

Contextual Affinities: Revaluating the Views of Thakur Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur on the Sanskritization of the Dalits.

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The aim of the present paper is to bring out the relevance of the socio-religious movements of Roy Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma (1865–1935) and Guruchand Thakur in the social upliftment of the Dalits, by contextualizing Dr. M.N. Srinivas's sanskritization theory.

While the social activists like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj, (1874-1922), E.V. Periyar Ramaswamy Naiker (1879-1973), and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) questioned the very legitimacy of the caste system and rendered their best efforts to abolish it, Roy Saheb exhorted the Rajbanshi people especially of Rangpur, Cooch Behar and the neighboring districts to restore their Kshatriya qualities by enlightening themselves; and Guruchand Thakur, a contemporary of Roy Saheb launched a religio-educational movement mainly for the then 'Chandal' community in the southern part of the then undivided Bengal, especially in the districts of Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna which rapidly spread to the other parts of Bengal. Soon after their deaths their separate movements got united and turned into a purely political one in the hands of Jogendranath Mandal and Nagendra Narayan Ray, the products of the cultural and intellectual ambience already created by Guruchand Thakur and Roy Saheb respectively, for electing Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, in the Constituent Assembly Election, 1946, in the interest of all the Dalit communities of India.

It would not be irrelevant here to refer to Swami Vivekananda since the paper deals with the problems of casteism and the ideologues related to the caste movements. Swamiji did not consider caste to be one's inborn identity and he thought that lower caste identity can be annihilated by sanskritization. But by misquoting or partially quoting Swamiji one may try to prove him to be a casteist. Swamiji's belief in the changeability of one's caste identity is best expressed in "Caste Problem in India" in *Swami Vivekananda on India and Her Problems*, in which he argued:

Take a man in his different pursuits, for example: when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is in Shudra-hood; when he is busy transacting some piece of business for profit, on his account, he is a Vaishya; when he fights to right wrongs then the qualities of a Kshatriya come out in him; and when he meditates on God, or passes his time in conversation about Him, then he is a Brahmana. Naturally, it is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another. Otherwise, how did Viswamitra become a Brahmana and Parashurama a Kshatriya? (1)

Roy Saheb Thakur Panchanan Barma says almost the same thing, "We are Kshatriya, but not in name. One who is a Kshatriya in thoughts and works is the real Kshatriya" (Pal, 53). In order to restore their Kshatriya qualities he initiated the sanskritization ceremony. Guruchand Thakur, a contemporary of Roy Saheb also launched a socio-religious movement in order to sanskritize the then 'Chandal' community of Bengal. Thus the three reformers were in favour of the process which was later on termed 'sanskritization' by Dr. M.N. Srinivas who elaborated it in his book, *Religion and Society Amongst the Coorgs of South India*. 'Sanskritization', according to Prof. Srinivas is a process of enrichment of the people belonging to lower castes, in order to acquire higher status in the social hierarchy by adopting upper caste practices and beliefs. Naturally one may think of the reverse: a community or caste giving up the 'higher' culture may be downgraded in the caste hierarchy, and be *patit* (fallen) people. According to Thakur Panchanan Barma this happened to the Kshatriyas (now known as 'Rajbanshis') of the northern part of the then undivided Bengal, who had forgotten their Kshatriya culture and identity. Bitterly

humiliated by a certain Advocate Moitra, Roy Saheb took an oath to restore the Kshatriya identity of the Rajbanshi people. This is why Roy Saheb led the Kshatriyaization movement among the Rajbanshis of the northern part of Bengal. Taking various religious, historical and anthropological texts as evidences, and consulting the religious pundits he proved that the Rajbanshis were of Kshatriya origin but later on 'desanskritized' into Sudra. He also felt that in order to confirm their restored identity they must be educated and organized and so he founded the 'Kshatriya Samity' which initiated not only ceremonial Kshatriyaization process but 'sanskritization' as well; thousands of Rajbanshis were re-designated as 'Kshatriya Rajbanshi' at the village Porolbari in 1912 on the 27th of the Bengali month Maagh in a purification (*prayaschitta*) ceremony on the bank of the river Karotoya (Pal 53, 54,55). But he knew that the ceremonial promotion in the social hierarchy would be of no use; he did this in order to restore their right to read the *Vedas* ignorance of which could not enrich the mind. He felt that the *shastras* (religious texts) written by the highly educated people for the educated people were abstruse to the masses and so he got them simplified by the scholarly people and published for sale at reasonable price. In the first annual conference of the Kshatriya Samity in 1910 (Bengali 1317, 18th of Baishakh) Roy Saheb, the then Secretary, exhorted his people to reform the society, delivered a speech which may easily be mistaken for Swami Vivekananda's one:

The glory of the society depends on right judgment. The society wants reformation. Reformation is a must. To give up the harmful practices and inception of and obedience to the helpful ones is social reformation. ... Education is a must. Religious education is a must. (Pal-50)

Roy Saheb also felt the need of English education, without ignoring the Indian religious education. He also decided to found a Rajbanshi hostel and later on he did this. (Pal, 56). In order to instigate the Kshatriya temperament, self-confidence and community sentiment among the young boys he advised them to be engaged in staff playing and physical exercise. Even the ladies were enthused to learn staff playing and sword playing. In order to save the helpless women Roy Saheb founded a women ashram, as well. (Pal, 81).

