



A Hidden Renaissance in Bengal: The ‘Rebirth’ of Subaltern ‘Matua’ Namasudras

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Abstract— *The caste system in Hindu religion operates stratification which constitutes social hierarchy. The Brahman is at the apex of this hierarchy, with the Kshatriya second; Vaisya third in rank. The fourth is the Sudra, the ‘footman’, the servant of former three varnas. This sect is alienated as untouchable in this hierarchical order since the Rig Vedic era. The ‘Chandal’ (later allowed as Namasudra) of Bengal is a severely unprivileged segment of Sudra. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this sector rebelled against the oppression, exploitation and persistent humiliation of the ‘upper’ Varnas under the leadership of Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and later by his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur. They promoted an alternative socio-religious Matua movement to awake the marginal Namasudras to make their distinct identity. They took extensive education as means of their intellectual and social upliftment. The influence of the education movement continues its widespread influence till today. Agonisingly, the history of this renaissance movement is kept almost silenced in the caste dominated testimonials and elite history. The paper, therefore, attempts to unearth this glorious history of academic and social elevation of the unacknowledged Bengali Namasudras.*

Keywords— *Education, Hide, Matua, Movement, Namasudra, Renaissance.*

I. HISTORY OF NAMASUDRAS

Namasudra as a distinct sect has its own historical root. It has been a subject of debate regarding the origin of Namasudras. Namasudra as a sub-caste originated from the Aryanisation processes which led to gradual absorption of non-Aryans into the four-fold *Varna* system. Later on, the *Varna* system turned into *jati* system based on occupational distinctions among various varnas. In Bengal, the continual spread of Aryanisation led to the classification of different sects with typical occupations as distinct *jatias*. The people, who were mostly engaged with diverse occupations like fishing, cultivation, carpentering, boating, roof thatching, weaving, and egg and vegetable selling, came to be recognized as Sudra (Namasudra) in terms of *Varna*. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Namasudra is a settled ‘peasant community’ (*Caste, Culture and Hegemony* 154). The Namasudras inhabited in marshy Eastern Bengal districts of Faridpur, Khulna, Dhaka Bakerganj, Jessore and Mymensingh. Acharya

Mahananda Halder in his *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* states that after Pala Empire Bengal was under the reign of Sena kings who were the patrons of Brahmanism. Hence, they unleashed their severe atrocities on the Buddhists and deprived of their social and religious rights. Those alienated Buddhists were identified as Namasudras and they were made the objects of social oppression and discrimination for generations. Snigdhendru Bhattacharya has put almost the same view:

Some early Bengali historians refer to them as ‘Brahmin-Buddhists’ who refused to accept Hinduism after the decline of the Pal dynasty and the rise of the Hindu revivalist Sen dynasty, which ruled in the 11th and 12th centuries CE.

Whatever the origin of Namasudras - through the Aryanisation process, conversion from Buddhists or from Brahmanism- is, it is the very fact that they have been made objects of oppression in social organization and

institution. The author Dr. Pandharinath H. Prabhu has represented the essentials of Hindu social thought and organization in his book *Hindu Social Organization* and interpreted that "The creation of the Sudra from the foot symbolizes the fact that the Sudra is to be the 'footman', the servant of other *varnas* (286). The French anthropologist Louis Dumonto views in his *Homo Hierarchichus* that the "Caste system as an extreme form of 'social stratification' (3) in Hindu society in which people of hierarchical strata denies the 'rights' of dalits: "Our two cardinal ideals are called equality and liberty" (4). The Namasudras are alienated as untouchables in the hierarchical order of 'Hindu' society.

II. HARI CHAND THAKUR'S MATUA RELIGION: A MOVEMENT OF SOCIAL AWAKENING

Sri Sri Harichand Thakur (1812-1877), a dalit, who was born at Safladanga in the district Faridpur (now in Bangladesh), rebelled against the social injustice of caste Hindus. He introduced an alternative 'Matua religion' to revive own rights and distinct socio-political entity during the end of the nineteenth century. He aimed "to achieve social freedom for the untouchables." According to the historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Harichand Thakur "was born in this world to bring salvation to the downtrodden" (The Matua Sect and the Namasudras" 163). He also states that the Matua community was formed as 'a protestant Vaishnava religious sect' that rejected the humiliating hegemony of the Brahmanical *Varna* in order to create an independent identity rejecting the *Vedas*, and their rituals. The president of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha, Manohar Mouli Biswas also opines the same view of "Matua faith as being in opposition to Brahmanism, the *Vedas* and their rituals" (Sipra Mukherjee, 3).

