

Struggle for Dignity and Rights: Bishmadev Das and his Contribution to the Marginalised in Bengal

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Abstract: In Bengal, some of the Hindu castes with low ritual rank were marginalised by being designated as untouchables through the centuries. The upper-caste Hindus discriminated against them in various ways. During the British rule in Bengal, a handful of these deprived communities became economically prosperous and aware of their lower social position and discrimination. They turned into leaders of their communities and began to claim honourable positions for their castes in society and demand opportunities in the fields of education, employment, and welfare activities from the government. Bishmadev Das, a Namasudra advocate of Orakandi, was the pioneer among them. In the early twentieth century, Bishmadev began his movement, claiming social respect for the Namasudras and demanding socio-economic and civil rights for the depressed classes. The range of his fields of action was spread not only at the social level but also to the court of law and provincial legislature.

Keywords: Untouchability, Marginalisation, Struggle, Dignity, Rights.

The practice of untouchability is a unique apparatus used in India for the marginalisation of the people placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Marginalisation injures human dignity and denies human rights, especially the right to live effectively as equal citizens. Iris Marion Young, the noted political theorist, argues that "Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination." In Bengal, people belonging to castes like the Namasudra (Chandal), Rajbansi, Bagdi, Pod (Poundra), Bauri, Jugi, Malo, Muchi, and Hari were held to be polluting and experienced severe discrimination in the fields of education, employment in government offices, access to public places, and equal opportunities in society until the early twentieth century. Some leaders from these marginalised communities initiated struggles against their social indignity,

economic oppression, and deprivation of equal opportunity by the government. The present paper explores the contribution made by the Namasudra leader Bhishmadev Das of Orakandi for the attainment of dignity and rights for his caste as well as other communities that had been suffering from caste-based marginalisation.

Methodology

The research has been conducted mainly by using primary sources. Secondary sources have also been used to some limited extent. Scholars like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Ratan Biswas have written down the socio-political activities of Bhishmadev Das in their works. But no research has so far been conducted exclusively on Bhishmadev, including his movements for the caste-based marginal communities against their social humiliation, deprivation of economic and civil rights, and indifference of the government. Oral history has been collected mainly about the early life of Bhishmadev Das through interviews with Bhishmadev's grandson since no written source is available. In this research study, printed government and university reports, government correspondence, legislative council proceedings, and caste literature have been used as major primary sources. The study can never be without its limitations. Nevertheless, it will assimilate new elements into the existing knowledge of the social history of colonial Bengal.

Caste-based Marginalisation in Contemporary Society

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, caste was the central parameter used to determine the social position of an individual in Bengal. The mainstream society did not acknowledge the "unclean" castes as equal citizens and kept them on the margins of society. The Mahishyas (Chasi Kaibarttas) were the largest Hindu caste in the province. Yet the Brahmins held them "low" and would not take water from their hands.¹ They were ridiculed by calling themselves the contemptuous epithet "Keot."² The upper-caste Hindus despised the Namasudras by calling them Chandals. The Brahmins considered them not only polluting but also thought themselves defiled, even when they trod in their shadow.³ The caste Hindus branded the Bagdis, Haris, Jugis, Haris, and Muchis as untouchable communities. They refused to take water from their hands and would not smoke from the same *hookah*. Their cooked food was not consumed, nor was their admission to the temples allowed.⁴ On account of their stigma of untouchability, entry of castes like the Namasudra, Bagdi, Jogi, Bauri, Rajbansi, Chamar, Dom, Bhunmali, and Hari to the Jagannath Temple at Puri was banned under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809.⁵ The Hindu *Bhadraloks* sharply opposed their entry into educational institutions, the right to public utility services, and the overall socialisation process throughout the nineteenth century. In this social context, sensible members of these marginalised communities were raising voices of protest as well as

demands for their redress against their indignity and overall deprivation.

