

Historical Development of the Education of the Namasudras

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Abstract – Education is a vital role in our life. The term education is derived from a Latin word ‘educatio’ meaning a bringing, a breeding, a rearing. Another Latin word from which the word education comes ‘educere’ implies ‘to draw out’, ‘to lead out’, ‘to bring forth’. Latin word educatum denotes “to train”, “to teach” Thus, education implies the act of training or teaching the child. The Namasudras constituted the second largest Hindu caste group in the British province of Bengal and the largest in its eastern parts. They lived mainly in the low-lying swamp areas of its six eastern districts, i.e., Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna In 1881, 71 per cent of the Namasudras of Bengal lived in these six districts.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Middle Ages of Bengal was entirely full of darkness. From the ancient ages Bengal was the land of Chandals and the abode of Kauma religion. The ancient inhabitants of this place were generously democratic, believers of equality and the worshippers of human religion. This Kauma religion of Bengal was never approved by the Buddhist religion and Brahminism. They were not the believers of democratic equality. So for them this downtrodden people were deprived. To teach the downtrodden people the Buddhist and the Brahminists with the help of the royal power became involved in a crazy sport to occupy Bengal. So at first the Buddhists occupy Bengal and then the Brahmins conspired to expel the Buddhists. On the other hand, the Buddhists invited the Muslims to drive away the Brahmins. This truth is proved through the comparative study of history. And these various religious people with the help of the royal power inflicting inhuman torture upon the chandals expelled from one place to another and were involved in a despicable conspiracy to convert them in their own religions. Without the help of the royal power there was no progress of such religions as a result they were never the worshipper of equality or democracy. The Buddhists condemned such non-vegetarians as Chandals and on the other hand the Brahmins called them ‘Dassu’ or ‘Taskar’. Later the Muslim rulers being allied with the successors of the former rulers inflicted inhuman torture upon the Bengal Chandals and converted their religions. So the land of the Chandals was the land of religious conversion in Bengal. Due to the torture of the Brahmins in Bengal the Chandals were compelled to accept the Islam religion.

In such a situation of crisis, Mahaprabhu Chaitanya Deb announced in order to resist such religious conversion,

“Chandallopi dwiga shreshto

Hari Bhakti parayana”

But Chaitanya Deb could not take away the chandals of Bengal in the flood of Haribhakti. So after the demise of Mahaprabhu the Brahmins started to inflict torture upon Chandals with the help of royal power of Muslim rulers. As a result the Chandals became ruined and penniless. For the sake of life and to save their own religion, they started to live in the unsuitable marshy regions of Eastern Bengal going out of the control of the rulers. The rest of the people were compelled to undergo religious conversion to save their life.

In the dawn of 19th century, there was a terrible decline among the Brahminist Hindu and Vaishnav religions. In such a terrible situation of the country (1812-1878) Sri Sri Harichand Thakur revolted against the Vaishnav and Brahmin religions. Along with this he revolted against the torture of Brahmin zamindars and associated persons. As a result the tortured Chandals started to support his movement gradually. Standing above the consciousness of the age and supporting the hopeless Chandals, he encouraged the Chandals brought them out of fear. He helped to found a community for the Chandals by giving the religion less Chandals his own Matua religion and he resisted religious conversion. He was the first pioneer for them who had no right in anything ever and helped them to establish their right. Sri Sri Harichand Thakur started his movement to establish

the peaceful, domestic life and to give importance to their land right. For this purpose he encouraged the Chandals towards movement by uniting them through their religion.

The beginning of 19th century and the two decades of the 20th century (1812-1937), there was the beginning era of alliance of the religion, socio culture, education, economy and politics among the downtrodden people of the East Bengal. In the historical perspective of their struggle for freedom the great role of Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur is a bright landmark.

Standing on such united power of religion Sri Sri Harichand Thakur's son Guruchand Thakur started his second phase movement to open the fully closed door of the downtrodden people's working field. At first he started education movement among the downtrodden people of Bengal directed by Sri Sri Harichand Thakur. At that time there was no opportunity for the downtrodden people in the educational institution in Bengal. So the epoch hero Guruchand Thakur started this education movement following his united power of the Matua.

HISTORICAL BACK GROUND:

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Guruchand Thakur was born on 13 March in 1847 in Orakandi of Kashiani Thana in Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur District. His father was the propounder of the Matua religion Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and his mother was Shanti Devi. Guruchand was the first child

of Harichand Thakur and Umacharan Thakur was Guruchand's younger brother. In his early childhood he started his education in the lap of nature and his parents. Guruchand Thakur was a very generous and brave boy. He used to take the leading position among his friends. When he was 7, his father sent him to Dasharath Biswas's house to take formal education at Padmavilla village. After completion of his education to Dasharath Biswas, he stated to take education from Harichand Thakur's closest devotee Golok Kirtaniya who was a resident of Molla Kandhi village. Golok Kirtaniya's son Giri Dhar Kirtaniya was Guruchand Thakur's classmate. After completion of his three years' education at Molla Kandhi though he was eagerly intent for pursuing his education, he could not attend to any institution for education because at that time there was no right for education for the lower caste people. This incident deeply hurt Guruchand Thakur. After returning to Orakandi, he took admission to Maktab and continued to study Arabic and Persian languages. He continued to study for 12 years long and then stated to take religious education from his father. At the age of 14 he got married to Sattavama Devi. After his marriage he started domestic education and austere education with his parents. Until he was 20, he received education on society, economy, politics, religious creed etc. To obey his father, Guruchand Thakur devoted himself to the benefit of his community. With his extreme hardworking, wise thought and efficient leadership, he started to proceed in his movement.

