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The Role of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur to the Social Awakening Movement of the Namasudras: An overview

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Abstract: *The social awakening movement and the introduction of various new facilities to the specific class, caste groups, communities by the colonial Government inspired them to launch socio-religious movement which took the shape of caste consolidation movement during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In this movement there was a significant role of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur for the overall development of the depressed and downtrodden people in the society, especially for the upliftment of the Namasudras. Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur's principle aim was to unite the untouchables and the oppressed for a common cause of collective thought, and that is where the key to the liberation of spirituality lies. He wanted to establish a classless, casteless society. Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur believed that he could not save his community unless he worked for all other social groups, especially for the depressed and untouchables. He also said that, 'All human beings living this world will be considered by me as belonging to one'. He also realized that in order to be socially developed, the Namasudras must have adopted education. This is education which brings wealth and without wealth no caste can move up in the society.*

Index Terms: Awake , Chandal, Discrimination, Downtrodden, Unprivileged, Upliftment.

I

INTRODUCTION

The social awakening movement for the overall development of the underdeveloped and downtrodden people in the history of Bengal in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is a very significant event. This type of movement and the introduction of various new facilities to the specific class, caste groups, communities by the colonial Government inspired them to launch socio-religious movement which took the shape of caste consolidation movement during the above mentioned period. Amongst them the most significant was the movement of Namasudras of Bengal.

The main aims of the social awakening movement by the Namasudras are:

- (i) Recognition of Identity (Transformation from Chandals to Namasudras))
- (ii) Expansion of Education and Employment.
- (iii) Social Upliftment.
- (iv) To growth economic stability.

- (v) Resistance of Conversion.
- (vi) Political Empowerment (Representation in various political Institution).
- (vii) Movement for social equality.
- and (viii) development of Matua Community.

The social degradation of the Namasudras helped them to be united against the upper caste outrage which helped them to develop a defiant attitude against the social disabilities. It must be added that their agrarian discontent manifested itself in the form of peasant resistance against Zamindary oppression. While the struggle between the Hindu landlords and Muslim peasant was perceived in religious terms, the Namasudras linked their struggle against higher caste Zamindars with movements for caste upliftment. In the district of Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Khulna, Jassore the Namasudras were over-whelmingly employed as *bargadars* or agricultural laborers. This is to say that they were at the bottom of both economic and social hierarchies. The Namasudra leaders succeeded in channelizing the agrarian discontent into a broader mass movement for their social upliftment. The educated part of the Namasudras gradually moved away from the mainstream of the national movement for the socio-economic development of their community.

When the social movement of the Namasudra's began, much of their energy was directed towards eliminating sectarian divisions and building horizontal solidarity among the members of these various sub-castes. Their leaders, at the first conference in Khulna in 1881, emphasized the need of the unity and caste consciousness as a first step towards social progress. It was seen that after the census of 1881, W.C. Macpherson, Assistant Commissioner of Sylhet District hanged a notice, 'that Namasudra must always be written and not *Chang* or *Chandal* for all persons of the said caste that Deputy commissioner has ordered that any who does not write Namasudra shall be removed from employ'. F.B. Peacock, Commissioner of Presidency Division wrote to Bengal Provincial Government, 'the improvement in the condition of the Chandals who are in the chief agriculturist in Narail Sub-division, had led them, it is said, to aspire to a superior status in the Hindu Caste system. They now call themselves Namasudra and profess to be Vaishnabs'. According to Garret, 'The Namasudra show considerable aptitude for organisation and it was at much pains they succeeded in getting their designation recognized in place of the term Chandal to which they objected'. The Bengal Government declared that 'the Namasudras will write in place of Chandals, 1901, Census Reports, that it would not be, in the humble view of the memorialists, out of place here to mention that the memorialists had submitted a petition to your Honor, and that your Honor was pleased to grant them the permission on the 3rd August 1901, to be entered as Namasudra at the Census'. Surprisingly, when the census report was published in 1901, Chandal or Namasudra had to be written. Chandal was dropped in 1911, only Namasudra was allowed.

II

Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and the social awakening movement

During the mid of the 18th century, with the end of Muslim rule and the beginning of the British Empire in India, we can see a remarkable changes in the lives of the downtrodden communities. The first decades of the nineteenth century were leading to a new path of religious freedom. With the adoption of '*Diwani*' by the British from the Nawab of Bengal, the socio-political scenario also changed. In this crucial moment, the pioneer of millions of people, Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur arrived at the homes of the bereaved men. Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur was born in a family of Safaldanga Village in the district of Faridpur in 1812 A.D.(1218 B.S.). He was the son of Jashobanta Thakur and Annapurna Devi. His father was a devotee of Vaishnava. But, from his childhood, he could not tolerate the Pseudo-Vaishnava, though his father took some food after serving the Vaishnavas.

