aid. Looking at the Namasudra, however, we know this is not the case.

The Protesting Namasudra

In their fight for respect and in their struggles against caste, the Namasudras had three major modes of protest: the reappropriation of Brahmin practices to reduce the power of those practices, the development of new practices to provide alternate modes of religious power within Hinduism, particularly through the development of the Matua sect, and the rejection of upper caste ideology, such as in the case of the *swadeshi* movement as discussed earlier. I propose that a fourth, subtle but still potent mode of protest, that Bandyopadhyay mentions but does not focus on, was the Invited Missionary. These three modes of protest demonstrate the agency of the Namasudras taking their fate and their future into their hands.

Bandyopadhyay outlines a few of the ways in which the Namasudras divested Brahmanical practices of their power. Primarily, they developed a variety of sects and practices which took directly from Brahminic traditions, "mostly under non-Brahman *gurus*, who disavowed all established norms of caste distinction and deference."[74] These sects mimicked *guru*-based Brahmin structures, therefore threatening the power that that structure had as it was becoming a shared practice with the low castes, not a solely Brahmin institution. These sects were also a tool for organized protest. Bandyopadhyay points to this socio-religious organization as what allowed Namasudras to perform other social protests such as refusing food prepared by other castes other than Brahmin, and refusing to provide service work to other castes.[75] In certain

[74] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 32.
[75] Ibid., 34.

discourses, this kind of behavior has been described as Sanskritization, the appropriation of upper caste practices by subaltern castes as to take on upper caste status; Bandyopadhyay argues that this is not a version of that phenomenon, as the purpose of this was not to take on the social status that those practices indicated, rather it was "a protest against a social condition that imposed on them a low status, lack of social honour and certain specific forms and conditions of labour."[76] By taking on these practices, they were simultaneously removing some of the religious power of the practices, while also protesting their status.

The Matua sect was by far the largest alternative Hindu sect in the Namasudra community. Emerging during the same period as other sects, it was unique both in its tie to the Namasudras–seen for example in the article quoted in the introduction which referred to them as the Matua-Namasudra–and in its complex relationship to Brahmanical Hinduism. It was founded by Harichand Thakur, though his son, Guruchand Thakur, was the leader of the sect for the majority of the period of interest of this work–Harichand died in 1878 and Guruchand took over his mantle.[77] While it was a splinter sect similar to those described previously, it eschewed the imitation of Brahmanical practices for wholecloth rejection of those practices. For example, Bandyopadhyay notes it rejected the *guru* structure, as both Harichand and Guruchand believed it to be a barrier to access to God.[78] This can be read as a manifestation of their egalitarian bent, rejecting a hierarchical religious structure both in day to day practices and in large scale social organization, i.e. the caste system. However, this egalitarianism faded from being formative to theological matters; despite rejecting upper caste practices, the Namasudra were unable to completely escape the Brahmin paradigm: "Although the practices and rituals of the Matua sect

[76] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 34.
[77] Ibid., 36-37.
[78] Ibid., 38-39.

had subversive implications for the hierarchy of castes, the Namasudras could never completely come out of the influence of its ideology."[79] Bandyopadhyay describes how their origin myth took on new dimensions as the sect grew, elaborating, "As their movement started, they began to demand a higher position within the ritual hierarchy itself and referred to their Brahman origin." [80] Thus the Matua sect was acting, seemingly paradoxically, simultaneously as a subversion of the caste hierarchy, all while asserting a higher status within that system. This again speaks to the deft maneuvering the Namasudras were embarking on in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, embracing a flexibility to find whatever advantage they could in ameliorating their social status.

Conclusion

The Namasudras, from their inception as an identity, have been defined and shaped by an *other*. Initially grouped together by colonial ethnographers and socio-economic pressures, they were continually defined in relation to other communities: in opposition to the *bhadralok*, in and out of collaboration with Muslims, and radically changed by the British colonial presence. They used different modes of alternative religious sects as a form of protest, sometimes divesting Brahmanical practices of their power, and other times rejecting Brahmanical traditions wholecloth. Understanding this context will be essential to understanding the appearance of the Invited Missionary in Namasudra history. This environment, in combination with the attributes of the missionary society as discussed in the previous chapter in many ways provided the perfect environment for the Invited Missionary to emerge.

