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THE DISTINCT CULTURE OF MATUYA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract

One of most imperative revolutions among the Namasudra was the instigation of the new religious sect Matuism in the middle of the 19th century. Harichand Thakur; a Hindu votary and founder of the Matuya sects of Hinduism, felt that the bakward Hindus were victimized not only socially, economically and educationally but also exploited religiously in Bengal. According to him, the social customs and order were the main barriers before the upliftment of the down-trodden and their freedom of mind. Matuya movement was adopted by Namashudra (chandal). His doctrine is based on three basic principles-‘truth’, ‘love’, and ‘sanctity’ and it treats all people as equal. Harichand Thakur left 12 instructions for matuyas; known as Dvadash Ajva. Cultural aspects of Matuism are related with ideas, customs and social behavior of the Matuya society. The cultural atmosphere of Matuya developed in association with existing social activities, lifestyle, social customs, rules and regulation. The culture of Matuya is independent from the traditional culture of India.

Keywords: Distinct, Dvadash Ajva, Abatars, Incarnation, Gurugiri, Hari Sabha, Kirtan, Gonsai ‘Matam, Kabigan, Haribol, Swayam-Dikshiti, Darshan.

INTRODUCTION

One of most imperative revolutions among the Namasudra was the instigation of the new religious sect Matuism in the middle of the 19th century. Harichand Thakur; a Hindu votary and founder of the Matuya sects of Hinduism (the son of Jasabanta Thakur and Annapurna Devi) was born in a Namasudra family of Safala Danga village in the district of Gopalgunj (Greater faridpur; now in Bangladesh), on the auspicious day of Madhukrishna Traodashi Tithi in 1812 A.D. (the day is logical and reasonable to Bengalee; 1218 Bengali year). He for the first time ,felt that the bakward Hindus were victimized not only socially, economically and educationally but also exploited religiously in Bengal. In these circumstances, he took an initiative step for protest against social injustice at first, he did not protest against social injustice directly but introduced a new religious sect for religious liberty for the down-trodden Hindu in Bengal. He realised the imperativeness of religious reformation for the down-trodden people who were deprived of various rights for centuries due to the existence of traditional social customs and order based on social inequality in Hinduism. According to him, the social customs and order were the main barriers before the upliftment of the down-trodden and their freedom of mind.

Different types of works performed and developed with the help of ‘Matuya Religion’ for Namashudra and other downtrodden people of society. It performed social and cultural reformation, establishment of a newly distinct religion, development in agriculture, economy, familial lives, human moralities, reservation in educations, services and in elections etc and development of social status, respect, position and honour. These become very essential for different types social positions and because of classification of society and professions. In every caste, there are distinction and have restriction about food habits, customs and cultures as well as social marriage system, social rituals.ⁱ

According to the Yajurveda, the worked and dignity of four castes or classes explained. The Brahmins set up at the highest position of the society on the basis of their work and dignity. The distinction started with in cultures of social arrangement according to the basis of colour or class and it led to create their own culture of every class. After that, these started to appear as distinct categories. As the Brahmins were the highest position in society, lots of rule’s regulations and customs depended on them because Brahmins only the main creators of highly cultures, customs and advisers as well as maintainer. As a result of inter-caste marriage, there were formed newly mixtures classes with in social arrangement. In India, there could found another one class who were original inhabitants or natives, known as Santal, Adibashi, Koal Munda, Chandalas. Their social customs, rules and regulations of living cultures, food, habits and social arrangements were totally distinction and we could not find out similarities with them.ⁱⁱ

Namasudra, also known as Namassej or Namassut, is an avarna community originating from Southern and Central Bengal. The community was earlier known as Chandala or Chandal, a term usually considered as a slur. As per the Hindu’s religious books, the Manusanghita and the Brihaddharma Purana, the chandala is the descendants of illegal sexual union of the Shudra male and the Brahmin female. The term is also used in modern times for a specific caste of agriculturists, fishermen and boatmen, more usually referred to as Namasudra.ⁱⁱⁱ