Early Life of Bhishmadev Das

Bhishmadev Das was born into a Namasudra (Chandal) family in the village of Orakandi under Gopajganj Sub-Division in Faridpur District of Bengal (now under Kashiani Upazilla of Gopalganj District in present-day Bangladesh).⁶ Halder mentioned that he lived in the western part of the village of Orakandi with his family.⁷ It is difficult to ascertain the actual date of birth of Bhishmadev. It seems that he was born around the year 1870.⁸ In the nineteenth century, most of the people belonging to the Namasudra community were poor, illiterate, and socially despised by upper-caste Hindus. Orakandi was a Namasudra village in a low-lying marshy tract of southern Faridpur inundated with flood water where access was impossible without a country boat during the period over six months in a year.⁹ Most of the inhabitants of the village were poor peasants or manual labourers. But Bhishmadev's father, Ishwarchandra Das, was a well-off cultivator of Orakandi. In those days, the upper-caste Hindus held the Namasudras as an untouchable community, and they did not welcome the children of the Namasudras in schools. In the village of Orakandi, there was no school. A *pathsala* was founded in the house of Guruchand Thakur in 1879, which could not be carried on due to the deficiency of competent teachers.¹⁰ Ishwarchandra Das, though a cultivator, was aware of the necessity of education for his children. His eldest son, Kamalakanta Das, got an education in the face of the hostile attitude of the caste Hindus and became a *Mukhtear*.¹¹ Later, he became a teacher in the Middle English School of village Kumuria. Before taking admission to Dacca Collegiate School, Bhishmadev got his education at this school.¹²

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, higher English schools were rare in *mafassal* areas outside Calcutta. The vast majority of the Namasudras could not even think of getting their children educated in higher educational institutions, keeping them in Dacca or Calcutta. The upper-caste Hindus despised the Namasudras by labelling the Chandal stigma on them. They were denied the right to stay in hostels or boarding houses for the Hindus on account of their lower position among the Hindus. No separate hostel or mess was in Dacca for those Hindus whom the caste Hindus despised for their lower status in society. For this reason, the majority of the Namasudra students would stay in houses belonging to their own community in towns like Dacca and Calcutta.¹³ Travelling from Orakandi to Dacca or Calcutta was very difficult in those days since no regular transport system existed. Nevertheless, Bhishmadev's father and his elder brother, Kamalakanta, sent him to Dacca Collegiate School for his proper education in English. For his outward journey to Dacca, Bhishmadev had to board the grain dealers' loaded boat and arrive at Narayanganj. From there, he availed himself of public transport and reached Dacca.¹⁴ During his study at Dacca Collegiate School, young Bhishmadev Das stayed in the

house of Ramkinkar Ray, a generous person from the Namasudra community. Ramkinkar Ray was born in 1840 in the village of Suvadya under Keraniganj Police Station in Dacca District. His house stood near Dacca town. Besides Bhishmadev, many Namasudra students and teachers would stay in his house, as Namasudras were not allowed to stay in hotels.¹⁵ In the face of a lot of challenges for him, Bhishmadev took his F.A. degree from Dacca Collegiate School.¹⁶

After completing his education in Dacca, Bhishmadev Das came to Calcutta for his higher degree. But he suffered great difficulty getting accommodations in the town.¹⁷ The hotels in Calcutta would not allow the Namasudras to stay or have meals because they were held to be an untouchable community. Under compulsion, the Namasudra students took admission in any mess or hostel with Kayastha surnames by concealing their caste. They had to consume physical and mental torture if the upper-caste inmates unearthed their caste. For this reason, the Namasudra students would stay in the houses of their own community in Calcutta and Dacca.¹⁸ The affluent Namasudras of Calcutta, like the Das Chaudhuri *zamindars* of Chingrighata and the Das family of Chandsi, provided accommodation to many Namasudra students.¹⁹ When Bhishmadev was in Calcutta for his study of law, he had never suppressed his caste. Unable to get admission in Hindu hostels, he stayed in Namasudra houses known to their family or relatives.²⁰ Despite all the adversities, Bhishmadev got his law degree from Calcutta University, sometime around the year 1902.²¹

