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THE RELEVANCE OF GURU CHAND THAKUR IN SPREADING EDUCATION AMONG THE NAMASHUDRA PEOPLE

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Abstract:

Dark environment of casteism made the life of the Namashudras and the lower Hindu castes unbearable. Not only in economic and social life, but also in education, the discriminatory treatment of the lower Hindu caste is deeply noticeable. The era was completely dark in Bengal. In ancient times, people of the Chandal and other religions lived in Bengal. After the arrival of the Vedic religion, the lives of the local people of India, particularly in Bengal, became unbearable in many ways. The preachers of Vedic religion perpetuated their dominance by writing various religious texts and books. In order to protect them from the exploitation of Vedic Brahmins, Guruchand Thakur started the education movement in the nineteenth century. In this paper, I will try to discuss what the role of Guru Chand Thakur was in the improvement of the education of the Namasudras. And how did the education of the Namasudras evolve?

Keywords: Education, Namasudras, Historical development, Bengal, Caste group.

Introduction:

The Namasudra community was formerly known as Chandal or Chandala. From 1881 onwards, this community officially received the name Namasudra. The Namasudras are generally considered a lower caste in Bangladesh. They primarily reside in the districts of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dhaka, Jessore, Mymensingh, and Khulna. 75% of the total Namasudra population lives in these districts. H. Beverly described this community as semi-amphibious based on their lifestyle. Most members of the Namasudra community earned their living through boatmanship, fishing, and agriculture. Education was far removed from this community. In the darkness of illiteracy, people struggled simply to survive.¹ On one hand, there was the darkness of illiteracy, and on the other hand, the discriminatory behavior of the upper-caste Hindu Brahmins and Kayasthas made their lives even more miserable. Looking at the earlier history of the Namasudra community, we find that their difficult times began after the reign of King Ballal Sen of the Sena dynasty. Before Ballal Sen's time, this community served as priests in Bengal. Various research papers indicate that Ballal Sen married a woman from a lower caste. When the Namasudra Brahmins did not consent to this marriage, Ballal Sen's wrath fell upon this community. As a result, the Namasudras were driven out, and the Kulinya system was introduced in Bengal, which marked the beginning of Brahmanism. Ballal Sen's reign was from 1160 to 1178 AD, and Harichand Thakur was born in 1812 AD. If we analyze this, we will see that the period of approximately 600 to 650 years was a dark age for the Namasudra community of Bengal. Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur emerged as saviors of the Namasudra community. In this paper, we will attempt to analyze Guruchand Thakur's role in the advancement of education for the Namasudra community.²

In the period preceding the 19th century, the institutional education system in Bengal was primarily centered around tols and pathshalas, patronized by Brahmins and the elite class, or makhtabs and madrasas established by the Muslim community. Opportunities for education were virtually absent for lower castes and socially marginalized groups in these institutions. Until the mid-19th century, the spread of education among the Shudra caste and the so-called untouchable communities was almost non-existent. In particular, the lower-caste communities considered "untouchable" and residing in the remote rural areas of East Bengal were completely deprived of education. The main reasons for this were extreme poverty and the rigid system of social untouchability.

Even after the establishment of British rule and the active efforts of Christian missionaries led to the expansion of English education and Western knowledge and science, it remained largely confined to the urban upper-caste society. Although



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thinkers and reformers like Vidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, William Carey, and Henry Derozio promoted rationalism, educational expansion, and ideas of women's emancipation, their influence on the rural society and lower classes of undivided Bengal was extremely limited. Consequently, the Bengal Renaissance and the process of educational expansion remained primarily confined to the urban gentry and middle class.

William Adams said "Certain of the higher castes were wholly literate in so far, as the male adult population was concerned, while the women of all castes (with a very few individual exceptions) and the entire population of several lower castes were wholly illiterate."³

The nineteenth century was a crucial period for Bengal and India. This era witnessed radical changes in the fields of education, culture, economics, and politics. India gained independence in the twentieth century, and a new constitution was established. Along with political rights came the right to education. Although this right to education was constitutionally granted in the post-independence period, the movement for it had begun much earlier. For example, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated for women's education. Similarly, the movement for the education of the lower castes in Bengal began with Guruchand Thakur. Harichand Thakur was Guruchand Thakur's father. Harichand Thakur understood the indispensability of education in bringing the Namashudra community out of the darkness of their lives in Bengal. He realized that without education, the overall progress of this community was impossible, and he entrusted the responsibility of their education to Guruchand Thakur.⁴