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EDUCATION MOVEMENT:

The revolt that took place in 1872-73 was known as the Chandal movement which started in the Faridpur District, in the village of Amdanga. In this movement Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur played an important role. According to Sekhan Bandhopadhyay, "The first step towards the spread of education was taken in 1880 when a pathshala was founded in Orakandi exclusively for the purpose of education of the Namasudra children." In 1881, in the village of Duttadanga in Khulna district in the funeral ceremony of Iswari Gayen's mother Guruchand Thakur first called for the education movement for the downtrodden people.

Guruchand Thakur realized the need of education through the experience of his own life. He felt that education is the only path that could bring a person

from darkness to light. He further realized that education could also bring equality, so he marked education as the only key to progress and started his movement with demand of "education for all". So he told parents even to beg for educating children.

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The census report of Bengal in 1872 delineates the Chandal habitat. It states thus:

"The Chandals or Charals aggregate upwards of a million and a half. This was the great sweeper caste to which were doubtless consigned the great bulk of the aboriginal tribes who embraced Hinduism. They were most numerous in the Eastern districts of Jessore, Furreedpore, Buckargunge, dacca, Mymensingh and Sylhet."

"...the dreary and unwholesome swamps of the extreme south [of the district of Furreedpore] are largely peopled by highly interesting Chandal race. The Chandals are originally a complete Hindu community consisting of persons of all castes from the Brahmans downwards, who on having the misfortune to be cursed in a body by a vengeful Brahman of unutterable sanctity in Dacca, quitted their ancestral homes and migrated bodily to the southern wastes of Furreedpore, Jessore and Buckergunge

The people of this community applying their great perseverance and toil built their homesteads in the dry weather to preserve their cattle and goods during the high inundations. They are located at this place till today cultivating rice and jute and carrying on the occupations of fishing and bird-watching. In the dry weather they often suffer considerable from scarcity of water and at times they often die from thirst because they do not preserve water in tanks. During the rainy season the whole country becomes flooded. The water level rises upto 10 feet and leaves their artificial mounds like so many islands in a huge lake. Even their cattle have often to remain for weeks standing up to their necks in water. For lack of their food, they are fed minimum amount necessary for surviving. Consequently, by the end of the season their physical condition gets deteriorated. They are reduced to skeletons and most of them die in the process. It is this that renders it impossible to introduce a large and less hardy description of cattle.

"Notwithstanding all the difficulties, this Chandal community has to contend against, however, they are strongly attached to the home of their adoption, and resist all inducement to abandon it. Efforts, for example, have been made to transfer some of them to the Sunderbans, but with no measure of success. They prefer remaining in the region to which they have adapted themselves perseveringly and laboriously, where they are not likely to be envied for their lot and where they can dwell together as a district community with their own Brahmans, their own priests, castes and tradition.

Their occupation and their enforced practice of going about in boats during the great portion of the have rendered the Chandals a hardy and muscular race, while they present a favourable contrast to their uncursed and therefore contemptuous neighbours in respect of ingenuousness and truthfulness."

According to B.C. Allan ICS, District Magistrate of Dacca, by far the most numerous Hindu caste "are the Namasudras, humble, cultivating caste who are believed to be the autochthons of the Bengal delta."

Dr. James Wise, Civil Surgeon of Dacca observed that "Chandals are generally very dark complexion, nearer black than brown, of short muscular figures and deep, expanded chest. Despite this fact, over 12 centuries had passed, there is striking similarity between the physical features of the Chandal described by the Civil Surgeon, dacca and the people Hiuen Tsang met during his visit to Samatata between 629 AD and 645 AD. The great Chinese traveler opines "The country borders on the great sea. The land lies low and is rich in crops and flowers and fruits grow everywhere. The climate is soft and the habits of the people agreeable. The men are hardy by nature, small of structure and of clack complexion; they are fond of learning and exercise diligently in the acquirement of it." (page 10 namasudras of Bengal).

The occupation of the Namsudras is varied. As pe the census report of 1911 "the Namasudras who are by tradition cultivators and boatmen, engaging in a number of other occupations, i.e. clerks, shopkeepers, goldsmiths, oilpressers, braziers, blacksmiths and carpenters: one member of the Namnasudra even holds the appointment of a Deputy Magistrate." In a memorandum to the Namasudras themselves asserted that "We are the yeomanry of the Provinces. Though we are chiefly agriculturists, some of our castemen are talukdars, traders, gatidars, carpenters, blacksmiths, contractors, physicians, pleaders, mukhtears, clerks, teachers, sub-inspectors of schools and police, kanungos and the followers of other occupation in life."