Chandal Epithet on the Namasudras and Bhishmadev's Move

For centuries, the Namasudras of Bengal have been discriminated against and pushed to the margins of society by sticking a "Chandal" epithet on them. The members of this indigenous community have never acknowledged this contemptuous designation for them and have always expressed their dissent. In order to demonstrate their protest against the contemptuous designation, the Namasudras staged a general strike in the district of Faridpur in the early part of the year 1873, resolving that they would not serve anybody of the upper castes, in whatever capacity, unless an honourable position in Hindu society was assigned to them.²² The general strike of the Namasudras produced a tremendous economic impact and civil disturbance not only in Faridpur but also in the adjoining districts of Bakarganj and Jessore. The strike was extensive, complete, and visible even after four months of its inception.²³ The epicentre of this strike was the Namasudra-dominated villages under Muksudpur, Kashiani, and Gopalganj Police Stations under Faridpur District.²⁴ The areas under Muksudpur and Gopalganj Police Stations became so tense that additional police reinforcements were dispatched from Dacca and deployed there to maintain law and order.²⁵ Bhishmadev's paternal village, Orakandi, was also the birthplace of Guruchand Thakur and the centre of this movement. The Namasudras of Bengal had been staging demonstrations across the province

under their local leaders for their Namasudra designation in place of "Namasudra or Chandal" since the 1891 census. Their leaders from the districts of Faridpur, Dacca, Bakarganj, Jessore, Mymensingh, and Pabna reiterated their appeal to the British government in 1901. Bhishwadev felt the brunt of his "Chandal" identity during his stay in Dacca and Calcutta for his education. He took a leading role in this movement in many places under the Goplalganj Sub-division.²⁶ Bhishmadev Das and a few other Namasudra leaders of Orakandi grabbed the opportunity of the 1901 census operations and sent a representation to the census authorities to designate their community as Namasudra.²⁷ The British government approved their claim in the census of 1911, and their "Chandal" designation was finally deleted.²⁸

Education for the Namasudras and Bhishmadev Das

The British administration in India announced in the Charter Act of 1833 that the doors of educational institutions were open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. But the Hindu *Bhadralok* would not allow the Namasudra boys to study in schools sitting side by side with their boys since they were held to be untouchables. Among the Namasudra community, only a very few were competent to be teachers. The caste Hindu teachers were reluctant to teach in the schools founded by the Namasudras. During his boyhood, Bhishmadev Das himself had to face a series of difficulties in his education at the primary and higher levels.²⁹ In this situation, Guruchand Thakur sought the assistance of an Australian Baptist missionary, Dr. C.S. Mead, stationed at Faridpur. Guruchand knew the competency of Bhishmadev Das. This is why he sent Bhishmadev, accompanied by his son Shashibhushan, to meet Dr. Mead in order to apprise him about the discrimination suffered by the Namasudras in the field of education and invite him to come to Orakandi. During his conversation with Bhishmadev, Dr. Mead was delighted to observe the personality of Bhishmadev and his ability to speak English.³⁰ Later, when the missionary, Dr. Mead, came to Orakandi by boat, he asked the villagers about the directions to the residence of Bhishmadev Das and initially arrived at the house of the Das family. He also visited the house of Guruchand Thakur and held a prolonged discussion with him. On behalf of Guruchand, Bhishmadev talked to Dr. Mead, reported to him about the economic and social distress of the Namasudras in the locality, and asked him to spread higher education among them.³¹ Dr. Mead took the initiative to help the Namasudras in 1905. Guruchand donated a piece of land in 1906, on which the Australian Missionary founded the Orakandi Mission and a high school in 1908.³² Orakandi Mead High School was the first educational institution of this kind in the Namasudra locality. Bhishmadev Das, as a representative of Guruchand, did a commendable job in making a bridge between Dr. Mead and Guruchand.