Likewise, Guruchand Thakur founded the 'Harichand Guruchand Mission' in 1932. Roy Saheb restored the Rajbanshis' Kshatriya identity while Guruchand Thakur with the help of Cecil Silas Mead (1834-1909) discarded the humiliating name 'Chandal' and renamed them as 'Nomosudra' in first in 1895 and got it confirmed in 1911. But the caste Hindus did not agree to accept the new name, and they used the old humiliating name. So, Guruchand influenced the administration to serve the following notice:

Notice: TO GOAL, STAMP VENDORS

Notice to be hung up:

In tahsil, In court, In English office, In Nazrat, In Criminal Office, In Municipal Out Post.

"That Namashudra must always be written and not change for all person of the said caste that the deputy commissioner has ordered that anyone who does not write Namasudra shall be removed from employment".

Sd/W.C Makpherson
Assistant Commissioner

9.9.1895

(Roy, 2)

Dr. Sukabilash Barma in his article "Panchanan Barmar Prasangikata" (The Relevance of Panchanan Barma) aptly says,

The effort of rejuvenating a vast population, in the name of caste sentiment was unfortunately considered by most of the Rajbanshis and other people to be a ceremony of mere accepting the

sacred thread and they considered Panchanan Barma to be a leader of a caste-based society. He did not believe that by using a sacred thread one would become a Kshatriya. According to him Kshatriyachar was some inner virtues; we do not deserve the term 'Kshatriya' until we achieve those virtues. ... The spontaneous initiative in rescue of the wretched is the duty of a Kshatriya. (Paschimbanga-13)

Dr. Barma also recaptures Roy Saheb's advice to be physically strong and mentally sound. He thought that a Khatriya must be strong, painstaking, and respectful to humanity and women. And for this, education is a must. Here we once again find the affinity between Roy Saheb and Guruchand Thakur since Guruchand was the first to found a school for the downtrodden communities at Orakandi in 1908, with the help of the Christian missionary Cecil Silas Mead. Asim Kumar Roy in his article "The Contribution of Guruchand to the Upliftment of the Neglected Communities." says that his (Guruchand's) literacy movement started from his conference at Duttadanga in Bagerhat Sub-division (now district). Mr. Ramchandra Kshirasagara also argues that in the conference (in 1881) Guruchand

advised his people to start schools in the area densely populated by them. His next movement was to remove the disgraceful name 'Chandal' (which was then attributed to Namasudra by the higher caste Hindus) from the census report. He was successful in the same. (Kshirasagara, 1994, 96)

The Harichand Guruchand Mission also founded the Debi Santi Satyabhama School for the girls of the lower castes. He used to say, "To all who respect me is my exhortation,/ Let no son remains without education" (Roy 1, Trans. mine). It may be kept in mind that Guruchand was the leader not only of the Namasudras but of other Dalits as well as evident in Mahananda Halder's *Guruchand Charit*: 'It is not certain how many Namasudras, Teli, Mali, Potter man, Kapali, Mahishya, Cobbler, Blacksmith Pod, Spinster, Malakar, Muslim gathered.) (Roy 2, Trans. Mine'.

Roy Saheb also ordered his people to send all the children to school. He thought that the complete manifestation of humanity is the real education. Here Roy Saheb indirectly accepted Swamiji's theory of enlightenment of the degenerated caste. Here he also anticipates Dr. Ambedkar's slogan, "Educate, agitate, organize". But the difference between the two great reformers was captured by Mr. Dinesh Dakua in his article "Rajbanshider Abhibhabak Panchanan Barma" (Panchanan Barma, the Guardian of the Rajbanshis),

Panchanan like Gandhiji was a Manuwadi and believed in the caste system. (But) Ambedkar, almost a contemporary (of Panchanan) was against it and he was a soldier in the abolition of the partition wall of castes. The goal of both of them was the same but the paths were different— the securing of a prestigious place for the so called lower castes. (Paschimbanga 6).