The benefits of Guruchand Thakur's education movement did not reach only the Namashudra community; people of all lower castes in Bangladesh benefited from this movement. Harichand Thakur's wisdom and foresight, and the education movement initiated by his son Guruchand Thakur in his later years, brought a new wave of change among the Namashudras. This education movement accelerated the socio-economic improvement of all lower caste people. It played a significant role not only in the education of lower caste people but also in the education of Muslims. For a long 600 years, the darkness of illiteracy had deprived the Dalit Namashudras and lower caste people of Bengal. They had no experience with education. The Namashudras and other lower caste people had no idea about the role of education in socio-economic development; they simply worked continuously to somehow eke out a living. Breaking the shackles of religion and caste, Guruchand Thakur created a new educational consciousness through which the Namashudras and other lower caste people became educated and returned to the mainstream of society.⁵

Guruchand thakur in the spread of education:

In the period preceding Guruchand Thakur, Harichand Thakur's religious movement had already brought about social upliftment for his followers. Most of the lower caste people of Bengal, especially the Namashudras, had embraced the Matua faith. The Matua religion and the respect the Namashudras held for Harichand Thakur played a significant role in Guruchand Thakur's educational movement. Guruchand Thakur told the Matuas that if they considered themselves followers of the Matua faith, they should educate their children. Following Guruchand's instructions, they would visit the homes of devotees and explain the importance of education within their community. Harichand Thakur's messages and proposals regarding education fueled an educational revolution among various Matua followers. According to Guruchand Thakur's directives, educational institutions were established in Orakandi and the surrounding villages. The Matua Gosains who propagated his educational movement were known as the Twelve Rudras. Guruchand Thakur, along with his Twelve Rudras, spearheaded the campaign for the spread of education among lower castes throughout Bangladesh. This campaign for the spread of education was not limited to the Matuas and Namashudras alone; it also extended to other lower caste communities and even Muslims in Bengal. Guruchand Thakur traveled from village to village to spread his educational movement and spoke to everyone as .

"Sabakare boli ami jadi mano money,

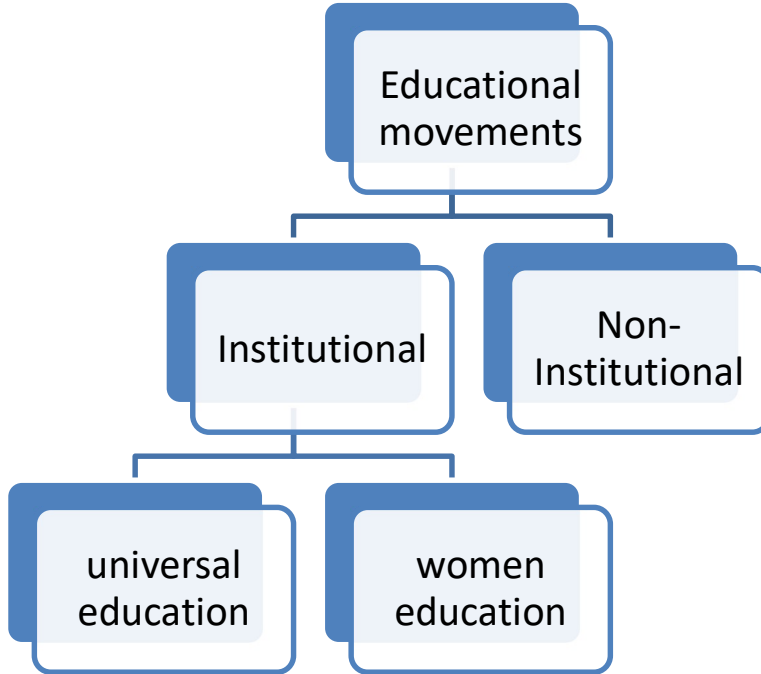
Abidwan putra jenno nahi thake ghore;

Khao ba na khao kono dukkha naai,

*Chhele pile siksha dao ei ami chai."*⁶



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Extend of educational movements Guruchand Thakur divided his educational movement into two parts: the first was formal education and the second was informal education. Formal education was further divided into two categories: universal education and women's education. Among the informal educational activities were singing devotional songs, glorifying God and chanting His name, performing funeral rites for parents, and receiving educational messages from the guru. Guruchand Thakur discussed educational matters at the Jagaran Sabha (Awakening Assembly). Guruchand's twelve followers, known as the Dwadasha Rudra, played a particularly important role in his educational movement.