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An early 20th century document underlines what the Brahmins and other upper castes thought about chandals; the largest Hindu caste in East Bengal (now Bangladesh): 1. The chandals live outside the villages; 2. their wealth consists of dogs and asses; 3. they put on rags gathered from dead bodies; 4. they live vagrant lives; 5. their principal occupation is to burn the dead; 6. they hang criminals by the command of the king and 7. they are not touchables.^{iv}

Harichand Thakur, a Hindu votary and founder of the Matuya sects of Hinduism and worked among the untouchable people of Bengal presidency. Matuya movement was adopted by members of the Namasudra community, who were then also known by the pejorative name of Chandals (untouchable). His followers consider him as Thakur Harichand and as an avatar. His doctrine is based on three basic principles—'truth', 'love', and 'sanctity'. The doctrine treats all people as equal. Harichand Thakur left 12 instructions for matuyas; known as Dvadesh Ajya to be followed by the Matuyas in living both spiritual and social life. The main aim of Harichand Thakur was to unite the untouchables and oppressed classes for common cause of collective contemplation and there lies the key to spiritual salvation.^v

Matuya is a socio-economic religion with spiritual outlook based on the uplift of the down-trodden classes. It includes ideal family life and mass salvation in the way of eradicating the barriers of casteism and untouchability, social and economic disparities. It is assumed that India is an integrated Nation. It is widespread belief that Hindu Religion is the root foundation of the Nation having Equality as its basic principle. The net result of this doctrine has been so cleverly placed that the entire outer world knows it that the people irrespective of Caste, Creed and Religion have been living independently with all sorts of rights. The Hindu Religion is garlanded with the name of "culture" and there are triumphs and glories of the Avatars (God-incarnate). But it is found that there were organised oppression and misbehaviours towards the down-trodden on the ground of prejudiced biasness. In this respect, there is no much distinct between the folklore and tradition of some other existing religions. Thus, an inexpressible deceit and exploitation on a great number of ethnical populations expedited the appearance of an incarnation of God.^{vi}

The word 'culture' derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin 'Colere', which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. It is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones and a million other things.^{vii}

Cultural aspects of Matuaism are related with ideas, customs and social behavior of the Matuya society. Matuya was the largest Community in East Bengal and second largest in North 24 Parganas in Bengal. The major people lived in Bakharganj, Faridpur, Jossore, Maimonsingha, Khulna and Dacca of East Bengal. Therefore, this area has been called as "Namasudra area" (area of Matuya). According to Census report of 1881 A.D., 1,66,966 people in Jossore, 2,44,948 in Faridpur, 2,61,606 in Bakharganj (Barisal), 2,04,953 in Dacca, 1,49,677 in Khulna and 1,51,495 people of Matuya lived. In "THE TRIBES AND CASTE OF BENGAL", H. H. Risley wrote that during that time they were divided into eight sub-caste and they had no matrimonial relation.^{viii} Harichand and Guruchand Thakur came to them as the God and paved a new way for them. Matua movement was anti Veda, Brahmin and Vedic sacrifice movement. Its campaign was against castism and tried to establish equal rights of man and woman in society. Since the third decades of the 19th century Harichand Thakur started campaign against introducing society, religion, political and administrative system. He led against religious practices, religious hypocrisy, impurity, injustice and superstition. Harichand Thakur openly declared that Vedic destiny, mystical formula, unholiness are false. There was no necessity of Vedic sacrifice, asceticism and Guru or Pilgrim.^{ix}