[79] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 45.
[80] Ibid., 45.

The Namasudra and the Invited Missionary

Introduction

The past two chapters of this work have focused on brief histories of missionary activity and the Namasudras respectively. First, I have traced the history of the missionary society, looking at its inception with William Carey, its composite parts, and its applications, to contextualize and establish the idea of the Invited Missionary. Then, I have discussed the history of the Namasudras as a people, looking at the formation of their identity, the way their identity shaped their actions, and in turn the way that their ideology and actions shaped the appearance of the Invited Missionary in their history. This chapter seeks to look at the occurrence of the Invited Missionary in the Namasudra community as a way of discussing issues of power and agency by looking at missionary writings on their experiences working with the Namasudras.

Contextualizing Missionary Sources

Missionaries documented their activities relatively comprehensively, giving us access to their mindset and operations. Cecil Silas Mead's *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses* is, unsurprisingly, enlightening with regard to interactions between missionaries and Namasudra communities. Mead was one of the primary missionary interlocutors with the Namasudras. He started engaging with them in 1905, and in 1906 he established a mission in Orakandi, which he considered to be a strategically valuable location for conversion, with the aid of Guruchand Thakur.[81] In essence, he was the Namasudras' Invited Missionary, brought in by them as a way of gaining an edge as the *swadeshi* movement emerged and the Namasudras seeked to redefine their

[81] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 56.

status. His text is a collection of speeches he made in 1910, in South Australia as a representative of the South Australian Baptist Fureedpore Mission. These speeches provide a picture of the message the mission wanted to send its supporters back in Australia. Mead's mission in giving these speeches was twofold: firstly, providing a sense of the work that missionaries had been doing to "save the souls" of the Namasudra, giving the members of the church a sense of what pre-existing financial support had been going to; secondly, providing justification and evidence for the need for additional funds and support. The fact that these speeches were published and distributed implies some kind of financial benefit or a need to spread the contents of the speeches. The preface says as much when, in addition to claiming that "those who heard them were deeply stirred, and many expressed the desire to have them in a permanent form," the hope was that it would be "used to a yet wider circle," while also noting that "any profits will go to the Society's funds."[82] This seems indicative of the motivations stated above–a hope to draw more attention to the work of the Fureedpore Mission, and providing it with additional financial support. To that end, it was in Mead's best interest to present his work as vitally important, to provide examples of the work that was already being done, and to demonstrate why that work was only just the foundation for the work that would save the souls of the Namasudra. It is with this lens that I read Mead, analyzing his speeches as having those goals in mind.

The choice to use Mead's writing as the main material for this chapter is primarily because it provides a detailed first-hand account of both Namasudra life at the time while serving as a window into the minute details of the approach of the missionaries and their activities. Many other sources provide some valuable context; for example, Macleod Wiley's *Bengal as a Field of*

[82] Cecil S. Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses by C.S. Mead*, (Adelaide: Hussey & Gillingham, 1911), Preface. nla.gov.au/nla.obj-589502840.

Mission provides some insight into the general landscape of Bengal at the time of its publication in 1854, and contains some discussion of a missionary council, but doesn't go into the specifics of missionary activity. In his description of the Faridpur district, for example, Wiley simply writes that the situation in the district is not particularly notable, as it is similar to that of the adjoining Dacca district, though he does note that it was frequented by missionaries.[83] Mead's speeches, by contrast, are full of information that is fertile ground for dissection and investigation into missionary activity, and is exemplary of that activity in the Namasudra community.