The Matua dharma begins "with a defiant opposition to Brahmanical Hinduism." It is a separate religion outside of Hinduism, which denies the Brahmanical *Varna* system and against the rules of *Veda*, priestly hedonism and rituals. Instead, Harichand's Matua religion was based on secularism, love, gender equality and unification of untouchables and the oppressed people. Manosanta Biswas in his article "De-Sanskritization and Social Mobilization": has also unfolded the fundamental principles of Matua movement:

Alternative reform movements had the courage to build separate caste identities by defying the caste distinction and rejecting the Brahministic customs and rituals. They gathered liberty to their women, allowed

inter-caste marriage etc and that way they tried to build an alternative, non-hierarchical society (368).

The great essence of the Matua religion is the unification of *Karma* (work) and *Dharma* (religion): "Haate kaam aar mukhe nam" ("work with your hands and chanting [of Haribol] with your mouth" is the core message of the Matuadharm. The professor Sipra Mukherjee has rightly stated in her article "In Opposition and Allegiance to Hinduism: Exploring the Bengali Matua Hagiography Harichand Thakur" that:

The Matua dharma, a dissenting faith against the established Brahmanical faith, nurtured the community's spirit of independence and dignity, enabling it to move up the economic ladder through its secular ethic of work (16).

Manoranjan Byapari, one of the most renowned authors of the Namasudra community, has represented the secular ethic of the Matuas religion in his book *Matua Ek Mukti Sena (Matua, the Freedom Fighters, 2013)*.

Harichand Thakur perceived that education is the utmost means which can bring the financial independence and social rights of subaltern people. Hence, he assigned his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur to spread education among Namasudras: "My father Harichand advised me, / To provide education to the doors of my own clan." (Mahananda Halder 108, translation mine).

III. GURUCHAND THAKUR'S EDUCATION MOVEMENT

Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937) took up the leadership of the Matua religion and brought about a renaissance, the 'rebirth' (transformation which is culminated through 'a series of social, political, and intellectual transformations.') among the illiterate and ever oppressed marginal. He renewed the religion through the unification of *Shakti* (potentiality) and *Bhakti* (devotion); *Dharma* (religion) and *Karma* (work). He renamed the Matua Sangha as Matua Maha Sangha.

Guruchand Thakur prioritised the work of spreading education in underdeveloped societies as directed by his father Harichand Thakur: "Get educated first, and then make family". According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, he was the true pioneer of Namasudra renaissance under whom "the sect achieved its doctrinal cohesion and organizational push" (*Caste, Culture and Hegemony* 96). He comprehended that it was not possible to have social rights through religion. Hence, he introduced extensive education movement and messaged his community stating that: "Uneducated man is like a

beast, / With lights of education take fire religious knowledge to the life." (Quoted from Sipra Mukherjee 16)

The historical symposium, the Nikhilbanga Namashudra Mahasammelan (All Bengal Namasudra Conference) endeavored by Guruchand Thakur in 1907 in Khulna (now in Bangladesh), was organised to determine the future outlines of his movement. The movement was aimed at the embracement of education to have social and political right. His educational vibrance unlocked new doors for dalits and backward classes all over Bengal. It also brought about immediate and continuing effects. The American historian Katherine Mayo in her book *Mother India* (1927) has statistically shown the educational elevation of this dalit community:

By the last report they had in Bengal over 49,000 children under tuition, of whom 1,025 had reached the High School and 144 the Arts Colleges, where, because of caste feeling, Government has been obliged to set aside special hostels for their lodging. This community is rapidly raising its status (160).

Although able to pass, educated Namasudras were not entitled to jobs, as they belonged to untouchable society. Guru Chand Thakur gave a deputation against that discrimination to the British government on 14 August 1907 and it resulted that the learned youth of the untouchable society of Bengal got the right to participate in the first government service in 1908.

Guruchand Thakur was also an uncompromising fighter on the question of self-esteem. In 1871, in the 'census' of the British government led by the caste Hindus, the Namasudras were registered as 'Chandals'. The agitation stirred by Guruchand Thakur and Dr. C.S. Mead forced the English government to use the word 'Namasudra' instead of 'Chandal' in the 1911 Census Report.

He unrolled the message among the unlettered Namasudras that religion can satisfy the hunger of the human mind, but it can never satisfy the hunger of the human stomach. He perceived that only knowledge can liberate the marginal and oppressed people from the oppression of caste Hindu and hunger and only knowledge can make them happy forever. Hence, he instructed his disciples to educate their children:

I tell you all if you obey me,

Never make your sons unlettered.

There is no sorrow in eating or fasting,

What I want is to teach children. (Mahananda Halder 144, translation mine)

He urged to increase the sense of rights and self-awareness among the alienated and deprived people of Bengal. He messaged to them that illiteracy is the root of their deprivation and pledged them to be educated to have their own rights:

Due to our illiteracy, we are deceived.

So, I say, if you wish to be free, you must be educated yourselves.

If you have education, grief will go away,

And be happy forever on the earth. (Mahananda Halder 130, translation mine).