There is no 'Gurugiri' and the Matuya's have only one Guru—he is Harichand Thakur. There is no pilgrimage for Matuyas. Matuyas do not do worship the other God except God Shree Hari. Matuya religion has a triangular flag with red colour and white border. The red colour is the symbol for revolution and white for peace. Actually the revolution is for living together with equal rights of all human beings. This revolution is for removing the untouchability, inequality, superstition, inhumanity and differences between human creatures and to set up of equality in the society. The musical instruments of the Matuyas are Jay Danka or Danka, Kansar and Shing. The symbol of revolution and victory is the flag of Matuyas' hand and sounds of Danka, Kansar and Shinga to announce the victory in war. The community observes Wednesday as the day of communal worship. The gathering, which is called 'Hari Sabha' (the assembly of Hari), is an occasion for the Matuya to sing Kirtan in praise of Hari till they almost fall senseless. Musical instruments such as jaydanka, kansar, conch, shibga, accompany the kirtan. The Gonsai garlanded with karanga (coconut shell) and carrying sticks near about 12 inch long and red flags with white patches, lead the singing.^x

Most of the Matuyas do not smoke Ganja (smoking element), do not love ales (beer) and drinks, and do not steal any things. To gain self-power, they obey the customs and rituals of their society. They do their work with maintaining the sacredness of character for getting differences within the castes. They habituate to devote to their parents with purity, to become good polite in the breathing and



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habit of holiness. They maintain the expenditures in the works of burial of dead body, marriage etc. without any reason. They make physical relation with their wife if the intension grew in the mind of taking child. Matuyas use the red flag which is bordered with white colour to keep the similarities of social, economic and political life. The Matuyas use a religious stick in their hands to save the religious persons, to relief the distress, to deal the irreligiosity, ailment of bodies, by worshipping regularly as mighty.^{xi}

The Matuya believe that male and female are equal. They discourage early marriage and widow remarriage is allowed. They refer to their religious teachers as 'Gonsai'; both men and women can be 'Gonsai'. The Matuyas believe the power of austere endeavor of women than the power of men. They keep long cotted hair to gain the greatest object by the power of masculinity. Though they are males but they take the disguise of cogitation of female to realise the world lord. They ring the trumpet in high volume with the uttering the name of Hari in devotion. They utter the name of Hari seated with this to less the power of physical six complexes (6 ripu) and to destroy the plasmas of different kinds of the microbes of the body.^{xii}

Matuyas celebrate different type of festivals, mela (fair), dance, song, jatra (operas), plays etc. Social festivals of Namashudras, sweepers, potters, cobblers, washer man, blacksmiths etc of ancient Bengal conducted without Brahmin priests and they have their own priest belong to same caste. Worship of Devi Manasa, first day moving of plough of farmers, first day of spreading of seeds, cutting of crops, wheels of potters, adoration of blacksmith's furnace, loom of weaver etc. are celebrated with deep attention in the questioning of lives and professions. Matuyas tried to enjoy with the celebrating to different festivals like Baruni mela (fair), Matuya's song, poet-songs, operas or plays.^{xiii}

The most popular and best festival of Matuyas is 'Baruni Mela (fair)' that is celebrated at the birth day of Harichand Thakur on the auspicious day of Madhukrishna Traodashi Tithi in every year (the day is logical and reasonable to Bengalee). At first it was started at Orakandi in Faridpur district of undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh). Guruchand Thakur; son of Harichand Thakur introduced this mela. After the partition of India (1948) Pramath Ranjan Thakur started it at Thakur Nagar of North 24 pargana. Every year almost 16-20 lakh devotees and another people come here.^{xiv}

Main features of 'Baruni Mela' are the devotees of gangs of Matuya branch sangha from different parts of Bengal as well as India, have influenced taking the framed pictures of Harichand, triangular red flag with white border in hands, trumpets, a dish of bell metals, horns for blowing etc. different types of musical instruments are rung and giving 'Matam' in the restless dance saying as 'jay Harichand; jay Harichand'; 'Jay Guruchand, joy Guruchand'; 'Haribol', 'Haribol'. After that they bathed in the pond, name as 'Kamana Sagar' (Matuyas are taking birth in Kamana Sagar because they think that their on the auspicious day of Madhukrishna Traodashi Tithi, Thakur Harichand-Guruchand come on earth and their every sin shall be curtailed if they taking bath in this sacred pond) of Thakur Nagar they prey to Harichand and Guruchand Thakur to purify them with the holy water and be cured of their diseases.^{xv}