Mead and the State of the Namasudras

Mead includes throughout his speeches statements that explicitly define his understanding of the Namasudras. In his speech "The Uplifting of the Nama Sudras: A Problem in Mass Movements" he says, "the Nama Surdras are one of the lowest Hindu castes. There are two million of them, and one-third of a million are in the Faridpur district. Fast bound in misery and iron for probably 2,000 years, a sad people living a life in which hope no more sang…"[84] He represents the Namasudras as one of the longest and most oppressed groups under the caste system, with a large and influential population in the Faridpur, and without any possibility of status amelioration. In terms of internal social organization, he describes how "the ancient patriarchal system still largely holds sway. Guru Charan Babu is the head of the community at Orakandi, and is a man of very great and far-reaching influence. He frequently attends our Christian services, has helped us in the matter of securing land… Humanly speaking, almost

[83] Macleod, Wylie, *Bengal as a Field of Missions*, (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, and Co., 1854), 115.
[84] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 39.

everything depends on what this man does. All eyes are upon him. Pray for him."[85] This Guru Charan Babu is almost definitely Guruchand Thakur–the way that Mead describes him lines up with other descriptions of Thakur, and his position of leadership matches up well, as does his name, to a certain extent. It is additionally quite noteworthy that the leader of the Matua sect is working so closely with a Christian missionary. It seems indicative of the Namasudra agency I have been discussing; Thakur's actions evoke a certain intentionality in his active and supportive engagement with Mead and his fellow missionaries. Additionally, Mead's words belie a sense of powerlessness which is striking considering the intended goals of these speeches. This lends credence to the idea that the Namasudras held more agency in their relationship with the missionaries than the missionaries themselves. After all, it is only with the aid of Guruchand that the missionaries were able to establish a more permanent foothold in Orakandi, and they were there at the behest of the Namasudras in the first place.

It is also striking that in his speeches, when describing the state of the Namasudras, Mead does not mention the Matua sect, despite being so connected to its leader. Instead, he describes the Namasudras as having a sort of parallel religious authority, noting that "the Nama Sudras have their own Nama Sudra Brahmin priests. These are priests who, for some offence against the laws of caste, have been degraded from true Brahminhood, and have found refuge and sphere of priestly service among the Nama Sudras."[86] This type of arrangement in *Dalit* communities is corroborated by one Mr. Taylor in Wiley's text, which describes a similar situation in another *Dalit* community in the neighboring Dacca district.[87] Additionally, it plays into the aforementioned mythological Brahminical origin of the Namasudras.

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[85] Ibid., 9.
[86] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 10.
[87] Wiley, *Bengal as a Field of Missions*, 111.

The lack of acknowledgement by Mead of the Matua sect is worthy of discussion as it seems like a rather glaring omission. These aforementioned Namasudra Brahmin priests existed outside of the context of the Matua sect, and were likely much more visible to the outside observer than the Matua sect. The sect's disinterest in hierarchy outside of the leadership of Guruchand Thakur might in some ways hide the Matua sect from direct view, allowing Mead to be ignorant of the strength of the sect. On the other hand, it would be neither in Thakur's interest to discuss the sect with Mead, nor in Mead's interest to divulge its existence in his speeches, as one could argue that the Namasudra were already 'taken' by the Matua sect and unavailable to Christianity as an alternative to Hinduism, thus not an easy target for conversion. I would argue that it is most likely that Mead is on the whole ignorant of the Matua sect, as it seems the Namasudra presented themselves to him as undecided in what their faith would be. He quotes them as saying, in their initially contact with him, "'Some of us say, 'Let us all become Christians': some say, 'Let us wait awhile'; others say, 'Let us break away from Hinduism and run a reformed Hinduism of our own.'"[88] This seems like a pretty concrete piece of evidence in favor of a sort of lie of omission; the 'reformed Hinduism' of the Matua sect had been well established by 1905. However it is not impossible to imagine that Mead, despite knowing of the commitment by the Namasudras to the Matua sect, believed either that they were still easily convertible, or wanted to convince his audience that they were easily convertible–either case would be better for raising support for his enterprise than admitting defeat. It is telling that his prior description of Thakur has that quiet admission of powerlessness, but nevertheless, he persisted in his mission.

[88] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 7.

