

WEST BENGAL COMMISSION FOR BACKWARD CLASSES

REPORT ON CHASATTI (CHASA) CLASS

The West Bengal Commission for Backward Classes received applications from different blocks of the districts of Murshidabad, Nadia and Burdwan. All the applications submitted under the banner of Chasatti (Chasa) Samaj Kalyan Samity, Murshidabad and over the signature of Sri Bikash Kumar Mandal, Secretary of the samity were for inclusion of Chasatti (Chasa) class of people in the list of Backward Classes in West Bengal. The applicant submitted their prayer in the filled in proforma of the Commission.

On receipt of the applications the Commission decided that Dr. Parimal Karmakar, Member of the Commission would go on a visit to the different blocks and villages of the districts of Murshidabad and Nadia having a habitational concentration of people professing themselves to be Chasatti (Chasa) class of people for an on the spot survey on the social, educational and economic status of those people. The survey covered 39 villages of Beldanga-I & II, Berhampur, Kandi and Nabagram blocks in the district of Murshidabad and Kaliyaganj block in Nadia. Dr. Karmakar submitted the survey report before the Commission. He also shared his ideas and impression about the survey with other members of the Commission.

The survey report shows that the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people mostly live on the bank of the Ganges. Their traditional occupation was the cultivation of Polu. But owing to financial constraint and lack of capital they have now given up their traditional occupation and eke out a living by cultivation of paddy, working on others' land as daily labours etc. The survey also reveals that most of the people surveyed have income between Rs 1000/- and Rs.2000/- p.m. Some of them however are a bit better off

having their income between Rs. 2500/- and Rs. 5000/- p.m. Only a microscopic minority have an income over Rs. 5000/- p.m.

The survey shows that the literacy rate among the Chasatti(Chasa) class of people is very low. However, it also transpired from the survey report that of the 20,000 or more people covered only about 4% were Madhyamik pass, less than 1% graduates and only a few postgraduates. There is no MP, MLA, Councillor or member of Zilla Parishad of Chasatti (Chasa) class of people. There are only 2 members of Panchayat Samiy and 9 (Nine) members of Gram Panchayat from this community.

The Commission also procured an administrative report from D.M., Murshidabad in the prescribed proforma of the Commission so as to have a better idea as to the social, economic and educational background of Chasatti (Chasa) class of people inhabiting the district of Murshidabad where the chasatti (Chasa) class of people have a preponderant habitation. Their population in the district is almost 20,000 out of 25,000 in the whole state. According to the administrative report the social and educational and economic status of the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people is very deplorable & pathetic. They are largely outnumbered by people belonging to other classes of people in the district. The other classes of people except those belonging to SC & ST Communities look upon the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people as inferiors because of their abject pecuniary condition and the resultant social and educational backwardness. In any social gathering they suffer from an inferiority complex as their living standard is very low.

Only a few of the Chasatti(Chasa) class of people have their own land. Most of them work on others' land as Bargadars and agricultural labours. So far as their livelihood is concerned the administrative report mentions that some families have petty business like stationery, teashop, grocery shop etc. There are only a very few number of Primary School teachers, Secondary School teachers, ordinary State and Central Govt. employees among this class in the district.

Literacy rate among the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people is not satisfactory either. 30% of the males have their education upto primary level, 23% have their education upto secondary level and less than 10% are only Madhyamik pass. The number of graduates as well as postgraduates is not mentionable. Their medium of education is Bengali. Most of the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people have their income upto Rs. 2000/- per month. A few of them only have an income more than Rs.2000/_ p.m. and only very few of them have an income more than Rs. 5000/- p.m. Most of them live in thatched hutments, about 10% live in Mudwall kuchha houses. However, after the heavy flood of the year 2000 destroyed most of the kuchcha houses, some semi pukka houses have been built.

Though the survey report submitted by Dr. P. Karmakar, the discussion held in connection therewith an incidental thereto and the administrative report received from D.M., Murshidabad were sufficient enough for forming a fair idea as to the social, educational and economic status of Chasatti class of people, the Commission for proper appreciation of the above decided to give them a hearing on 13.11.2009 at 12 p.m, which was attended by the Joint Secretary Reservation and Ex-officio Joint Secretary, Backward Classes Welfare Department and Director, Cultural Research Institute on behalf of the State Government.

Shri Bikas Kumar Mandal, Secretary Chasatti (Chasa) Samaj Kalyan Samity, Murshidabad made submission on oath regarding the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people and their social, economic and educational status.

The total population of Chasatti (Chasa) class people in the whole State is about 25000 of which males are about 13000 and females about 12000. They mostly live in the district of Murshidabad. The population of the Chasati (Chasa) class of people in the district is about 20000. They also live in the districts of Nadia and Burdwan. Their habitation in other districts of the state is not worth mentioning. Now they speak in Bengali. Their original language has reportedly become almost extinct.

The social status and standing of the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people are very low. They are a sub-caste of the Hindus. Not to speak of the Brahmins, other communities in the locality like Ghosh, Mahishya, Teli, Banik class of people look down upon them and address them in the derisive nick names of “Chasa Buddhinasa” (Dullard Chasas), “Chousatti Bachorer boka” (fools for the years), “Kaamar, Kumor, Chasa gramer baire thuba, darkar hale du ek gha diba” (Blacksmiths, potters, chasas stay outside the village and if need be, will be given a good thrashing) and actually the Chasatti(Chasa) class of people have to live on the outskirts of the village which indicates their social marginalization.