Endeavour for the Employment of the Namasudras

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, some of the Namasudras somehow got higher education in the face of spiteful behaviour by the upper-caste Hindus. A few of them also got appointments as clerks, inspectors, teachers, and professors, but they had no representation in the higher administrative posts.³³ The educated Namasudras felt that the labelling of untouchability on them was the major impediment to getting employment in government departments. Orakandi was "the most influential centre of the Nama Sudra World."³⁴ A resident of Orakandi, Guruchand Thakur was the undisputed leader among the Namasudras. Being a relative and resident of the same village, Guruchand and Bhishmadev were closely connected in all the Namasudra movements in the early twentieth century. In those days, only a very few men among the Namasudras had knowledge of proper English. Bhishmadev gained not only efficiency in the English language but also expertise in law since he was an advocate by profession. Both Guruchand and Bhishmadev were born leaders. Bhishmadev's proficiency in English and the law of the land bridged the Namasudras with the European bureaucrats and missionaries in Bengal. Most of the socio-political movements of the Namasudras were the combined vision of Guruchand and Bhishmadev.³⁵ At the village of Orakandi, the Namasudras held a meeting with the agenda for the social advancement of their caste by obtaining higher education and public employment. In this meeting, Guruchand was the chairman, and Bhishmadev Das was one of the distinguished leaders and a representative of the educated Namasudras. In the meeting, it was resolved that a Namasudra delegation steered by Dr. C.S. Mead would meet the Lieutenant Governor of the province in order to place their demand for better educational facilities and employment opportunities, as well as the deletion of the "Chandal" epithet from their caste.³⁶ In 1907, a delegation of the Namasudras comprising Guruchand Thakur, his son Shashibhusan, Bhihamadev Das, Dr. Tarini Charan Bala, Radhamohan Biswas, and Purnachandra Mullick met the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Sir Lancelot Hare, and apprised him about discriminations against their caste. They also appealed that their community needed better educational facilities and an adequate number of representations in public employment in order to get rid of the "Chandal" calumny labelled on them. Immediately after this meeting, Shashibhusan Thakur got an appointment as a sub-registrar and Dr. Tarini Charan Bala as a government doctor. In early 1908, Kumud Behary Mullick of Khulna was appointed a Deputy Magistrate. At a later date, Siddheshwar Halder of Faridpur also became the second Deputy Magistrate from among the Namasudras.³⁷ In organising the upliftment meeting at Orakandi and in putting the aspiration and appeal of the Namasudras before the Lieutenant Governor as a member of the delegation, Bhishmadev Das played an admirable role. He was an English-educated person and had an influential personality. In the movement of the

Namasudras for their dignity in society, educational facilities, and employment opportunities, Bhishmadev Das occupies a glorious position in history.

***Swadeshi* Movement, Namasudras, and Bhishmadev Das**

During the anti-partition movement in Bengal in 1905–1911, the Namasudras and most of the cultivating classes, like the Muslims, Mahishyas, and Rajbansis, remained aloof from it. The Namasudras identified the anti-British *Swadeshi* movement as a movement of the Hindu *Bhadralok Babus* and refused to participate in any such agitations. Guruchand Thakur advised his followers not to take part in the *Swadeshi* movement.³⁸ His eldest son, Shashi Bhusan Thakur, made contact with Salimullah Khan, the Nawab of Dacca. They decided that both the Muslims and the Namasudras would refrain from supporting the movement against the partition of Bengal as well as jointly resist any move for its attainment.³⁹ As a member of the Namasudra community, Bhishmadev Das also took an active part in the anti-*Swadeshi* campaign. In Namasudra-dominated areas under Gopalganj Sub-Division, Bhishmadev became a prominent leader under the guidance of Guruchand.⁴⁰ The involvement of Bhishmadev Das against the *anti-British* movement is further testified when it is found that Bhishmadev himself was a team member of Guruchand in 1907 who met the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Lancelot Hare, and expressed their support and conferred an address of honour to him on the division of Bengal while the *Swadeshi* movement was at its highest magnitude.⁴¹ When Nawab Ali Chaudhuri, a member of the Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council, came to Gopalganj, Guruchand, Bhishmadev, and other two members of the Namasudra community went there on his invitation and met him to express their opposition to the campaign against the partition of Bengal.⁴²