Mead additionally gives a window into the state of Namasudra society throughout his speeches, giving a sense of social customs and institutions he saw when he arrived in Orakandi. He mentions that some of the wealthier Namasudra emulated the Zenana system of secluding women. This is indicative of the fact that the struggle against caste was a multifaceted affair–in combination with other aforementioned modes of protest, a common strategy by low caste groups was to appropriate upper caste behavior as a mode of caste mobility.[89] As discussed in the first chapter of this work, this was a venue for women missionaries–Mead notes that the wives of missionaries had better access to the women in Namasudra communities and so were at the forefront of teaching and preaching to them, providing photographic evidence of this.[90] The issue of gender persists in some of the common themes of preaching Mead mentions, which includes "the need of education both for boys and girls, the evils of early marriage," and "the plaint and plea of the widow"[91] This indicates that these were pressing issues–access to education for all children was probably very limited, early marriage was likely common, and widows held particularly low status. Additionally it reinforces the centrality of women to the missionary endeavor, as any issues pertaining to women were addressed by missionary women in their work, from schooling, to social issues and the like. As previously mentioned, the question of education holds particular weight in the formation of the Invited Missionary, the specifics of this case will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Mead on rare occasions quotes Namasudras from their interactions with him and his compatriots, letting the reader hear their voices. In those few cases, he doesn't name or personify

[89] Ishta Roy's "A Critique of Sanskritization from Dalit/Caste-Subaltern Perspective" in CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, Vol. 2, No. 2, provides great insight into this behavior and is well worth reading.
[90] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 11-12.
[91] Ibid., 12.

them–rather they are quoted as a faceless mass, or as irrelevant individuals. This is seen in the first speech in the collection, which he begins by recounting the moment of first contact between the South Australian Baptist Fureedpore Mission and the Namasudras. He describes how a delegation of Namasudras came to the mission to ask for aid:

> 'We come,' they said, 'as representatives of a great, sad class–hated, despised, downtrodden, treated like the dogs for centuries. We have at last waked to the fact that we, too, are men: that the same great God who made the proud Brahmin made us too, and we have it in our hearts to rise to a betting and a bigger life. Will you help us?'[92]

This quote suggests a newfound sense of awareness on the part of the Namasudras with regard to their status. To Mead, it seemed their struggle against their oppression was a rather recent awakening, and they are looking to the missionaries for aid in this struggle. One might read this quote with some skepticism–the contents within might be accurate, but Mead could have taken liberties with the language they used considering they likely had little experience communicating in English. However, as has been previously established, by the time of Mead's invitation, the Namasudras were well established, and directly tied with this was their class and caste awareness. Again it calls into question Mead as a reliable narrator of the Namasudras' position and intent. It is quite striking how perfect the image is that this quote paints for Mead of a helpless oppressed caste showing up on the doorstep of his mission, begging him and his compatriots for aid. Keeping in mind his goal of gaining support for the mission, this quote

[92] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 7.

provides quite a compelling argument for the vitality of the mission, and therefore the need to provide it with the utmost support.

The continuation of this conversation is, if anything, more striking than the quote above. It reveals complexities that Mead seems to ignore throughout much of his speeches. Previously quoted in this chapter, the Namasudras presented to Mead the question of Namasudra religious affiliation.[93] Taken at face value, this quote presents the Namasudras at a crossroads, a community in struggle both against the oppressive institution of caste and with itself about its identity. Understanding and keeping this perspective in mind is vital to reading beneath the surface of Mead's writing. As I mentioned earlier, Mead's interest was in representing his work as needed, as beginning to be effective, but also as needing more support to reach its full potential. This meant that Mead had an interest in presenting the veracity of that dichotomy, and emphasizing that first option in the quote above, and denying the likelihood of the other two options, no matter the reality of the situation. Despite his best efforts, he makes it clear that the work that he and his fellow missionaries were engaged in was less than effective. He himself frames their work as having to turn "a social into a religious movement,"[94] and in looking at the responses of the Namasudra to missionary activity, it is quite clear that the South Australian Baptist Fureedpore Mission failed to accomplish this mission.