Risley's inquiry reveals that they "actually work at anything. They are the only Hindus employed in the boats (bajra) hired by shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, oilmen as well as successful traders. They are, however, debarred from becoming fisherman, although fishing for domestic use is sanctioned. In North Bengal they catch fish for sale." The Namasudras returned in 1871 numbered 1,50,3518 and 2,094, 959 in 1931. It is striking that in 1881 they numbered 1,69,2233 only.

In 1880 Guruchand established his first school in the Chowdhury house at Orakandi. Pandit Raghunath Sarkar from Decca was the first teacher of that school. Along with the spreading of education Guruchand Thakur encouraged people to make roads, to maintain cleanliness and to arrange sanitation for keeping the environment clean. He was dead against for child marriage and also instructed his disciples not to encourage dowry system and to stand against it. In 1881 he occupied the position of President in the first assembly of the Namasudras. From that meeting there was a competition among the people of East Bengal to establish pathsalas, primary schools, lower English medium and higher English medium schools. The religious persons started to establish schools instead of establishing temples. In the assembly almost 1000 representatives were present from Decca, Maimonsingha, Pabna, Jessore, Khulna, Bakargunj, and Faridpur districts. This assembly was the first milestone of the Namasudra movement. He invited all for inspiring them to spread education. So to spread education various village committees were established. Under the leadership of the committees, it was attempted to increase educational fund for establishing schools. So, common people started to save money by decreasing their expenditure in various ceremonies like, marriage, funeral ceremony and various social programmes. Those, who were affluent, provided food and lodging for the students and teachers free of cost. And those who were very poor and were not financially strong provided their voluntary service for spreading education. In the assembly of 1881 Guruchand Thakur told the downtrodden people to be educated, agitated and organized. In 1920 Dr. Ambedkar mentioned the same in the assembly of Hitakarini in Mumbai. Though prophets belong to different places and time, their thoughts are same. Guruchand Thakur began financial and farming development for the downtrodden people along with education movement. At that time Guruchand Thakur paid Rs. 20 as tax. He continued an investment business for the progress of the Namasudras. He turned the attention of the Namasudras towards business. He was of the opinion that only farming would not bring them progress as it was nature dependent. They should, as Guruchand thought, engage themselves also in business. As a result a part of the Namasudras developed much in the field of business than farming gradually. He realized that only government aid can bring progress for the community. Without assistance from the govt. the progress of this community would be barred. So he always tried to follow up the principles of the govt. So he was able to

meet the fundamental needs like treatment, health check-up, nature awareness etc. of the Namasudras with the help of Australian Missionary Dr. C.S. Mead. Besides, with the help of Dr. C. S. Mead he was successful to communicate with the British govt. Guruchand Thakur's disciples did not engage themselves in the movement against the partition of Bengal because the greater part of the community was illiterate and poor.

In 1907 under the leadership of Sri Guruchand Thakur schools were established in Orakandi in the name of Dr. C.S. Mead School which was a higher English medium school. Besides he established a girls' school later named Shanti Satyavama Girls's School. In 1907 he moved for reservation for the Namasudras in the field of jobs and he was successful. As a result of this movement Guruchand's elder son Sashi Bhushan secured the post of sub-registrar, Kumud Bihari Mallick secured the post of Deputy Magistrate and Tarini Chandra Bala got the post of a govt. doctor. As per Guruchand's suggestion *Namasudra Suhrid patrika* started to be published from Orakandi under the editorship of Aditya Chowdhury. In the 1909 under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur widow marriage was introduced. In 1911 as a result of Guruchand's movement, the chandals were included in the census as Namasudras. In the same year under the inspiration of Guruchand Thakur and Purnachandra Mallick's initiation Gopinathpur High School was established. In 1913, in the month of December, Guruchand Thakur was awarded a silver medal by the British Govt, for his social work. In 1916 Rasaraj Tarak Sarkar's Sri Sri Harlilamrita was published from Sri Dam Mudi Lane press in Kolkata under Guruchand Thakur's endeavour. Poet Haribar Sarkar and Guruchand Thakur's second son Sudanya Kumar assisted them for the publication of the book. It cost around Rs. 500 to publish the book and the price of the book was Rs. 3. This was the core book of the Matua community. In 1919, Guruchand Thakur was the president in an assembly of the downtrodden community in Decca. In 1921, in Firozpur Guruchand Thakur was the President in the assembly of the farmers. In 1927, Guruchand Thakur sent his grandson P.R. Thakur to London for studying law to become a barrister. His other grandson Bhagabati Thakur was also sent to London for studying PhD in Philosophy. In fact he was the first PhD degree holder among the Namasudras. In 1933, Guruchand Thakur was the President in the assembly of farmers at Ghatal in Midnapore district. In that meeting a number of proposals were presented for the progress of the farmers.

CONCLUSION:

Guruchand Thakur not only engaged himself in the education movement but also he played a major role for social, economical, and political movement. His active leadership and participation from 1872-1937 resulted in an enormous progress among the Namasudras for which this period may be

considered the 'golden age' of Namsudras. This great leader of the Namasudra community took his last breath in 1937 leaving a large number of followers motivated by his idealism.

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