Guruchand Thakur, through his own efforts, established a school in Orakandi village of Faridpur to promote formal education. Thakur and his other followers assisted him in spreading educational institutions. After establishing the school, he realized that the cultured and educated class of the upper-caste Hindu society would never help him; instead, they would create obstacles. Guruchand Thakur's educational movement spread directly or indirectly among the lower-caste people, and everyone extended a helping hand in their own way. However, their educational movement was not so easy, primarily due to their economic hardship and the lack of cooperation from the educated class. Not only did they face a lack of cooperation, but many from the educated class also actively obstructed their efforts.⁷

Guruchand Thakur became aware of the need for education among the Namashudra and other lower-caste communities, and he knew that the Namashudra class had no right to education in society. To liberate them from social constraints through the light of education, he established a total of 2048 schools, including primary, upper primary, secondary, and high schools. This school establishment work continued from 1880 to 1918. He first established a school in 1880 in his own village, Orakandi, and Raghunath Sarkar was appointed as the first teacher of that school. After the partition of India, his educational movement did not stop; he established numerous schools with the cooperation of the West Bengal government of India. These schools were primarily located in the border areas.



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Police Station	Number of school
Gaighata Police Station	36
Bagda police station	13
Barakpur police station	1
Hanskhali police station	15
Miyapur police station	2
Amdanga Police Station	11
Baduria Police Station	1
Ashokenagar Police Station	1
Habra Police Station	3
Kolkata	5
Tehatta Police Station	6
Krisanganj Police station	5
Dhantola Police Station	7
Chakdaha Police station	9
Bamangola Police Station	6
Raiganj Police station	5

A considerable number of educational institutions are presently distributed across several police station jurisdictions in West Bengal and the adjoining regions. Specifically, 36 schools are located within Gaighata Police Station, 13 in Bagda, and one in Barrackpur Police Station of North 24 Parganas district. Nadia district accounts for 15 schools in Hanskhali Police Station, two in Miyapur, 11 in Amdanga, three in Habra, one in Baduria, one in Ashokenagar, and five within Kolkata city. Additional institutions are found in Tehatta Police Station (six), Krishnaganj (five), Dhantola (seven), Chakdaha (nine), and Kaliganj (two). Murshidabad district includes one school each in Hariharpur, Baharampur, and Murshidabad Police Stations. In Malda district, six schools are situated in Bamangola, five in Habibpur, eight in Gazole, four in Old Police Station, and one in English Bazar. North Dinajpur district has five schools in Raiganj Police Station, while three institutions are located in Sonamukhi Police Station. Beyond West Bengal, two schools are recorded in Gopalganj Police Station, four in Khulna district, four in Kotalipara subdivision, two in Rajor subdivision, and five in Jessore district.

In addition to school education, several colleges were established under the influence of the followers of Srihari–Guruchand Thakur. These higher educational institutions include P. N. Das College at Palta in North 24 Parganas, Yogendranath Mahavidyalaya at Nahata, Dr. Ambedkar Centenary Mahavidyalaya at Helencha, Tangrakhali College in South 24 Parganas, Bagula Srikrishna College, Betai Dr. Ambedkar College, Bethuadahari College in Nadia district, Pakua High Degree College in Malda, Medinipur Pashang College, and Chittaranjan College in Kolkata. ⁸

Ami jani rajshakti batito /

Patit joner kabhu nahi hobe hito //



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(I know that without royal power,
the downtrodden will never find well-being.) haldar p.182

Adorsho shikha diye guruchand koi /

Vidyashunya grihe kintu ortho britha jai //Haldar p.102

(Guruchand says, with proper education,
But in a home devoid of knowledge, wealth is wasted.)⁹

For social progress, he spoke of both education and economic prosperity. He reminded people that without education, wealth is of no use. He emphasized that acquiring knowledge would lead to increased economic well-being, and similarly, he stressed the importance of education for gaining political power. He stated that liberation from social oppression and exploitation is impossible without acquiring knowledge and developing political competence.

The dissemination of education among the marginalized communities of Bengal was initiated both directly and indirectly through the sustained efforts of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur. Direct intervention occurred through the establishment of diverse educational institutions, while indirect expansion was facilitated by the active participation of devotees and adherents of the Matua religious movement. Guruchand Thakur played a particularly significant role by founding numerous associations, trusts, and by encouraging the publication of newspapers and periodicals aimed at promoting social reform and educational awareness across caste boundaries. As a result of these initiatives, a substantial number of newspapers and magazines emerged in East Bengal, serving as vehicles for mass communication and consciousness-raising.

