

**The Reformation of the Matua Movement as a Stepping Stone for the Upliftment of the
Dalits in Bengal: A Study**

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ABSTRACT

One of the most distinctive characteristic of India is its social system. It has been driven by casteism. It has partially been believed by the high caste Brahmins that casteism has saved Hinduism from disintegration. Therefore they have preached the proletariat and subaltern that they are specially created by Brahma to rule over them. Due to this they have divided the whole social system with four sections - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. But their inhuman treatment over the marginalized and dalits has left no mark of identity for them. Therefore, they have been searching their identity with the periods of time either by embracing other faiths or by revolting against them. In this context, Matua Mahasangha or MMS is a religious reformative movement which was an initiative step for the Namashudra, a Scheduled Caste group to acknowledge their pangs and pathos in the Brahmin centric division and motivate them to revolt against the untouchabilities they have been faced since decades. This paper attempts at analyzing how the reformation of the Matua movement becomes a stepping stone for the upliftment of the Dalits in Bengal.

Keywords: *Casteism, Hinduism, Dalit, Matua Mahasangha, Namashudra, untouchables, upliftmen*

The social awakening, religious and political movements among the lower caste people in Colonial Bengal and many other parts of colonial India may be interpreted in terms of two different distinct manners. The underlying reason behind these movements was perhaps due to the utter negligence of the downtrodden on account of their economic set back, social disparity, lack of proper education and inhuman treatment meted out to them by the upper class people of the society

The word 'Dalit', is derived from vernacular form of the Sanskrit word 'dalita' which means "divided, split, broken, or scattered". It is a term or name that describes the people belonging to the lowest castes of India, characterised as 'untouchables'. 'Dalit' is not a caste or race but a socio- religious and cultural disease that is feeding on the body of Indian society.¹ Long before, this term became the point of discussion and the social movement entitled Matua movement. This movement was founded by the sect Shree Shree Harichand Thakur. It as started as a religious movements and social reformative activities to empower the *Chandals* or *Namashudras* of East Bengal who were one of the most deprived and untouchable people of Bengal. The *Chandals* are the 'fifth varna' of the Aryan caste system. They were the indigenous people of India. Thus, they were not included in the Aryan caste system which had four

¹ Mohanta, Nandadudal, 2002. *Matua Andolan O Dalit Jagaran*. Kolkata: Annapurna Prakashani. P 6

main castes or 'varnas'. Those who are born of inter- caste marriages were considered as the 'fifth varna' or the outcastes. Those were later classified as the 'Dalits'.²

The *Chandals* or *Namashudras* of Bengal were one of the prominent Dalit communities of Bengal. They were the largest group of untouchable people among the untouchable communities of Bengal. They were not the *Chandals* described in the '*Manusmriti*' who were associated with the ritual of the act of the burning of the dead body. Rather they were associated with farming and agriculture and fishing.³ But the *Chandals* or *Namashudras* of Bengal were considered as untouchables and were prohibited from entering the Mandirs and the upper caste people did not provide any assistance in the act of earning livelihood of those from Namashudra community.⁴ The Bengalis are mixed race people originated from the interrelation between Aryan and non- Aryan people. This mixed quality can be found in the *Namashudras* as well. The traces of qualities of different castes like *Brahmin*, *Kshtriya*, *Baidya*, *Kayastha* can be seen among the people from Namashudra community. In undivided Bengal the *Namashudras* were scattered in different parts of Assam, Odisha as well as Bengal, they were mostly found in congested population in the East Bengal.⁵

Bengal underwent a great religious reformation in the 15th century with the emergence of Shree Chaitanyadeb (1486 – 1534) and his *Vaishnab* doctrine of reformatory religious movement. But this reformatory religious movement could not and did not help to change social and religious state of the Dalits or lower castes of Bengal.⁶ Later in 19th century Bengal, mainly urban Calcutta- centric Bengal became upgraded through Bengal Renaissance which was mainly a cultural phenomenon. This 'renaissance' enhanced and enriched the socio- cultural atmosphere of the upper caste society of Bengal, but it did not affect the rural life and the social situation of the lower caste people of Bengal.