Depressed Classes of Bengal and the Namasudras

The expression “depressed” was unknown in Bengal until the year 1916.⁴³ That year, the Government of Bengal prepared a list of classes that it considered to be depressed. The Calcutta University Commission mentioned the term in its report published in 1919. The list in this report consisted of twenty-one groups categorised as depressed classes proper, consisting of the Bagdis, Bauris, Dhobas, Haris, Muchis, Namasudras, Pods, Santhals, and Sunris, together with their numbers based on the figures collected from the 1911 census.⁴⁴ Thompson prepared a list of thirty-nine communities as depressed classes in the Census Report of 1921. The Bagdis, Bauris, Chasi Kaibarttas, Muchis, Namasudras, Pods, Rajbansis, and Santhals were the major groups included in the list.⁴⁵ The recognition of some of the backward communities as “depressed classes” produced a new dimension in the economic, social, and political movements in Bengal. The Namasudras of Bengal, particularly the educated Namasudras, spearheaded

these movements since they were the second largest caste in this category after the Mahishyas and had a long tradition of movement against indignity and discrimination. In the early days of the depressed class movements, Bhishmadev Das proved himself to be a pioneer in the history of Bengal.

As a Member of the Bengal Legislature

Bhishmadev Das contested the Legislative Council elections in 1920, 1923, and 1926 and lost on all occasions. In the Council election of 1920, a caste-Hindu candidate defeated him from Faridpur constituency.⁴⁶ Faridpur was a Namasudra-dominated district among the Hindus. The primary reason behind Bhishmadev's defeat was that most of the Namasudras of Faridpur did not have voting rights because of higher property qualifications. In the election of 1920, there were mistakes in the electoral roll, and it was alleged that many voters could not turn up at the polling stations in time to record their votes because the polling centres were selected at distant and inconvenient places.⁴⁷ Bhishmadev lost the 1923 election in the Faridpur South Constituency. Mohini Mohan Das, a contestant from the Namasudra community standing for the Swarajya Party, defeated him and won the election. In this contest, Mohini Mohan Das obtained 3,117 votes, whereas Bhishmadev Das stood second, obtaining 1,716 votes. The number of polled votes in this constituency was 5,200 out of a total of 14,273.⁴⁸ Bhishmadev Das again lost the 1926 council election to a caste-Hindu candidate.⁴⁹ In those days, constituencies were earmarked as Muhammadan and non-Muhammadan. No constituency was reserved for the depressed classes. Only a small segment of the depressed classes, including the East Bengal Namasudras, got voting rights. For this reason, it was very difficult to win an electoral battle for a candidate like Bhishmadev Das, who had an oppositional socio-political dynamism against the hegemony of the *Bhadralok* Hindus. The victory of a candidate with upper-caste Hindu support was certain. Among the depressed classes, Bhishmadev was not only an advocate by profession but also very proficient in English. Being an automatic choice, he got a nomination by the government to represent the depressed classes of Bengal in the Legislative Council in 1921. He had witnessed the difficulties of the marginalised Namasudras of southern Faridpur and other parts of lower Bengal. This is why he repeatedly pointed out the deprivations, discriminations, and sufferings of Namasudras and appealed to the government for their redress. His performance as a representative of the depressed classes on the floor of the House was highly laudable. During his tenure in the Legislature, Bhishmadev proved his calibre, commitment, and overall capacity to become a true representative of the marginal communities in Bengal.

