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The Origin of Matua Philosophy and Namasudra Social Upliftment Movement Through the Lens of Foucauldian Power Relations

Pritam Mondal, *Research scholar, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India*

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Abstract

This paper examines the origin and evolution of Matua philosophy and the Namasudra social upliftment movement through the theoretical lens of Michel Foucault, particularly his concepts of power relations and governmentality. Methodologically, the paper employs discourse analysis of academic writings of eminent scholars like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Namasudra religious texts, and community-produced literature to trace the formation of an alternative epistemic and social order. It demonstrates that the Namasudras simultaneously resisted Brahmanical hegemony while strategically engaging with colonial education and socio-economic mobility. The main argument of this paper is that the emergence of Matua philosophy cannot be understood merely as a religious reform movement; rather, it constitutes a critical counter-discourse that challenged entrenched caste hierarchies and Brahmanical dominance in colonial and postcolonial India. By situating the Namasudra movement within broader dynamics of power, resistance, and discourse, the study highlights how marginalized communities actively negotiate and reconfigure structures of domination.

Keywords: Matua Philosophy, Namasudra Movement, Power and Governmentality, Brahmanical Hegemony, Discourse and Resistance

Introduction:

The caste system has historically functioned as a central framework of social stratification in Indian society, with its ideological roots often traced to the Vedic Varna framework. Over time, the structure of social relations evolved through the interaction of caste hierarchies with changing socio-economic conditions, regional cultures, and diverse philosophical traditions. Within this context, religion frequently emerged as a significant medium for the assertion of dignity and collective identity among marginalized groups. Nineteenth-century colonial Bengal witnessed significant social and religious transformations that reshaped the dynamics of caste, identity, and social mobility. One of the most significant among these movements was the Matua movement, founded by Harichand Thakur in the mid-nineteenth century Bengal. Later, under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, the movement expanded beyond religious teachings and actively promoted education, social reform, and collective mobilization among the marginalized sections of society. To understand the deeper significance of this movement, it is useful to analyze it through the theoretical framework of

Michel Foucault, particularly his ideas on power relations and governmentality. The origin of Matua philosophy can be realized through the lens of Foucauldian power relations, this paper will analyze the emergence and development of this philosophical school within the broader historical and social dynamics of power, resistance, and discourse in India. Examining the origin of Matua philosophy through a Foucauldian lens therefore enables a deeper understanding of how marginalized communities resist dominant structures of authority. This paper argues that the Namasudra movement should not be viewed solely as a religious reform initiative but as a counter-discourse that challenged caste-based power relations and facilitated the social upliftment and collective self-assertion of the Namasudra community.

Historical Background: Namasudras and Social Marginalization:

This paper will examine how, within the framework of Foucauldian power dynamics a subaltern group such as the Namasudras – the second-largest SC community in Bengal – developed their collective identity through their self-respect movement.

The Namasudras, who traditionally known by the derogatory term as "Chandala", were one of the marginalised communities in Bengal. They were formerly considered as untouchable by due to their 'avarna' or 'antyaaja' or out-sider of the four-fold varna system. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has been stated in his book "Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947" "The Namasudras were jealously referred to as 'Chandalas', or more disparagingly as Chanrals, and were described with various derogatory epithets as *durbritta* (evil persons), *naradham* (worst of all people), *ati adham jati* (the most lowly caste), *antyaaja* (low born) and *asprisya* (untouchable), with whom all sorts of contact had to be avoided and who should live outside the village or at least beyond the *bhadralok* neighbourhoods." (Bandhyopadhyay. S;2011 p 18)

Bipul Mondal wrote in his article "Problem of Caste and Identity: The Namasudras of Colonial India" - "The different synonyms of the Namasudras are 'Chandal', 'Charal', 'Namasud' and 'Namah'. The word Chandala, as surmised by Ballal Sen, ruler of the Sena dynasty of Bengal, was used as a generic term; to refer to all the lower caste people...they had descended from the particular mixed caste called Chandala described in the post-Vedic Dharmasutra literature." (Mondal, 2018 p 1539)

They experienced systematic social exclusion. The community, which is geographically centered in eastern Bengal's marshy riverine areas, especially Faridpur, Bakarganj, Jessore, and Khulna, has historically worked in boatbuilding and fishing, which are considered polluting by upper-caste standards. (Bandhyopadhyay. S;2011 p 5)

Sekhara Bandyopadhyay remark that- "The Namasudras lived mainly in the marshy tracts of eastern Bengal. Earlier known by a common denigrating generic term of Chandala, a unified caste identity was not a given thing for them, as they were divided into a number of endogamous sub-castes, with low but differentiated social status and restrictions on social interaction. Classified under a common caste name by the colonial ethnographers, these various sub-castes of fishing and boating people of eastern Bengal..." (Bandhyopadhyay. S ;2011 p 5)