Missionary Activity

To ascertain the impact of missionary activity in the Namasudra community, first we have to determine the scope and intent of their activity. As mentioned above, their hope was to convert

[93] "'Some of us say, 'Let us all become Christians': some say, 'Let us wait awhile'; others say, 'Let us break away from Hinduism and run a reformed Hinduism of our own.'"
[94] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 39.

the Namasudra struggle against the caste system into a Christian movement, so many of the conversion methods were focused on building good will toward the missionaries so that the Namasudras would see Christianity as the way forward. Mead makes this approach quite clear in his speeches. As he frames it, "in India there are fifty million human beings sitting abject on the outskirts of Hinduism, waiting for the vivifying message of the Christian faith."[95] In his eyes, every *Dalit* presented an opportunity for conversion; one needed simply to reach out to those outcasts to convert them. He outlines why he believes this to be the case, saying:

> They have been touched by the spirit of the awakening East, and hope has kindled in their hearts, and taught them that the Hinduism which has treated them as brute beasts is false, while the Christians, whom the Brahmins have taught them to hate, are their best friends, treat them like human beings, labour for their well-being, and teach them that they are potential sons of God and heirs of eternal life. Downtrodden and despised for centuries they are awaking to the fact that they, too, are men, and have rights as men in God's free world.[96]

This then forms the theory behind Mead's missionary activity–by befriending and ingratiating themselves with the Namasudra, they could be persuaded to convert to Christianity. This echoes all the way back to William Carey's original pitch for the missionary society, which again proves to be foundational to the appeal of the Invited Missionary for the Namasudras, who saw the resources gained from missionary activity as a potentially valuable asset in their struggle. It also plays into the issue of recognition. Whereas the *bhadralok* were guilty of misrecognizing the

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[95] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 17.
[96] Ibid., 39.

Namasudra, Mead posits that recognition–treating them as equals, working to improve their conditions and status–is the most powerful tool in bringing them into the Christian fold.

The missionary case for recognition suffers from its own issues of misrecognition, for Mead makes crudely clear the transactional nature of the aforementioned arrangement. While part of the missionary approach is the amelioration of their conditions and status, Mead's discussion of caste elsewhere in his speeches reveals the exploitative nature of the missionary project:

> Caste, which is our chief enemy in dealing with the higher ranks of society, is sometimes a great ally in work among the outcasts, driving them *en masse* into the arms of the Christians. When the front of a mass begins to move, caste-cement holds the mass together, and the whole of it rolls forward. The caste system thus acts as a net in God's hand to bring multitudes to land.[97]

It is clear that Mead sees the caste system not as an enemy, but as an ally and vital tool for conversion. It is then, in his eyes, in his and his compatriots' best interest to not dismantle caste but instead to reify it and the identity of the Namasudras. This disconnect in effect undermines any ability of the missionaries to successfully and truly recognize the Namasudra. This is because a piece of recognition is the mutual recognition of parity, and the assumption of a peer-to-peer relationship. The predatory nature of Mead's approach prevents him from ever being able to assume that relationship–though even outside of Mead's thoughts on caste, one could argue that the missionary endeavor as a whole prevents the formation of that relationship as it assumes disparity between the missionary and the intended convert, who could only become a

[97] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 35.

peer on the basis of conversion. In addition Mead's mindset doesn't account for the agency of the Namasudra, or the complexity of their position as a community at a crossroads. This is all to say that Mead's approach to the issue of caste is indicative of the underlying issue of missionary activity in Namasudra communities.

This is seen both in what missionary activity looked like, as well as its effects. As mentioned earlier, one of the primary ways missionaries worked was through preaching. Mead claims frequently that the presence of missionaries is often respected and held in high regard by the Namasudras, noting, for example, that "the missionary's presence is always sought as president."[98] Though Mead describes this preaching as happening in many different contexts, one particular time and place he emphasizes is at "uplift meetings," which were often held at the feasts following funeral ceremonies. Originally created as a space to organize and galvanize the Namasudra community, the introduction of missionaries to the community spurred an evolution in their purpose.[99] As Mead described, missionary activity became an important part of uplift meetings. They provided missionaries with a unique opportunity to speak to Namasudras they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to. Because uplift meetings were held after funerals, whose attendance could be upwards of hundreds or thousands of people, missionaries and Namasudra leaders were able to reach large groups rather efficiently. In one particular case, Mead recounts how he was taken by a group of Namasudras to the funeral services of the mother of one Ram Charan Poddar. He describes how "a large meeting was held, and I was put in the chair. I counted 2,000 men present. The meeting began at 3 in the afternoon. Speech followed speech, voicing their new-born hopes and aspirations… It was nearly 9 o'clock before my turn