For research purpose when I went to Baruni Mela, would feel that thousands of people come from different parts of India and foreign country. I saw that women were ready to welcome the Matuyas and others visitors at Thakur Nagar. Having taken the information about it, I was able to know that every person has given rice, pulses, vegetables etc. and staying place are hither and thither. But no one has any dissatisfaction, no one has any complain, all are confined with one tune.^{xvi} Within a month after 'Baruni Mela', devotees celebrate grand festivals that are called as 'Chhaya Baruni' or 'Shakha Baruni' at the birth places of ascetics or in the own localities. Matuya padageeti (foot songs) and Matuya sangeet (song) are also important element of Matuya's culture of literature. Before the origin of Matuya sects Bengali songs have grown up and have made stronger by lyrical poets of Namashudra castes. They sang the folk songs, boat-songs, bouls songs in a special mood. In these song, spiritual feelings and influences of marginal feelings are more observed. On the one side, songs are identified as movements of historical events and feelings of life-living subject of society, on the other hand these are found as the philosophy of Matuya religion.^{xvii}

Another important side of the literature and culture of the Matuya is 'Kabigan' (song) of poets. It is only human cultural based or mass-literature. These types of poets are not only singer but also reformers. By the song poets spread Matuya Dharma as well as Matuya culture. Matuyas use Hari-play and narrative songs to spread Matuya religion. Ashtak Gan (song of ashtak) and Charak (ceremonial swinging from tall pole by worship shiva) are seen among Matuya. Santiutsob, Matuya Mahotsob Harilut etc. are celebrated by different branch of Matuya sangha or Gonsai.^{xviii} Matuyas do processions with horns, trumpets, flags and become busy in joy tuning with dance and enter in the courtyard of 'Harilut Matuya festival' dancing with the position saying as 'Horibol', 'Horibol', 'joy Harichand, joy Santi-Satyabhama. This ceremony is called as 'Matam'. After that gathered Matuya sang the praise song in front of the image of God Hari. After that Gonsai reads Sri Sri Harililamrita. Later gathered community of local Matuya sangha sang the sing and with the distribution of prasad (material substance of food that is a religious offering) Harilut is ended.^{xix}



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In the occasion of birthday anniversary of Harichand Thakur at Orakandi in East Bengal erstwhile East Pakistan the Matuyas from different part of India used to throng being divided into many groups of different sizes under the leadership of a Matuya, known as Dalpati (leader) in every group. After the partition of India Thakurbari of Thakurnagar has been organising also such festival in this occasion. Guruchand Thakur felt the necessity of bringing them together on a common platform by which a big group comprising the small ones can be formed to gain adequate strength capable of fighting out all the devils and evils. This big group wastermed later 'Matuya Mahasangha'. Matuya Mahasangha believe in 'Swayam-Dikshiti' (Self-Realisation). Therefore, anyone who has faith in the Darshan or Philosophy of Harichand belongs to Matuya Mahasangha. At first Matuyas formed an organisation at Orakandi district in Faridpur district of Bengal Presidency (now in Bangladesh). After partition, followers formed a second organisation at Thakurnagar in West Bengal. The temple was initially looked after by Thakur's family, but as of 2011 A.D. it was managed by trustee chosen by the followers.^{xx}

CONCLUSION

The cultural atmosphere of Matuya developed in association with all the above existing social activities, lifestyle, social customs, rules and regulation. The culture of Matuya are independent from the traditional culture of India. There exists both similarities and disparities among the inherited culture and the culture developed by the Matuya through their own philosophy. Matuya sangeet containing praises of the God Hari and their gurus Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. The baul songs are predominantly about love and bhakti. Matuyas ring a trumpet at the time of uttering the name of Hari. They use a red flag with white border to symbolise equalities of social, economic and political. They use a long stick (religious stick) and keep long cotted hairs for their desireless love and the power of devotions. In Matuya religion men and women have equal right in the field of religion as well as in society. They thing that all human being are sacred within this religion. In this religion there is only one name; Lord Hari.

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