Guruchand Thakur's Role in Spreading Education in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century

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The 19th century is a very important chapter in the history of Bengal as well as India. In all aspects, this century was the introducer of transformation or change. This transformation was active in the society, economy, religion, culture and all other fields of Bengal. The intellectuals of Bengal developed their talent in various streams. On one hand, the science, philosophy and literature of the oriental and on the other, the culture of Hindu, Buddhist, Islam, Christian and various folk religions, both played an important role in this transformation. This transformation or renaissance of the 19th century was largely confined within the higher class. The surge of religious, educational and social reform in the 19th century that started from Rammohan Roy was limited within the Kolkata centric, upper and middle class. It did not spread at all levels of the society. That is why Bankim Chandra wrote in 1872, in his "BangadesherKrishak", welfare of the nation ? Whose well-being denotes the nation's welfare ? I see welfare of you and I but do you and I represent the country ? How much do you and I share the country's population ? Which cause of the nation is going to be served by you and I alone ?" In Bangadarshan he wrote, "If anyone thinks that the quotes of the cultured must be understood by the well-bred only and they are not meant for us, then it is specifically wrong. There is no welfare of the country if there is no improvement of the Bengalee as a whole."

In the 19th century, a large number of people of the rural Bengal were the untouchables in the so called rules of the society. In 19th century, the Chandals (later came to be known as the Namasudra) were the untouchables. Harichand and Guruchand Thakur devoted themselves in the overall development of this Chandals. Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur of Bengal was eminent among the great human figures of the 19th century who tried to establish religion in an equalitarian and scientific mentality, based on truth and logic. Harichand Thakur was born at Faridpur, East Bengal in 1982. Raja Rammohon Roy introduced the Braham Dharma in 1828, protesting the social prejudices of the upper castes. Almost in contemporary time, Harichand Thakur introduced Matua Dharma in 1830 – Establishment of his dharma was basically aiming the overall emancipation of the untouchable and backward dalits.

Harichand Thakur himself had taken birth in a untouchable Chandal (Nama) family. At that time, these low-born untouchable people had no social, political or religious rights at all. Just as they had no social dignity, in the same way, no other caste person used to cut their crops or harvest their lands and used to avoid their contact in every possible way. Rabindranth wrote, "I have just witnessed in the village that people of other castes do not harvest the lands of the Namasudras, do not reap their paddy or build their house. It means our society has considered them incapable of the cooperation that one demands from other in order to survive in the world. Every day, from birth to death, we are giving them punishment by making their life difficult and oppressive without them being at fault. "In addition this there were also torture, exploitation and oppression dealt by the upper caste zamindars and eviction from houses in the name of tax collection. So, by 1850, the low born backward class people of Bengal began to unite under the flag of Matua Dharma.

"History is evident that political revolution follows religious and social revolution. That is why the political revolution of the Europeans came after Martin Luther's religious reformations, the Arabsians had gotten the religious revolution of proponent Mohammed prior to earning political power, before the political revolution of Chandragupta, there came religious movement, introduced by Buddha, social and religious movement of Mahkarastra was followed by Shibaji's political revolution. The political revolution of the Shikhs came after Gurunanak's religious and social revolution. Considering from this aspect, Guruchand Thakur, brought about the renaissance of the base-born Bengal on the strength of social and political revolution, after Harichand Thakur's religious revolution.

Just as Harichand Thakur had united the untouchable dalit people through religion, he was also assiduous in spreading education amongst them. The objective of the education policy, declared by the British in 1859 was to extend education to the lower level of the society rather than keeping it limited within the periphery of the upper class. During this time, Vidyasagar wrote to the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sri Peter Grant on 27th September, "Such an illusory conception has been created in this country and also in England that a comprehensive success has been achieved in the education of the upper classes and now it is time to
concentrate on the education of the lower class. But if inquired, a completely different picture will come up. So it is my humble request that education may be restrained by the government within the upper castes as the only mean of spreading education. The education policy will succeed only when there is comprehensive expansion of education within the upper castes.

So, the upper caste people of the society opposed to the education of the lower castes. Due to lack of education, the ignoble and untouchable people were unaware of their rights.

Harichand Thakur had been able to realize the fact that without education, it is impossible to awaken the minds of these people and he conferred this responsibility to his son Guruchand Thakur."

"AnunnataJatimajheShikhhaProcharite, AggyaKorenHarichandTaareBidhi mote."  