[98] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 12.
[99] Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 28.

came to speak."[100] He then goes on to give an excerpt of the speech he gave to the crowd. This anecdote elucidates what an uplift meeting looked like, while the story as a whole provides some insight into the dynamics at play within Namasudra communities. What is particularly significant is that Mead was taken by a group of Namasudra for the purposes of an uplift meeting, and so was speaking per their request. This dynamic is a direct manifestation of the Invited Missionary; Mead is relegated to passivity while this group of Namasudras are actively inviting him. As mentioned earlier, Mead saw the Namasudras as coming to the mission house in Faridpur declaring their uncertainty–do they stay the course and hope for reform of the caste system, do they split off and create a new reformed Hinduism of some kind, or do they convert to Christianity? Their actions indicated to Mead that part of this process of weighing was through experimentation: What do the Christians bring to the table? What beliefs do they hold? Are they worth aligning with?

This experimentation is seen operating distinctly in the question of schools. One of the main projects of the missionary endeavor undertaken by Mead and his compatriots was the expansion of schools. This was a rather common trope of missionary work and Mead outlined the appeal of the project thus: "The Nama Sudras are keen enough to see that if they are to rise they must educate their sons, and the missionaries are keen enough to see that if they can have a hand in the schools they hold one of the keys to the situation. At Orakandi we found them eager about their school. It was the handle sticking out."[101] In this quote, the situation at hand was the conversion of the Namasudras, which therefore reflects Mead's mindset in his work. Again this plays into the benefits of the Invited Missionary to the Namasudras, who in many ways are

[100] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 13-14.
[101] Ibid., 14.

allowing themselves to be 'modernized' so to speak by the missionaries. This quote also indicates that he looked to schools additionally as an opportunity to form the next generation of Namasudras into Christians. In fact, part of his speech was to compel young men to volunteer to teach at the school they were establishing at Orakandi.[102] Mead seems to be optimistic about the school–though his optimism might simply be a means to engender support both through recruiting missionaries and for financial means–which was only beginning as a project.

There is a pretty consistent theme running throughout Mead's speeches, namely, that the Namasudras are moving into a new era, and that in Mead's eyes, that will be under the banner of the Christian God. He repeats this idea with a confidence and certainty that is quite striking, as if it were imminent. For example, he replies to the writing of a *bhadralok*, who is concerned with the fate of the Namasudra by saying, "The Nama Sudra, for example heartily dislikes the Mohammedan, and the Bengalee editor writes, 'They will embrace Islam,' when he means 'they will embrace Christianity,' only he hates to say it."[103] Mead presents this with certainty, which makes sense considering the purpose of his speeches. He had a vested interest in presenting Namasudra conversion to Christianity as all but certain. That being said, Namasudra-Muslim relations were complex, and while there was collaboration between the two, conversion was rather unlikely. In any case, the events and happenings he describes with confidence, nevertheless, paint a radically different picture with regard to the flocking of Namasudras to Christianity. Considering all the efforts that have been put in, from schooling, to uplift meetings, to other works such as medical aid, and considering Mead's rhetoric framing the Namasudras as on the precipice of conversion, one would expect Mead to cite the dramatic success of the

[102] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 14.
[103] Ibid., 37.

mission in the Faridpur district. Instead, he describes how "no Church of Nama Sudra converts has yet been formed. But there are the droppings of the shower. Kali Charan and his wife were the first to be baptized."[104] The fact that the only evidence he can present of the success of all the work being done is one couple is a major warning that they are gaining no traction through their efforts.