Organizational efforts further strengthened educational outreach. The *Namasudra Shiksha Samiti* was established under the leadership of Birat Chandra Mondal, while Dr. Banamali Das founded the *Bhabani Bhavan Chatrabas* to support Namasudra students. In addition, the Mashirhati School, developed in 1918 at Panchanan Ghosh Lane in Kolkata, was specifically designed to promote the educational advancement of the Namasudra community. The growing collective consciousness of the community was reflected in the organization of the *Namasudra Sammelan* in 1926, held in the presence of prominent national figures such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and Sarala Devi, with the objective of socio-educational reform at a broader, national level. Subsequently, the *Bangio Namasudra Sangha* was established at Agailjhara village in the Barishal region and at Kanchrapara in the district of 24 Parganas, under the guidance of leaders including Rashiklal Biswas, Mukunda Bihari Mallik, and Birat Mondal.

Although state-sponsored mass education programmes were later introduced to address widespread illiteracy, Guruchand Thakur had long advocated universal education, emphasizing its necessity even in circumstances of acute economic hardship. In order to sustain and propagate the ideological foundations of Matua thought, a wide range of newspapers, journals, and magazines were published across Bengal. Notable among these were *Pataka* (monthly, 1914), *Namasudra Patrika* (monthly, 1920), *Jagran*, *Adhikar*, *Bengal Herald*, *Samakal*, *Bharatvani*, *Yug Sankat*, *Sansaptak*, *Kon Patha*, *Atoeb*, *Adol Badal*, *Bahujan Nayak*, *Pon*, and *Lekhi* from Kolkata; *Nikhil Bharat* from Barasat; *Abbokto* from Palta; *Madhumati* from Helencha; *Surya* from Hridayapur; *Matua Mahasangha Patrika* from Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas; *Matua* from Barochandghar; *Jaidhanka* from Chapria; and *Utsavbhumi* from Ranaghat in Nadia district, among others.

Following the demise of Guruchand Thakur, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur emerged as a central figure in the Matua Sangha and continued the educational mission through the establishment of various institutions. One of his major contributions was the