He began to establish schools with his tired-less efforts for the elevation of the unlettered oppressed people of Bengal. It was very difficult enterprise for him to set up academic institutions. There were financial crisis to institute school buildings, denial of the educated caste Hindus to teach in those schools as well as the reluctance of the poor to read. Under those critical conditions, Guruchand Thakur set up his first school in his own house in 1880 and it was upgraded to a high school in 1908. In the same year, the first English-medium high academy was set up in his village. It was an unprecedented initiative for the unprivileged illiterate people of Dalit society.

A Namashudra Mahasammelan chaired by Guruchand Thakur was held in 1881 to convey the essence of inevitability of education in dalit Namasudras and the way of its spreading among them. In his speech at the convention, he proclaimed to accept education as the only way to uplift illiterate dalit people: "There is no regret in living or dying, /I prefer to build schools from village to villages (Halder 145, translation mine). By 1931, he established a total of 1820 schools in undivided Bengal. Dr C. S. Mead, an Australian Baptist missionary, was of immense help to him in the education and social justice movements.

Guruchand Thakur was truly the pioneer of dalit renaissance in Bengal. He apprehended the necessity of women education. He built numerous schools for girls. He also set up a training academy for women. He donated a boat for the girls to go to school. He also began a new era by initiating the widow-marriage and an 'Ashram' for them with assistance of Dr. C.S. Mead's wife.

The caste Hindu attempts to lower the significance of the Matua movement and has kept almost hidden in the history. The faith of this religion is love and love to all, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Sri Thakur did not confine his movement of education only to Matua sector. Indeed, it was spread among other depressed castes like Teli, Mali, Kumbhakar, Kapali, Mahishya, Yadav, Das, Chamar, Kamar, Tanti and even Muslim.

Shri 'Rajarshi' Guruchand Thakur induced the "intense interest in education" among the subaltern class and he was also able to convey the value of their schooling. This consciousness of education resulted to set up lots of colleges and universities by his followers in India and Bangladesh, as after the partition of India in 1947, a major number of Matuas migrated to India and formed their second organisation in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, India.

IV. CONCLUSION

Hari Chand Thakur and more particularly Guruchand Thakur initiated *renaissance*, a 'revival of interest' in education and social awakening, which enlightened the dalit Namasudras. Sadly, the history of this Bengal renaissance is kept almost hidden in the elite history. In his letter (1921), the Australian Baptist missionary Dr C. S. Mead unrolled his delation for the negligence by the caste Hindus to Guruchand Thakur and his regard to Guruchand for his 'ability and wide-spread influence' on Namasudras, stating that "foreigner [Mead] is able to realize him [Guruchand] and so obeys him" (<https://sites.google.com/view/srisriguruchand-charit/417>, translation mine).

The history of this dalit renaissance reiterated by the two humanists was first truly unveiled in *Sri Sri Harililamrita* (1917) by the dalit poet Tarak Chandra Sarkar and in *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (1943) authored by Mahananda Halder. These two texts mirror the history of 'Chandal' community, the ethics of the Matua religion and the social awakening movement. Sipra Mukherjee in her article has also stated the fact *Guruchand Charit* is the first book which unfolds the movements of Namasudra community:

Guruchand Charit, authored by Mahananda Halder is a valuable text and the Life-Veda ('Jeevan-Veda') of the Matua sect. It is a grand narrative of the struggle for freedom of Bengal's underprivileged and disadvantaged classes. No history of these people has been written before this. ((Mahananda Halder, *Guruchand Charit*, p. v; quoted from Sipra Mukherjee 10).

Tarak Chandra Sarkar, the pioneer of *Kavigaan* (a kind of song tournament) and his successors such as poet Haribar, Manohar, Rajendranath Sarkar, Vijay Sarkar, Nishikanta Sarkar" and the recent dalit folk-poets Surendra Nath Sarkar, Amulya Ratan Sarkar, Srinibas Sarkar, Asim Sarkar, Mano Ranjan Sarkar and Uttam Sarkar take the promising role to "promote the idea of social reformation through the lyricism of rhymed verse" (Jaydeep Sarangi 12). A number of dalit writers like Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, and Nakul Mallik are trying

to focus on the history of education and social movements. Very recently, Prof. (Dr.) Tapan Kumar Biswas, the Hon'ble Vice-Chancellor of the University Harichand Guruchand University (HGU) and his eminent associates have established the Centre for Matua Studies (CMS) to extend Guruchand's education movement and 'the culture, heritage, and prospect of Matua Community' in modern age.

The elite chroniclers never perceive to focus on this repressed history. Rather, the history of Namasudra renaissance movement has been almost inaudible in their conventional history, except in the testimonials of dalit intellectuals. It is, thus, undeniable that the history of the sublime renaissance of subaltern Namasudras of Bengal is marginalised in elite history.

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