This puts a point upon this idea of the Invited Missionary and the exercising of Namasudra agency in this case. All these efforts, from social reform, to educational effort, to missionary presence at uplift meetings and the like would read differently had there been mass conversion to Christianity by the Namasudras. However, as Mead notes, that was not the case, which is quite striking considering the reach and effort put in by the missionaries. It raises the question of why, which is what conjured the idea of the invited Missionary in the first place.

To read against the grain of what Mead presents, I propose that what he depicts and the work he engaged in is all a manifestation of Namasudra agency. As I noted earlier, despite the missionaries' energetic and sustained efforts, the dynamics at play reduce them to a sort of passivity; the vast majority of the actions taken are done specifically at the request and behest of the Namasudras, and the Namasudras themselves held the decision making power of whether or not to actually convert. This reverses traditional narratives surrounding missionary work–often seen as predatory and one-sided, a closer look at the Namasudra case in fact upends this supposed dynamic. Likewise, it upends traditional narratives surrounding the power of subaltern communities in the arc of Indian history. Subalterns who are often reduced to passivity and one-dimensionality, and rarely given the opportunity to be seen as exercising agency in their fate

[104] Mead, *The Nama Sudras: and other addresses*, 24.

in the discourse of nationalist and communalist factions. The Namasudras' Invited Missionary thus pushes us to reconsider narratives of subaltern agency both in the past and in the present day.

Conclusion

The case of the Invited Missionary in the history of the Namasudra community is a doorway into investigating issues of caste, recognition, and agency. The first chapter of this work delineates the evolution of the missionary society. The attributes of the missionary society created the conditions in which the Invited Missionary arose. The second chapter turns to the history of the Namasudra people and identity. It then looks at the factors from that history that put them in a position to capitalize on the idea of the Invited Missionary. The third chapter looks at the interactions between the Namasudras and missionaries, to shed light on the ways the Invited Missionary was a form of Namasudra agency. Therefore, the Invited Missionary can be used as a lens of analysis to return agency to the Namasudras, a community that has been historically marginalized and disempowered. With the reemergence of their relevance in the 2024 election cycle, their current position harkens back to historical patterns and dynamics. This work has sought to elucidate the dynamics and actions of the Namasudras in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to provide an alternative and under-discussed piece of history, and to contextualize their modern day position.

The history of the Namasudras and the Invited Missionary is in many ways a reversal of traditional narratives of missionary activity. Missionaries are often presented as predatory and exploitative, and for good reason. Mead's speeches support this claim; as previously mentioned, he saw the inequality of the caste system as a major motivator for conversion, and so targeted low caste communities such as the Namasudra. The Invited Missionary flips this dynamic on its head. It in many ways removes the agency from the missionary, handing it over to those who

invited the missionary. This allows us to potentially reinterpret and reassign agency in missionary histories, shifting historical and modern narratives of power. In the case of the Namasudras and caste struggles in India this takes on a particular resonance. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu Nationalist paramilitary organization associated with the BJP, and the BJP themselves have targeted Christians in India with violent attacks and anti-conversion laws.[105] These laws have precedence in the legal codes of Hindu-ruled princely states in the 1930s and 1940s, to fight against Christian missionary activity at the time.[106] The targeting of Christians stokes religious divisions, motivating unity between Hindus of all castes and statuses in defense against a threat to their most vulnerable ranks. It also removes the agency of those low caste communities, in essence infantilizing them. This yet again is a form of misrecognition, as those communities are not afforded a say in their future. The Invited Missionary undermines this narrative of the vulnerable and exploitable lower castes, returning to them their agency in deciding their own fate. In the case of the Namasudra, this issue is compounded by the question of citizenship and the CAA discussed in the introduction. What direction the Namasudra will go in will only be known with time as their struggle against misrecognition continues.

[105] Alishan Jafri and Neel Madhav, "Why India is witnessing spike in attacks on Christians, churches," *Aljazeera*, December 2, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/2/india-christians-church-hindu-groups-bjp-conversion.
[106] Prem Chowdhry, "Anti-conversion laws violate right to equality," *The Tribune*, September 6, 2021, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/anti-conversion-laws-violate-right-to-equality-307214.

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