Namasudra scholar Jagadish Chandra Roy, in his book "Namasudra Koba Holo Purbe Tara Kiba Chhilo", references "Guruchandcharit" and several other archival sources. He examines the socio-historical and ethnic origins of the Namasudras, highlighting the efforts to change their derogatory label from "Chandala" to "Namasudra". Roy claims that during

the Buddhist Pala dynasty, the Namasudras, who were initially Buddhists and belonged to a warrior class, had considerable affluence. During the Brahmanical Sena dynasty, especially under Ballala Sen, whose policies resulted in the marginalization of Buddhists and the stigmatization of this community as "Chandala," their standing decreased. As a result, many moved to eastern Bengal's marshy regions, where they adopted agriculture and fishing while upholding their unique religious customs. Their previous Buddhist identity gradually faded, and gradually starting in the Islamic period, they were categorized as Hindus, albeit the disparaging term continued into the colonial era. (Roy, J 2018,39-50)

The establishment of colonial power in Bengal during the nineteenth century brought about certain administrative and economic advances, but these developments did not significantly address the deeply ingrained caste disparities in rural culture. Marginalised Namasudra people were still subject to socially and culturally dominated by dominant caste landlords and local elites in many places. As a result, there were still very few prospects for social mobility. As Sekhara Bandyopadhyay said "it is only the standardising tendency of the colonial ethnographers which has given currency to the prevailing notion of a fixed universal rank for a particular caste.... standardised official constructions of rank that the Namasudras as well as their social neighbours began to define their actual social location - a situation which Bernard Cohn has described as the 'objectification' of colonial culture. (Bandhyopadhyay. S ;2011 p 16)

The twin deprivations of educational exclusion and religious segregation compounded the Namasudras' marginalization, with spiritual authority remaining the exclusive preserve of upper castes. This dual marginalization necessitated organized resistance, culminating in the Matua movement founded by Harichand Thakur, which propagated an alternative value system centered on devotion, dignity, and egalitarianism. Guruchand Thakur subsequently advanced this foundation by prioritizing education and social reform as transformative tools for community upliftment (Bandhyopadhyay, S;2011).

Socio- Historial Background of Matua religious philosophy:

The broader historical and socioeconomic transformations of the Indian subcontinent can be utilized to understand the origins of Matua philosophy. Its emergence is closely connected with changing power relations, social resistance, and the intellectual traditions that influenced marginalized communities.

By considering these elements, we gain deeper insights into how Matua philosophy has influenced and responded to the societal challenges and transformations throughout India's history. Buddhism's development initially provided an alternative to Brahmanical orthodoxy, with many Namasudra scholars arguing that a significant portion of their community were formerly Buddhists. (Bandhyopadhyay.S;2011p13) India's socioeconomic and political relationships were dramatically changed as a result of the advent of Islamic influences through invaders and later rulers, which led many marginalized castes communities to adopt to Islam due to its values of equality and brotherhood. In the subsequent phase, the Bhakti movement spread across the entire country, including Bengal. This was primarily through Sri Chaitanya's Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which embraced people of all castes and religions in the nectar of devotion. However, in the post-Chaitanya period, guru-centricism within Vaishnavism reinstated the caste system in a new form. Consequently, influences of Vaishnavism, Sahajiya, Islamic Sufism, and similar traditions became evident among lower-caste communities. During the nineteenth century, the

establishment of British colonial rule introduced significant changes in India's socio-economic and political structures through the development of a modern administrative system. It was within this historical context that the philosophy of Matua Dharma emerged from the teachings of Harichand Thakur. His ideas challenged the dominance of Brahmanical Vedic ideology and drew upon elements of Sankhya and Buddhist thought. At the same time, the philosophy reflected the egalitarian and devotional spirit of the Bhakti tradition. Through these ideas, the movement encouraged new cultural and social practices among the oppressed Namasudra community, fostering a stronger sense of dignity, unity, and collective identity.

The genesis of Matua philosophy can be better understood and the major philosophical and social elements that influenced its development can be identified in light of the previously described historical backdrop.

a. Influence Of Sankha Philosophy

b. Influence Of Buddhist Philosophy

c. Influence Of Vaishnavism

a. Influence of Sankha Philosophy:

Matua scholar Nityananda Halder, in his three-volume work *Sri Hari Darshan* written at the request of P. R. Thakur, describes Matua Dharma as "Sukkha Sanatan Dharma" (Halder, 1999). He argues that true Sanatana Dharma predates Vedic Hinduism, tracing it to the pre-Vedic Indus Valley Civilization, which was settled, labour-based, and showed matriarchal features. Drawing on Sankhya philosophy, particularly the concepts of Prakriti and Purusha, he rejects the Vedic idea of Brahma as creator. Citing Harililamrita, he highlights the influence of Sankhya thought on Matua philosophy.

b. Influence of Buddhist Philosophy:

Dr. Nityananda Halder has analysed the historical context of the origin and development of Buddhism in his book "Matua Dharma bonam Marksbad". Dr. Halder quoted from "Harileelamrita" and explained Harichand Thakur's criticism of Buddhism, saying that it was a big mistake to not give importance to the family system in Buddhism. He also said that Matuaism had emerged to rectify this shortcoming and thus it emphasizes religion as being in close association to the family and production system. He said about this context to quote "Sri Sri Harililamrita" -

"Ei bhul sere Bouddho dhormoke jugopojogi kore procharer jonno Matua dhormo praborton korte hoyechhilo. Shree Shree Harililamrite Maharshi Tarak tar jonno likhechhilen - 'Buddher kamona taha poripurno janya Yashomanto grihe Hari hoilo
("Sri Sri Harililamrita" pp 15)"
(Halder, Dr. Nityananda, 2010; P - 11)

("To address this mistake and to adapt Buddhism to contemporary needs, it became essential to establish Matua Dharma.")

Acharya Mahananda Halder wrote in his text "Sri Sri Guruchandcharit" in this context -

"Ekada Bharat khonde, Asiya Uttar Bonge, Rajar aloye jnana gyan-avatara.
Buddha name porichito, Korilen jiba-hito, Bheda-bheda bhuli sobe holo ekakar."
(Halder, A. M. ,2009, pp 124)

(Once, in the land of India, Arriving in North Bengal,
In the royal palace was born the embodiment of
knowledge. Known as Buddha, He worked for the welfare
of all beings, erasing all distinctions, uniting everyone as
one.)

C. Influence of Vaishnavism:

Vaishnavism or more specifically Sri Chaitanya's Vaishnavism was a direct influence on Matua philosophy. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay wrote – that “What had further inspired the Namasudras to hold their heads high was the influence of the Bhakti movement, particularly its more nonformal and equalitarian rural variants.” (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar;2011; P- 31) Sri Chaitanya established the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya in Bengal, leaving the question of caste status ambiguous. However, following his death, his followers diverged significantly. While Nityananda and his associates embraced the more egalitarian Sahajya tradition, figures like Advaita Acharya reasserted Brahmanical dominance within the sect. Consequently, Brahman devotees retained ritual privileges, while untouchable converts were marginalized and stigmatized as Jat Vaishnava. (Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar; 2011; P-33) Namasudra Vaishnavas are also included in this 'Jat vanishnava sampradaya '. However, in the philosophy of Matua religion defined by abandoning the liberal sexual relations principle of "jatvanishnava sampradaya" and instead integrating it with the family and the production system.

Foucauldian Analysis and Matua Movement as Resistance:

This paper seeks to revisit Michel Foucault's framework of power relations, particularly his conceptualization of power, knowledge, and governmentality, by analyzing the historical emergence of Matua religious philosophy and the Namasudra movement for social upliftment.

Power is the ability to control others. According to Foucault, power is relational and dynamic. Michel Foucault explored in his book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” (1975), how the punitive system has evolved from inflicting physical pain on the body to focusing on the mind, soul, and behaviour through regulation and normalization. “The body as the major target of penal repression disappeared.

By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out, though here and there it flickered momentarily into life”. (Foucault, 1975, P. 08)

He reinterprets power as a diffuse and interdependent force, embedded in institutions and daily activities, rather than a top-down imposition by the state or authority figures.

Foucault's conception of **disciplinary power** draws attention to the methods by which modern societies exercise control over their populations. In his book “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison” (Foucault,1975) Foucault illustrates the concept of disciplinary power through the example of the Panopticon, a prison design that allows for continuous surveillance of the prisoners.

Thus, our discussion so far reveals that the Namasudra community – suppressed within the confines of the Indian caste system – identified Brahmanical caste hierarchy as the root of their economic, socio-political, and cultural backwardness. In response, they constructed the Matua religious ideology as an alternative to Brahmanism. This development can be

analyzed through Michel Foucault's concepts of power, disciplinary power, and governmentality: the caste system functions as a disciplinary mechanism, establishing a hierarchical stratification across society. In opposition, under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, the Matua ideology formed a counter-discourse that challenged the Brahmanical knowledge regime and established an alternative epistemic framework. Through this process, a collective consciousness emerged among the lower-caste Namasudras, directly confronting the dominant power structures.

Conclusion:

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the construction of Matua philosophy serves not only as a resistance against Brahmanism but also as a means of developing an alternative knowledge system and fostering socio-economic progress. This demonstrates that the Namasudra, an oppressed and marginalized group, simultaneously protests and resists Brahmanism while also engaging in colonial education and socio-economic advancement.

Resistance, therefore, is organized from within the power structure itself, aligning with the existing power dynamics. This supports the validity of Foucauldian power theory. It may be concluded from the history of the Namasudra movement that, although this oppressed community engaged in forms of resistance within existing power structures, their own agency has been largely overlooked within a Foucauldian analytical framework. This issue requires further critical examination in future scholarship.

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