Normally, marriage outside their own community is not in vogue. But if any girl belonging to their community marries any boy of any other community excepting SCs & STs of the locality, the girl is subjected to persecution and virulent invectives as one coming from a lower community and desecrating the sanctity of her in-laws’ homestead. The condition of the women of the society as a whole also beggars description. As the main occupation of the Chasatti(Chasa) class of people is cultivation the women folk have also to participate in the job. They are married at the tender age of 13-14 and become mothers at a very premature age much to the detriment of their health.

The standard of living of the Chasatti(Chasa) class of people is very low. Only a very few of the Chasatti’s have their own land for earning their livelihood. Majority of them are employed on others’ land as Bargadars and agricultural labours. When works on land are not available they have to work as unskilled labours for their livelihood. Their representation in services, Govt or non-Govt, is quite insignificant. Less than 1% are engaged as primary or secondary school teachers. There is no lecturer in Colleges and Universities from Chasatti(Chasa) class of people and obviously their representation in the profession of Engineering, Medicine or Law is nil. Most of the Chasatti(Chasa) Class of people are unemployed. A significant number of people of the Community are holders of job-cards, which do not

however always guarantee jobs. Some of them due to abject poverty are reduced to beggary. In point of sanitation and health consciousness the Chasatti(Chasa) Class of people are very backward even by unsatisfactory rural standard. Almost 60% of the people attend nature's call in the open air. 20% of them however have thatched sheds as their latrines; only 10% have brick built lavatories. Potable water is also difficult to come by. Some of them even drink untreated river water or they have to.

The educational status of Chasatti(Chasa) class of people is also not very satisfactory. The literacy rate in the district of Murshidabad as a whole was 55% and that in West Bengal was at 69% (as per 2001-census report). But it was very low for Chasatti(Chasa) Class of people. A large number of children in the age group of 5-15 do not ever attend school. Even among those who attend school belonging to the said age group, the percentage of dropouts in the primary level to say nothing of College and University levels, is very high. The reason behind this sorry state of affairs is not far to seek. Most of the people belonging to community do not find learning worthwhile having not for generations ever tested its fruit. Over and above this they find their children's labour more meaningful to supplement their meagre income than their schooling. Age old conservatism has also insulated them from the pursuit of education.

There is also nothing much to write home about the economic condition of the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people. The income of the most Chasatti (Chasa) class of people does not exceed Rs. 500/- a month. The number of those having an income of Rs. 5000/- a month among the Chasattis constitute only 2% of the total population of the Community.

The Chasatti class of people have some rites and rituals, which make them distinguishable from other classes and communities;

- (a) On the sixth day of the child birth a ritual called "Sheteru" is

observed with 6 leaves. On a small mound of mud, Nine Cowries (*Koris*) are placed in case of male child and seven *Koris* are placed in case of female child. Palm leaves with the name of “Rama” inscribed on them are placed over the head of the child.

- (b) At the time of worship of Goddess Durga on the day of Vijaya Dashami, they bring a pitcher full of water and worship the ghot with old coins, gold and silver. And the immersion is performed on that very day in the evening.
- (c) Following the day of marriage the bridegroom and the bride are nicely dressed. Then a child is placed on the lap of the bride. After that with an umbrella in the arm pit and an attaché in hand the bridegroom pretends to leave the house along with his newly wed wife. On this a brother-in-law (Groom’s brother) beats the newly married bride with thorns and make them return to the household.
- (d) The bride-groom and the bride play with rice with cowries (*kori*) added to it. The rice is set aside for seven days after which the rice is exchanged with fish from a married lady belonging to Bagdi community. Then the bride is treated to a meal comprising a curry of those fish.
- (e) On the 8th day of the nuptial (Astomongola) on his arrival to his in-law’s house the son-in-law is denied any seat to sit on. The son-in-law starts bowing down to the superiors one by one who in return offer him rupees and the son-in-law in his turn also gives the superiors the same amount or more money on a plate. After this long ritual of obeisance (pronam) the son-in-law is offered a seat as the custom demands.
- (f) The main festival of Chasatti(Chasa) class of people is “Shiver Gajon”.

Md. Refatullah, MLA, Beldanga who attended the hearing and spoke on behalf of the Chasatti (Chasa) class of people stated that the submission made by the Chasatti(Chasa) Class of people in course of the hearing were true to the best of his knowledge as a people's representative.

Thus, in the light of all the materials placed, submissions made and reports received and keeping in view all the determining criteria like average literacy of the class of people, their average standard of education, the dropout rates of their children form school, their representation in the Govt. & Non-Govt. services, their social custom, living condition, status of women etc., the Commission draws the conclusion that the Chasatti (Chasa) Class of people constitutes a socially and educationally backward class in the state and the Commission recommends to the State Govt. that the Chasatti (Chasa) Class of people should be included in the list of Backward Classes in the state of West Bengal.

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Dr. Debjani Sengupta
Member

Sd/-

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Dr. Parimal Karmakar
Member

Sd/-

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Syed Masudal Hossain
Member

Sd/-

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Shri S. B. Mandal
Member Secretary

Sd/-

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Justice Malay Sengupta
Chairman