Education for the Depressed Classes and Bhishmadev Das

Illiteracy was a curse among most of the depressed classes of Bengal. The upper-caste Hindus did not welcome the spread of education among

them. The census of 1921 registered the male literacy rates per thousand (aged 5 and over) among the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas as 729, 822, and 626, respectively. The similar ratios among the Bagdis, Bauris, Chasi Kaibarttas, Dhobas, Haris, Malos, Muchis, Namasudras, Pods, and Rajbansis were 45, 12, 245, 159, 40, 93, 38, 159, 260, and 122 respectively.⁵⁰ In comparison to the *Bhadralok Hindu* castes, the depressed classes of Bengal remained far behind in terms of male literacy. As a member of the Legislative Council, Bhishmadev Das possessed a special enthusiasm for education and employment for the depressed classes. On July 4, 1921, he raised a question to the Minister in charge of the Education Department:

“Will the Hon’ble the Minister in charge of the Department of Education be pleased to state what steps Government are taking for spreading education among the depressed classes?”⁵¹

The reply to the question of Bhishmadev Das was very dismal so far as the education of the depressed classes was concerned. The Education Minister, Mr. P.C. Mitter, reported that the government had been incurring only 46,457.00 rupees as recurring expenditure for spreading education among these classes. Out of which a grant of rupees 3,000.00 had been allocated to the Secretary, Depressed Classes Society, rupees 24,000.00 for the education of the Santhals, rupees 5,400.00 for educating Dai girls, rupees 3,876.00 for the tea-garden schools, and rupees 6,480.00 for the education of factory children.⁵² The government adopted no plan for spreading education among the numerous depressed classes like the Namasudras, Rajbansis, Bagdis, Pods, and Mahishyas of Bengal. In reply to Bhishmadev’s question raised on September 2, 1921, Henry Wheeler, the Minister of Education, stated in the House that the population of the depressed classes was over seven million in the province but could not give any statistics regarding how many of them had passed the matriculation and obtained intermediate, bachelor, and master degrees in arts and science during the last ten years.⁵³ During the discussion on the budget in the Legislative Council on February 28, 1922, Bhishmadev Das alleged, “It is to be regretted that the Budget makes no adequate provision for the spread of education among the backward or depressed classes.”⁵⁴

Bhishmadev had knowledge about the widespread illiteracy among the Namasudras and wanted the government should adopt appropriate measures so that the poor Namasudra boys get an education at their doorsteps without the malice and opposition from the caste Hindus. To lodge a complaint with the government, he asked the Education Minister in the Council on November 20, 1922, for a statement that would contain: (i) the number of Middle English, Upper Primary, and Lower Primary schools in the district of Faridpur; (ii) the total number of Namasudra students in the district and the number of such students in each of those schools; (iii) which of these were managed mainly by the Namasudras with or without grants-in-aid from the Government and the District Board; and (iv) the

amount of monthly grants received by each students. From the written statement of the Education Minister, it was known that the aggregated numbers of Lower Primary Schools, Upper Primary Schools, and Middle English Schools for boys and girls in Faridpur District were 1,430 and 807 respectively.⁵⁵ The statement also disclosed that the total number of Namasudra students, comprising boys and girls, in the district was 11,940. According to the statement of the Minister, the following schools were found to be mainly managed by the Namasudras in Faridpur District:

Table I: Schools managed mainly by the Namasudras in Faridpur District with or without grants-in-aid from the Government⁵⁶

Sl No	Classes of schools mainly managed by the Namasudras	Number of schools
1	Aided Middle English Schools	8
2	Unaided Middle English Schools	5
3	Aided Upper Primary Schools	9
4	Aided Board Primary Schools for Boys	15
5	Aided Lower Primary Schools for Boys	117
6	Unaided Lower Primary Schools for Boys	37
7	Aided Lower Primary Schools for Girls	40
8	Unaided Lower Primary Schools for Girls	23