Bengal Renaissance of 19th century marks the starting of the steady growth of the Bengali literature. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar became able to bring changes in the social customs like *Satidaha*, child marriage and conduct widow re-marriage through the help of British rulers. They became able to bring the women of upper caste people of Calcutta to the schools to receive education. These social reforms did not affect the lives of lower caste people.⁷ Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar even acclaimed that the lower caste people, much less the lower class women, did not need education. Only the upper caste society was eligible for betterment and reformation. In this atmosphere of renaissance and reformation of 19th century Bengal, but far away from the urban mainstream life, was born Harichand Thakur who became the pioneer of lower caste movement of Bengal, the Matua Movement, the single impactful religious reformatory movement against the *Brahminic* set up of society in Bengal by the lower caste people.⁸ Harichand Thakur was the founder of Matua sect and doctrine. He established this Matua sect and doctrine to lead the people of Namashudra community to the path of self-empowerment.

Namashudra community can be considered as the representative of all the other Dalit communities of Bengal as they had the most number of population or members. This was the reason behind the Namashudra Movement being one of a kind Dalit Movement in Bengal. Historically the

² Ambedkar, B.R.. *Writings and Speeches*. Vol- VII, Education Deptt. Govt. of Maharashtra. 1990, P 279

³ Biswas, Manoshanta. 2016. *Banglar Matua Andolan: Somaj Sanskriti Rajniti*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani. P 34

⁴ Ibid. Pp 117- 119

⁵ Mohanta, Nandadulal. 2002. *Matua Andolan O Dalit Jagaran*. Kolkata: Annapurna Prakashani. Pp 10- 12

⁶ Biswas, Manoshanta. 2016. *Banglar Matua Andolan: Somaj Sanskriti Rajniti*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani. P 34

⁷ Biswas, Manoshanta. 2016. *Banglar Matua Andolan: Somaj Sanskriti Rajniti*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani. P 39

⁸ Bandyopadhyay, Sandip. 2005. *Daliter Purankatha*. Kolkata: Anushtup. P 108

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initiation of Namashudra Movement was from the Duttadanga Meeting in 1881 in Faridpur which was also the starting point of Matua Reformatory Religious Movement. At the same time the founder of Matua Doctrine Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur were the pioneer of the Namashudra Movement. Thus, the Namashudra Movement that was mostly initiated and led by the Matua Religious leaders is in reality inseparable from Matua Religious Reformatory Movement.⁹

Harichand Thakur was born in a family of Namashudra community with *Vaishnav* faith. As a member of Namashudra community he always felt the severe oppression that the people had to face in the name of religion. The *Namashudras* were regarded as untouchables in the society. The upper caste people would accept the service of untouchable but would not let them have the right to worship the God or enter the *Mandir*. This unequal treatment was detested by Harichand Thakur. In Hinduism only Brahmins are given the right to worship the God directly, any other caste has to ask the help of Brahmin priests to preside the act of worshipping the God as a medium or middleman. This deprived the other castes of their right to worship the God on their own. Harichand Thakur refused to accept this rule. He claimed if the *Namashudras* are not allowed to enter the *Mandir* and worship the Brahminic God the *Namashudras* should leave those Gods to the Brahmins and worship their own God through *Harinam Sankirtan*.¹⁰

According to Manu the women should be dependent on the men throughout their life in every aspect, they would be treated as the liability of their father in childhood, possession of their husband in their youth and responsibility of their son in old age. They were also deprived of any right to worship the God on their own. Harichand Thakur refused to accept this Brahminic concept of gender discrimination and unjust towards the women in the society. In his religious doctrine Harichand Thakur provided the women with equal rights in every aspect of life and society.