From the very beginning of his life, he could win the respect and honor of the downtrodden men by his divinely miracles and many people became his disciples. He united the under developed and the downtrodden people. Apart from these, many people used to come to him with their problems, sufferings and diseases. In this regard there is a reference to it in *Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita*.

Prabhur mukher bakye Roge mukta hai,

Eai mato Rogi kata ase ar Jay.

Panch-sat grame krome sabha holo bhari,

Kota lok ashito dekhibe bole Hari.

[We are healed by the word of the Lord. This is how many patients come and go. People from many villages used to come to see Hari arranging many meetings]

In this way, his name spread throughout the area. Desperate people suffering from the inferiority complex used to come to him from every corner of the country. He encouraged them giving the inspirations. Gradually the depressed and downtrodden people could assemble themselves under the religious banner of the 'Matua Religion'. In such a way, a new and unique religious sect was instituted with the common people of India who were inferior in the sight of the so called upper castes. Although outside of its adequate religiosity the emphasis of this movement was largely secular. Its primary goal was to (i) establish ways and means of achieving perfect peace of mind within the parameters of family life and (ii) eradicate social inequality and ensure the upliftment of the downtrodden. He explained that chanting 'Harinamgan' or 'Namasankirtan' would make it possible to purify the soul and attain the God. Gradually all the untouchables and lower castes of the society became believers in this religion and this religious sect grew in size. People began to consider him as a gift of nature with supernatural power not only to cure human diseases, but also to protect them from the Brahmanical cruel rules and regulations in the society. 'Namasankirtan' among the participants evokes a sense of cooperation and courage, self-respect and confidence which is the strength to stand in front of their strong opponents who throw them in frustration in the society.

Hari Chand Thakur gave 'twelve instructions' (*Dwadash Agga*) for the purification of soul which later became the main religious duties of the believers of the Matua Religion. The twelve instructions were as follows : (i) Speak honesty, (ii) walk along the honest path, (iii) respect your parents, (iv) remain devoted to your brothers and sisters, husband and wife, (v) be satisfied with a single husband or wife, (vi) consider all persons to be ones kin abstain from discriminating amongst men, (vii) concentrate on domesticity; asceticism is unnecessary, (viii) do not take *Diksha*, (ix) there is no to have a Guru, (x) try to eradicate the sufferings of others and (xii) show concern for all living creatures.

Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur's main aim was to unite the untouchables and the oppressed for a common cause of collective thought, and that is where the key to the liberation of spirituality lies. He wanted to establish a classless, casteless society. According to the recent version, Matua is a socio-economic religion based on the development of the lower castes on the basis of spirituality and for their liberation through the elimination of caste and untouchability, socio-economic inequalities from the society. Tarak Chandra Sarkar in his 'Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita' expressed that Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur appeared on this earth to rectify the errors of flows. He overcome all religious barriers and appeared in the house of Jashobanta Thakur to fulfil his task and to popularize 'Harinam' mingled with humanly duties. He relieve the tension and turmoil's of the roofless millions in the last part of 'kaliyug'. His main purpose was to base religion on the pillars of reason, logic and scientific thoughts and to start a mass-liberation movement. The following words prove so-

Sanjam Sadhana Kari

Haye Mahashaktidhar

Garibe Sansar.

Sukarme Sansar Dharma

Palite Kartabya Kar

Bidhane Tahar

Jabe Karma Sesh Hai

Sudhanite Mon Dhay

Uddhar Karane

Purna Sadhanate Tabe

Mone Purna Santi

Sri Hari Sadhane

[Praying for frugality, having been so powerful in poor family. Do your duty according to his provisions in order to observe the worldly religion well. When the 'karma' ends, the mind goes to 'Sudhani' to rescue. In full pursuit, however, full peace of mind comes through the pursuit of Sri Hari.]

The main goal of the Matua religion is to teach men and women simultaneously about domestic happiness and spiritual salvation. Man lives in a society, so man has to do his job. Otherwise, meaningless thinking (*sadhana*) can only bring bad consequences. Therefore, he has to work at a certain stage (*karma*) and after that, comes the stage (*dharma*) of religious discipline.