[According to his principles, Harichand ordains to disseminate education amongst the depressed class]

In this way, by uniting the ignoble class through religious movements, a fight to establish their dignity begins through the literary movement.

In 1880, Guruchand Thakur established the first school at his own effort, without any kind of help. At that time, according to the norms of Hinduism, there was no education system for the lowborn class. Acquiring knowledge and education was education was prohibited in the Hindu scriptures. They were not allowed to get admission in any college. He himself got education through Muslim concomittance. In the meeting of the Namasudra community, held at Duttabhanga village, under Mollaghat police station of Khulna district in the present day Bangladesh in 1881 (1827 B.S.), Guruchand Thakur invited in favour of establishing school in every village at individual effort. Soon, the Matua devotees undertook a massive task of building schools in the villages at their own effort. It was a groundbreaking step by Guruchand Thakur. We get evidence of this from the thesis of Dr. Atul Chandra Pradhan. In Bengal, even though the depressed class people found no difficulty in securing admission to common schools during 1931, there existed 569 special schools for the backward class in Presidency Division, 246 special schools exclusively meant for the Namasudra children in Dacca division.

In his educational movement, he found Christian Missionary C.S. Mead by his side. With his cooperation, the first English school was founded in 1906 (Mission School). One day school and one Sunday school were opened for the girls and for the widows, “Widow Ashram” was opened. With his assistance, Middle English School was established in 1907 which became Higher English School in 1908. He promoted his schools at first to ChhatraBritti schools and thereafter to Middle English Schools. This Education Movement, led by Guruchand Thakur was not limited within the Namasudra society only, but it was circulated by him among the entire backward dalit class of Bengal.

"Shiksha andolan jobe prabhu kore deshedeshe, bhaktosujanjato cover kachhe, Naasudra, Teli, Mali aar Kumbhakar, Kapali, Mahishya, Das, ChamarKamar. Pondease, tantaise, asemalakar, kotoi Musalmansathiknahi tar."  

[When our master was carrying out education movement countrywide, all his good disciples gathered before him. There came the Namasudra, Teli, Mali and Kumbhakar. Kapali, Mahishya, Das, Chamar, Kamar, Ponde, Tanti and Malakar also came along with countless Muslims.]

In the Brahman-ruled upper society, where women were deprived of their rights, Harichand Thakur gave them the rights through their practicing of religion. Regardless of men and women, to become gleeful in chanting Harinam in open courtyard is the common faith of the Matuas. HarichandThaaur realized that in order to capacitate women of equal rights in society and family, whatever is required is proper education. That is why he paid deep attention on women education. He founded Hari-Guruchand Mission in 1932 and with assistance from this mission, founded a school named ‘Shanti Satyabhama’ at Orakantalyata for the purpose of women education.

"Narishikhatore prabhu aponaloy Shantisatyabhamanam e school gore day."  

[For the sake of women education, our master built school named Shanti Satyabhama in his abode.]

In 1908, he also founded a women training school in Orakandi, where, alongside vocational education for women, obstetrics education was also given. In this matter, his associates bwere Miss. Tak, companion of Dr. Mead and Mrs. Mead. Apart from this, all the schools founded out of the Chandal (nama) conference, were also equipped with system for women education.

A foreseeing Guruchand Thakur realized that growth and development of the society is impossible if education does not reach the oppressed, neglected and backward mass of people. IT is quite amazing that a person from the village perceived this truth by virtue of his own understanding and invoked in villages alike.

"bachokimbamoro lekhaporakoro."
[Either live or die, but do study]

That is why, in unveiling the true nature of Guruchand Thakur’s Education and Matua movement, folk-culturist Prof. Tushar Chattopadhyay said, “” At the time when the impact of the 19th century renaissance and national movement was limited to the upper class of the society, liberation movement of the oppressed Namasudra community assumed specific form through the Matua Movement. Although the movement began on the basis of religious philosophy, yet the object of Harichand and Guruchand was to guide the neglected race to the path of growth through proper education, humanity, social and economic consciousness. 10

SOURCE

1. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bunga Darshan, 1872.
3. Dr. anil Ranjan Biswas, Antaja Banglar Nabajagarane Guruchander Blumka.
5. Mahananda Halder, Guruchand Charit.
8. Do.
9. Do.
10. Tushar Chattopadhyay, Matua Dharmandolan O Ganajagarane Sangram.