Dalit Movements were originated from the helplessness the lower caste people of Hindu community for being dominated and deprived by the upper caste Hindu Brahmins. The main aims of Dalit Movements were to gain social- religious- economic equality and to get rid of the untouchable status forced by the Brahmins.¹¹

Dalit Movements of India were mainly reformative movements aimed for socio- religious reform of Hindu religious and customs. Caste system of Hinduism was the root of social unjust that took form of deep dissatisfaction among the depressed classes. The Namashudra Movement of East Bengal that was initiated by the founders of Matua Doctrine, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, did not aim for any reformation under Hinduism but tried to find their own religious and cultural identity.¹²

In Brahmin dominated society of Bengal the Dalits or lower caste people had this thought deeply engraved inside that they were not human enough to be equally treated with the upper caste people. Dalit communities of Bengal held this grudge in their mind and bore through generations. But they failed to raise their voice against this unjust. There was no combined Dalit Movement against the Brahmins in Bengal like the South India. The Matua Reformatory Religious Movement was a single religious movement that is worth mention here.¹³

The origin and growth of Matua Religious Movement was East Bengal centric and its root was in rural atmosphere. There is almost no mention of this religious movement in its contemporary mainstream history and literature. Though Bengali literature had ample examples of religious texts, from '*Charyapad*'

⁹ Biswas, Manosanta, 2016. *Banglar Matua Andolan: Somaj Sanskriti Rajniti*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani. P 119

¹⁰ Ibid. Pp 122- 123

¹¹ Biswas, Manosanta. 2016. *Banglar Matua Andolan: Somaj Sanskriti Rajniti*. Kolkata: Setu Prakashani. P 18

¹² Ibid. P 19

¹³ Bandyopadhyay, Sandip. 2005. *Daliter Purankatha*. Kolkata: Anushtup. Pp 108-109

to 'Mangal Kabya' and 'ShreeKrishnaKirtan', the 19th century Bengali literature being modern in nature refused to accept religious scriptures as exemplary literary text. Still, as being the very first example of Dalit Movement in Bengal the religious scriptures of Matuas, the 'Shree Shree Harililamrita' and 'Shree Shree Guruchandharit' held immense importance in historical value of its origin as a text.¹⁴

Since the Sen Dynasty the Dalits of Bengal had to face the caste based prejudices in society. As the emergence of custom named '*Kaulinya pratha*' the inter-caste marriages and even intra-caste marriage was prohibited and socially disdained by the upper caste people. This custom precisely detected and pin-pointed the lower caste people as the lower and bad in condition. It also helped the upper castes to get rid of their guilty consciousness on this matter of mistreating other human beings.¹⁵ Though in Bengal caste discrimination was not as distinct as in the upper north part of India or south India as the consciousness of being a mixed race was clear among the Bengalis, caste system and its discriminative effect became deep with time as the rulers from northern part of India came to rule over Bengal.¹⁶ If one is less human than the other then mistreatment is justified in its own. Thus, the discrimination gradually increased.

In Hinduism it is seen that the caste division has brought distinctions among the people in the society with four caste divisions. The *Shudras* are instructed to serve the generation descending from *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* castes without raising any protest. *Shudras* are not given any right to practice religious rituals, studying of scriptures and even to acquire education from the institutions. The *Namashudras* of Bengal were regarded as lower than the *Shudras* of Vedic 'Four Castes or Varnas'. They were marked as 'Dalit' or Scheduled Caste in the first half of 19th century by the British and Indian political leaders.¹⁷ Thus, the Namashudra Movement of 19th century as a Dalit Movement was an important feat of history.