III

Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur and the social awakening movement

In the second half of the nineteenth century the whole Namasudra community awoke and a new frenzy of new learning arose. One of the great social reformers of outstanding skill, Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur, son of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur brought about a renaissance among the downtrodden. His birth on the day of Dol Purnima in 1847 (1253 B.S.) is a historic event for the unprivileged classes. He widely promoted the Matua movement in the socio-cultural, intellectual and political fields. Although Guru Chand was born in a Namasudra family. He believed that he could not save his community unless he worked for all other social groups, especially for the depressed and untouchables. He also said that, 'All human beings living this world will be considered by me as belonging to one'.

The social awakening movement under the leadership of Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur deals with the unification of 'Dharma' and 'Karma'. There can be no equality until and unless the gap between developed and under developed countries has been destroyed. Being a farsighted man, Guru Chand Thakur realized that in order to be socially developed, the Namasudras must have adopted education. This is education which brings wealth and without wealth no caste can move up social scale. In his words:

Anunnata Jati Majhe Siksha Bistarite

Aggya Karen Hari Chand Tare Bidhimate

(Guru Chand Charit)

[For the spread of education among the underdeveloped castes

Hari Chand ordered them according to the rubric]

According to the wishes of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur, Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur composed the life style of the Matua disciples. In this regard, Acharya Mahananda Halder states in his book 'Sri Sri Guru Chand Charita' :-

'Shakti-Bhakti Ekasane Ashia Bosila,

Dharma-Karma Sammilan Sri Guru Karila.

Matua-Jibanpath Bivinnya Akare,

Dekha Dilo Karma-Kshetre Dharma Vitti Pare.

['Shakti' and 'Bhakti' came together and sat down on same throne,

Unification of 'Dharma' and 'Karma' were done by Sri Guru. Matua life also appeared in the field of work in various forms based on religion.]

The above quote carries a meaningful philosophical view of the Matua religion. Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur was entrusted with the task of propagating the Matua religion and the religious principles of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur. With the help of the downtrodden he started the liberation movement. The main emphasis of this movement is on education. Acharya Mahananda Halder state in his book 'Sri Sri Guru Chand Charit'

Aage Karo Vidyabhyas

Ripudale Karo Nash,

Parete Grihasthya.

Bishoy Basana Chhari

Balo Sabe Hari Hari,

Seshe Banaprasthya.

Ei Niti Pale Jei,

Shantidhame Rahe Sei,

Param Aallahde.

Chalite Jiban Pathe

Duksha Nei Kono Mate,

Shanti Pade Pade.

[Practicing the education, destroy the 'ripus', then enter in domestic life. Leaving the wealth and desire, everyone say Hari Hari, at last enter in the practice of 'Banaprasthya'. Who follows this principle lives in peace with absolute joy. There is no sorrow in the way of life, peace prevails step by step.]

Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur felt the necessity of education for awakening the downtrodden. That's why he started to work for spreading education among the oppressed classes. He thought that education was more important than food. So, he said to them:

Sankhya Bale Bali

Aamara Sakali

Tate Kiba Aashe Jay

Bidhyahin Bale,

Chhale-Bale-Kale,

Moder Charie Khay

Bidhya Bale Boli

Aachhe Jato Bali

Ashim Sakati Dhara

Bidhyahin Mora,

Tai Dekhi Tara

Kare Rakhe Jyanta Mara

Tai Bali Bhai

Mukti Jadi Chai

Bidyan Haite Habe

Pele Bidya Dhan,

Duksha Nibaran

Chira Sukhi Habe Bhabe.

[When it comes to population, we are big in numbers, but if we are not educated, these numbers are of no importance. In the absence of our education others will exploit us in potential ways. So education is our primary need for mass emancipation, then our suffering will end and we will be happy forever in this world.]

Being a foresighted Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur knew that the present age had to be apprehended to tear the servile bond of decades. For this he instructed his disciples to set up many educational institutions. He gave them financial support. He taught every depressed person to overcome superstition, blind faith and ignorance. But he gave the highest priority to education and enlightenment with the great performance of the British administration in Bengal.

In 1880, Guru Chand Thakur set up Pathsals in his village Orakandi and various other districts in Bengal with the help of Australian clergymen, Dr. C.S. Mead for the spread of education among the under developed masses according to the the wishes of his father. He said,

'Sabakare Bali Jodi Mano More

Abidyan Putra Geno Nahi Thake Ghare.'

[must be committed myself so that the uneducated son does not stay in the family.]

Guru Chand Tagore realized that if the oppressed could be educated, even the women also, could raise a reasonable voice against social injustice and inequality and engage themselves in various avenues of economic development, become an integral part of the state system. For the spreading of women education, he established '*Shanti Satyabhama Valika Vidyalaya*', '*Taltala Gadadhar Valika Vidyalaya*' and '*Nari Training School*' and a '*Ashram*' for widows with the help of Dr. C.S. Mead's wife.

Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur only showed the way of light to protect Indian farmers from the long-term exploitation and humiliation of the upper castes. He saved the Hindu society by reforming social system. The political, economic and moral standards had to be raised for the progress of the poor and destitute. So he asked Dr. Mead to change their economic standards with government services. For this, in the first part of 1906 he went to meet the Governor of Eastern Bengal of that time and appealed to him for the mass-education and government services for the depressed and downtrodden. He described to the governor the ill-treatment of the caste-Hindu bureaucrats in government offices. He realized that only the help of the Royal British was needed to raise their standard. Thus he presented their tragic life story to the Governor of Eastern Bengal with the help of Dr. C.S. Mead.

By his efforts, the Reservation and a name scheduled was prepared for this purpose which was called scheduled castes. On 31 October 1906, the Governor of Bengal proposed to the Governor-General of India a draft proposal for social development, including a list of 31 disadvantaged and lower class people, which was adopted by the Governor-General. In 1906 few seats were reserved for them in the Bengal legislative Assembly. The system of reservation was created only for the Bengal Presidency, which is narrated in the '*Sri Sri Guru Chand Charit*':

Ehen Prakare, *Lat Darbare*
Patitere Dilo Gati
Holo Jagaran, *Namasudragan*
Raj Karya Pae Bange.

[Down-trodden or the depressed who had got position to the Royal court (Lat Darbar), By awakening Namasudras were participating to the royal activities.]

Thus Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur established them with modern thinkers in the modern age. Needless to say that Dr. C.S. Mead was a great friend for the upliftment of the oppressed and downtrodden of Bengal than any other Scheduled Caste leaders of India. The present position of the Backward Classes of India is the result of the tireless efforts of Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur and the movement of the Matuas. So, the Scheduled Caste and the other Backward class peoples owe to great deal to him. The main reason of the downfall of the *Chandals* (now Namasudras) as they were not recognized by the British rulers. For this, Guru Chand Thakur started a movement with his followers and then the Reservation was introduced in education, employment and the representation in legislature. In 1909 a list of reserved castes with 31 communities was created only in Bengal Province under the Morley-Minto Act of 1909. However, no other state in India had such a system of reservation. Subsequently, in 1919, under the Montague-Chemsford Act of 1919, the system of reservation was introduced in other provinces of India. This has been mentioned in '*Sri Sri Guru Chand Charit*':

'Tapashili Jati Madhey Ja Kichhu Hoichhe,
Hari Chand Kalpa Brikshey Sakali Falechhe.'

[Whatever has happened to the Scheduled Castes, everything has come to fruition in the imaginary tree of Hari Chand.]

As a result a large number of scheduled caste people of India have been recognized as man and all these were for the Matua movement. Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur was also aware of politics. He realized that the participation in politics could bring the oppressed the social dignity. When Indian Administrative Act was enforced in 1935, Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur advised the Matua sect to get entry into the legislative assembly. Having been inspired the scheduled caste people contested in the election independently and won most of the seats in Bengal legislative Assembly. He could see through his heavenly eyes that the oppressed and backward classes had a great opportunity to perfect their authority and power in the government services.

IV

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it can be said that Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur started a new era in the history of human civilization. He filtered out the existing Hindu religion by eradicating the social evils. Thus he created a new religion for millions of people. He shows us the way to light and freedom, by combining '*Karma*' and '*Dharma*'. Tirelessly, he fought against the Brahmanya and Vaishnava religion for the crucial rites by which the depressed were being humiliated through the ages and he directed the depressed to the real path to the salvation. So, Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and his Matua religion can lead us to spiritual pursuits, peace and prosperity.

Apart from that after the demise of Sri Sri Hari Chand, Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur played an important role in the social awakening movement of the Namasudras. He struggled through out his life for social reforms, spread of education, self-development, self-respect of the depressed and backward classes. There was none like him who could effect all round development of the oppressed and the downtrodden men and women in the society. In this way, he brought a '*spiritual renaissance*' in Bengal and India at large. He taught the oppressed the values of self-respect, self assertion of rights etc. So he was able to inspire them to take part in every aspect of their lives.

Lastly, it may be said, this is a glorious chapter in the history of Bengal. Bengal became enlightened by the light of Matua religion and the thought of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur and Sri Sri Guru Chand Thakur. They placed them in the modern age and modern life style which is the capital of the depressed and the backward class people of the present time.

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