According to Mr. Sukhabilas Barma (a retired I.A.S Officer and a Bhowaia singer and an M.L.A. at present) Roy Saheb thought that "mere caste sentiment cannot develop a community. In order to secure facilities for achieving eligibility the Rajbanshis need to be enlisted as Scheduled Caste" (*Paschimbanga-15*). It would not be irrelevant to mention here that the very phrase "scheduled caste" was substituted for "depressed caste/ class" in 1931 at the request of Thakur Panchanan. (Pal, 99).

In 1924 in the All India Kshatriya Mahasabha the Maharaja of Alowar, the President of the conference conferred the title 'Thahur' on Panchanan Barma. In 1919 the British Government honoured him with the titles 'Roy Saheb' and M.B.E. (Member of the British Empire). (Pal, 61)

Something like this happened to Guruchand Thakur also. In 1905 King George-V came to India and attended a conference in Faridpur and Guruchand was also invited to and attended the conference. In this year he presided over a large Matua conference in Dacca; it was the first Matua conference in India.

Later on he held various meetings and seminars in various parts of Bengal and thereby united the underdeveloped and underprivileged communities. He believed that work is worship, as his father Harichand Thakur did. In his noble mission he was enormously helped by C.S. Mead. As an acknowledgement of his philanthropic project he was awarded a gold medal and the title 'Nomokulapati' by the Viceroy of Bengal in 1912, in a conference hall in Faridpur. (Roy, 2).

There is a conspicuous difference between the two great 'Thakurs'. Thakur Panchanan struggled for the whole Rajbanshi community but neither thought of the recurring financial benefit of his own generations nor established a system that might generate revenue for his children or grand children. But Guruchand Thakur was considered by many of his disciples to be an avatar and they offered him *pronami* which he accepted and this system of *pronami* is still going on because most of the people of Nomosudra community regards Guruchand more as a religious guru rather than a social reformer, and today the huge income from *pronami* probably is one of the main issues behind the familial conflict among the members of the Thakur family.

The legacy of Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur was carried forward by their disciples Nagendra Narayan Ray and Jogendranath Mandal respectively. Jogendranath Mandal actively involved himself with the activities of the 'Little Brothers of the Poor', a social welfare organization. He contested the 1937 Bengal Legislative Assembly elections from the Bakarganj North-East General Rural Constituency and won a surprise victory over Saral Kumar Datta, the apparent heir of Aswini Kumar Dutta. After his election to the Legislature, he became the Minister of Law and labour in undivided Pakistan. Thereafter Mandal worked tirelessly for the upliftment of the scheduled castes, especially the Nomosudras because they were the greatest in number and they already got themselves united under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur. Subsequently, Mandal developed a political connection with Dr. Ambedkar and joined Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation. (<http://www.bdbiography.com/Jogendranath-Mandal.php>). Jogendranath Mandal invited Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar to come to Bengal and wholeheartedly supported him to enter in the Constituent Assembly in 1946, although Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel tried his best to resist the entry of Dr. Ambedkar in the Constituent Assembly from anywhere in India. Patel's claim was toughly challenged by Mandal who played a pivotal role for the cause of whole Dalits of India and by assuring the votes of the seven MLAs belonging to Namasudra, Rajbanshi and fisherman communities. The name of Dr. Ambedkar was proposed by Jogendranath Mandal and seconded by the Rangpur M.L.A. Nagendra Narayan Ray; Tangail M.L.A. Gayanath Biswas, Faridpur M.L.A. Dwarikanath Baruri, Jessore M.L.A. Bholanath Biswas, Pabna M.L.A. Haran Chandra Barman and Mukunda Behari Mullick voted for Ambedkar. Thus he won seven votes whereas he required only five votes. Probably it is not difficult to realize that Thakur Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur had already paved the way for Dr. Ambedkar. So today's constitutional safeguard and various upliftment projects for the Dalits of the whole country all owe indirectly to Thakur Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur.

Guruchand's emphasis on the political power is conspicuous in his statement "je jahir raja nai, se jati taja nai" (the community without a king of its own is not a lively one). The political influence of Roy Saheb on Nagendra Narayan Ray is mentioned by Dr. Nripendranath Pal: "From 1926 to 1929 Panchanan was not in the Bengal Legislative Council. Nagendra Narayan Ray kept a strict vigil so that the Amendment Bill be passed as per Panchanan's recommendation" (Pal, 12, Trans. Mine).

Today the prestigious place in the social hierarchy and financial soundness of many of the Rajbanshi and the Namosudra communities, as well as other Dalits— all owe to Thakur Panchanan Barma and Guruchand Thakur. But unfortunately the philosophy of Roy Saheb and of Guruchand Thakur

seldom transcends the religious boundaries and so Roy Saheb remains a 'poita guru' of the Rajbanshis and Guruchand Thakur an Avatar, to most of the people, as Mr. Sukhabilas Barma bemoans in his article quoted above.

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