Although in the post independent period the people in our county have been given right of freedom and equality the law has not yet been translated into action. This is in common with the situation of many other countries. A group of human beings still remain backward in the society in many respects. It is proved that by only administrative power of the government people cannot achieve their human right. As a result the division of castes and class still remain a dominating system in the society and life. Under this situation it was a real achievement to preach for religion of humanity and fraternity in India. At that time being a part of the society which was under the pressure of on- going system of prejudices and superstitions and it was the time of the rise of Matua religion. This Matua religious doctrine first directed the downtrodden people of the society the path to upgrade their life and reach the state of emancipation through the help of education.¹⁸ That is why they claim Matua religion as a distinctly separate religion. Harichand Thakur gave shelter to the Muslims as well. Muslims also came under the religious faith provided by Harichand Thakur.¹⁹ This act was repeated during the time of his son Guruchand Thakur. In the present time as well it is noticed that the Matuas maintain affable relationship with the Muslim persons like Jalil Mian, Diwar Hossain, and Farhan Mondal etc. They consumed food with these Muslims from the same plate. This clearly proves that Matua religion is a religion of humanity. Also there is no restriction of entry of people of any religion into the temples of Matua. Harichand Thakur never advised

¹⁴ Biswas, Sukritiranjana. 2012. *Matua Dharma Eak Dhrama Biplab*. Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya. P 31

¹⁵ Mukhopadhyay, Jiban. 2007. *Bharater Itihas (Part I)*. Kolkata: Shreedhar Publishers. P 201

¹⁶ Sengupta, Dr. Nitish. 2008. *Bangabhumi O Bangalir Itihas*. Kolkata: Dey's Publishing. P 24

¹⁷ Jha, V. *Candal and the Origin of Untouchability*. Indian Historical Review, 1986- 87, Vol 13, No. 1, Pp 1- 36

¹⁸ Halder, Sudhir Ranjan. 2018. *Matua Dharma Prasange*. Chakdah: Kamala Publishers. P 11

¹⁹ Sarkar, Tarak Chandra. 2016. *Shree Shree Harililamrita*. Thakurnagar: Modern Press. P 220

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to destroy the evils, he advised to rescue them from their evil way of life. In Matua religion the women have been given power and right of work with dignity. Harichand Thakur chanted the 'Namgan' jointly with all people irrespective of male and female. Thakur said that nothing can be done in the society without active participation of women. To him women are the source of power. So, dignity to power and right of human beings, irrespective of male and female, is there in Matua religion.²⁰

Automatically, Matuas unlike those who have left their families and society will be involved in politics. Guruchand Thakur in first quarter of 20th century was acquainted with C.S. Mead, a doctor in profession, but a Baptist in Christian missionary and almost all correspondences with government and other functionaries in connection with his social activities were made with the help of this gentleman. Guruchand Thakur realized two things clearly, one is political awareness and another is education. Guruchand Thakur was indifferent to activities of the British as regards the partition of the country.²¹ In the first quarter of 20th century the depressed class is seen to come closer to the Muslim community and is found to participate in political activities with them.

Outstanding politicians, social reformers, educationists who have advocated for the service to the poor and downtrodden are not uncommon but a versatile like Guruchand Thakur who set a combined path of sociality and spirituality for elevating the backward to the mainstream of nation irrespective of caste, creed and religion is very rare. With his initiation the Namashudras were re-named from Chandals as Namashudras in 1911 census.²² This act marked another feat in the history of Namashudra Movement.

With the leading of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur the Matuas coming from the Dalit Namashudra community advanced to the better future that waited for them. Though the Partition of Bengal had left a great rift on the progressive movement of Matuas, they accepted this challenge and continued to strive for equal social rights. Thus, the Namashudra Movement which was almost the single prominent Dalit Movement in the history of Bengal was initiated and led by the founders of Matua Movement, Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. Even after them the Namashudra Movement was led by the Matua leaders of next generations. In a way it can be said that Namashudra Movement and Matua Movement were two faces of a same coin, first one was the social outburst while second one was the religious rebellion.

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²⁰ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. Editorial, *Anandabazar Patrika*, 9th April, 2019. P 08

²¹ Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. Editorial, *Anandabazar Patrika*, 24th April, 2021. P 04

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