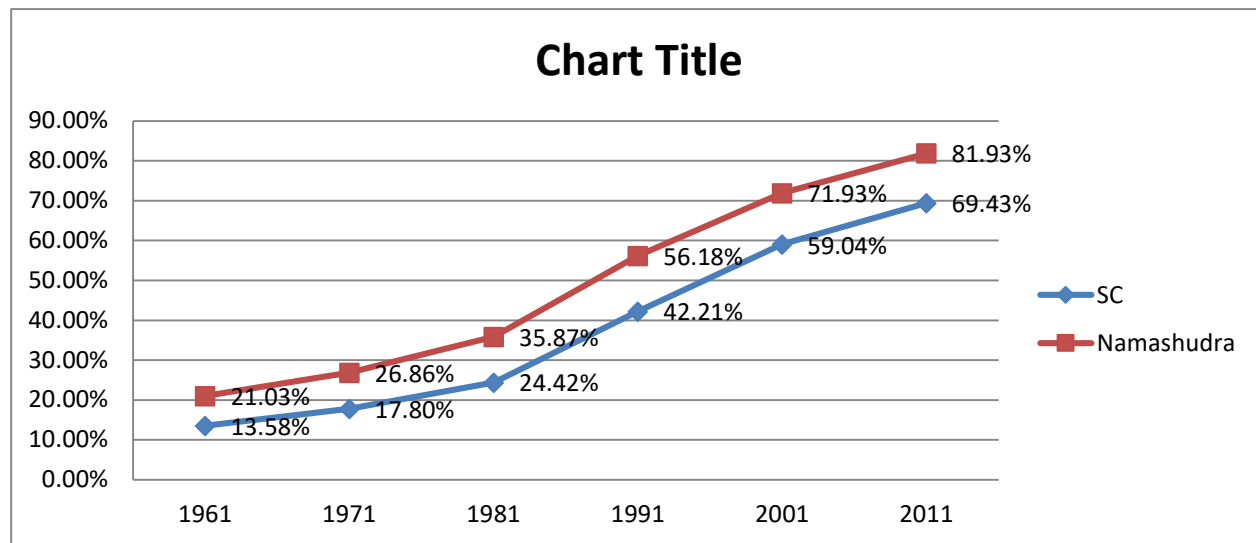


founding of the Thakurnagar Colony in the district of North 24 Parganas, which developed into an important center of Matua social and educational activity. Subsequently, institutions such as *Harichand Seva Ashram*, *Harichand Hostel*, and *Harichand Vidyamandir* were established at Pakhanjore in 1972, while *Harichand Seba Sangha* and *Guruchand Hostel* were founded at Shaktigarh in 1965. In more recent times, scholarly engagement with Matua history and philosophy has been further institutionalized through the establishment of the Matua Research Foundation by Dr. Birat Bairagya and Tushar Chattopadhyay.¹⁰

Conclusion:

Harichand Thakur’s son, Guruchand Thakur, played a pivotal role in promoting education among the Namashudra community. His sustained efforts contributed significantly to the spread of educational awareness, the impact of which is reflected in the community’s improved educational attainment over time. Census data indicate that the literacy rate among the Namashudras rose from 21.03 per cent in 1961 to 71.93 per cent in 2001. A comparative analysis of the literacy levels of the Namashudra community vis-à-vis other Scheduled Castes is presented below.¹¹

Sl No.	West Bengal	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
1	SC	13.58%	17.80%	24.42%	42.21%	59.04%	69.43%
2	Namashudra	21.03%	26.86%	35.87%	56.18%	71.93%	81.93 %*



The data presented in the chart indicate that in 1961 the literacy rate among Scheduled Castes stood at 13.58 per cent, while that of the Namashudra community was comparatively higher at 21.03 per cent. This differential persisted across subsequent census years. In 1971, literacy levels increased to 17.80 per cent for Scheduled Castes and 26.86 per cent for the Namashudras. The upward trend continued in 1981, with literacy rates reaching 24.42 per cent and 35.87 per cent respectively. By 1991, literacy among Scheduled Castes rose to 42.21 per cent, whereas the Namashudra community recorded a higher level of 56.18 per cent. The 2001 census further reflected this pattern, with literacy rates of 59.04 per cent for Scheduled Castes and 71.93 per cent for the Namashudras. According to the 2011 census, these figures increased to 69.43 per cent and 81.93 per cent respectively.



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An examination of the decadal growth rates reveals notable variations between the two groups. Between 1961 and 1971, literacy among Scheduled Castes increased by 4.21 percentage points, compared to a higher increase of 5.83 percentage points among the Namashudras. A similar pattern is evident during the 1971–1981 decade, with increases of 6.62 percentage points for Scheduled Castes and 9.01 percentage points for the Namashudra community. The period from 1981 to 1991 witnessed substantial gains for both groups; however, the increase among the Namashudras (20.31 percentage points) exceeded that of Scheduled Castes (17.79 percentage points). In contrast, during the subsequent decades (1991–2001 and 2001–2011), the growth in literacy among Scheduled Castes marginally surpassed that of the Namashudra community. Overall, while the Namashudras experienced relatively higher rates of literacy growth between 1971 and 1991, the last two decades show a slightly faster pace of improvement among Scheduled Castes as a whole.

Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur's educational philosophy was not limited to his own time; rather, it transcended the contemporary context and remains equally relevant today. One of the main objectives of the Matua religious reform movement was the expansion of education and the creation of educational awareness. The movement's leaders believed that the root cause of the social backwardness of the lower castes was their lack of education. From this understanding, education was identified as the primary means of the overall upliftment of the lower castes, capable of dispelling the darkness of ignorance and neglect. During this period, with the cooperation of the Australian Christian missionary Mr. Mead, Guruchand Thakur was able to secure access to government jobs for educated lower-caste youths, which was a significant step towards social advancement. Through his initiatives in expanding education, on the one hand, social reform, economic progress, and development of the lower castes were accelerated, and on the other hand, their political consciousness gradually increased through the establishment of schools and colleges, the construction of hostels, and access to employment opportunities. The far-reaching impact of this process was noticeable even in his time. Placing education as a central driving force within the framework of a religious movement and emphasizing educational awareness and expansion—this perspective has given the Matua movement a unique characteristic. As a result, a cohesive effort is observed to overcome the economic, social, and cultural backwardness of the lower castes through education, culture, and the development of political consciousness, both through religious thought and within the newly formed religious structure.

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