Bhishmadev knew that the spread of education among the poor and illiterate Namasudras could not be possible without the patronage of the government. To draw the attention of the government to this issue, he asked the Education Minister on November 28, 1922, what steps were being taken to improve the condition of the Namasudra schools in the Gopalganj Sub-Division of Faridpur District. In reply, the departmental minister assured him that the matter was under consideration by the government.⁵⁷ In the Namasudra areas of Bakarganj and Dacca, their local leaders founded some schools in their own capacity. However, it was very difficult to run these schools without any grant from the government. On January 30, 1923, Bhishmadev Das demanded a status report from the Minister of Education on the names of primary, middle, and high schools in Bakarganj and Dacca Districts mainly managed by the Namasudras, together with the amount of grants received by them, if any, and the number of Namasudra students in those districts. The minister, however, bypassed his queries, just saying that the questions were vague and covered a wide field of inquiry.⁵⁸ The objective of Bhishmadev was to point out the negligence of the government with respect to education for the depressed classes through a questionnaire in the legislature and demand the spread of education among them. In the dreary

and unwholesome swamps of the extreme south of the Faridpur district, the numerical strength of the Namasudras among the depressed classes was large.⁵⁹ The Namasudras were the biggest Hindu community in other parts of south-eastern Bengal as well. It is evident why Bhishmadev repeatedly referred to the Namasudras while raising his voice for the welfare of the depressed classes. Bhishmadev always encouraged the parents of the backward communities to send their children to school.⁶⁰ He was a member of the Faridpur District Board for a longer period of time. With his sincere and utmost efforts, he got recognition for many primary and English schools in the district from the government.⁶¹

Grant of Stipends for the Depressed Class Students

Bhishmadev Das wanted the poor and needy depressed class students should get stipends from the government. But the government was not sincere enough to sanction stipends for them. To raise his demand in the Council, Bhishmadev wanted to know from the minister of the department when the students of the backward classes would get stipends. He also raised a question about whether the minister-in-charge had any knowledge that the students of the depressed classes in Madras were exempted from the payment of examination fees and whether the government was desirous of allowing similar concessions in Bengal. The departmental minister, however, could not give him any assurance on behalf of the government.⁶² On February 26, 1923, Bhishmadev Das burst out with anger on the floor of the House and accused the Education Minister of not taking any bold steps for the removal of illiteracy and the progress of education among the depressed classes. He pointed out that the government had reduced the grant for the improvement of education for the backward classes from Rs. 30,000.00 to Rs. 20,000.00. He also expressed his doubt on the intention of the government about the expenditure of this "paltry sum" of money during the financial year. He lodged a protest against the government for the allocation of this small sum of money for the improvement of the education of the backward classes, including the Santhals, and supported the proposal of Babu Nirode Behary Mullick, another depressed class M.L.C. from the Namasudra community, for an annual grant of five lakh rupees for the progress of the depressed classes' education.⁶³

Accommodation for the Depressed Class Students

The students belonging to the "untouchable" communities were not allowed in the hostels of the Hindus. For this reason, the majority of these marginalised students would stay in the houses of their own communities in towns like Calcutta and Dacca. Their leaders, particularly the Namasudra leaders, had been demanding separate hostels for boys of their caste, requiring accommodation in the cities for higher education. The colonial government considered their demand sympathetically. It is found from a question and answer session of the Bengal Council on September 1, 1914,

that the government had already established special hostels for the Namasudras at Dacca, Barakandi (Faridpur), and Barisal, for the Jugis at Chittagong and Comilla, and the Rajbansis at Rangpur.⁶⁴ But a similar requirement for these hostels was being felt in other parts of the *mufassal* towns. The number of students from the Namasudra community and other similar categories was increasing day by day in schools and colleges in Eastern Bengal. As a representative of the depressed classes, Bishmadev Das was aware of their difficulties in getting accommodation. He exerted his efforts so that the government came forward and set up more hostels for the depressed classes in other parts of Eastern Bengal and their difficulty could be removed. In the Bengal Legislative Council, he demanded the opening of special hostels for the depressed class students in Daulatpur, Pirojpur, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Mary Gopinathpur, Bhanga, and Faridpur.⁶⁵

Efforts of Bishmadev Das for Public Employment of the Depressed Classes

Bishmadev Das was aware of the discrimination against the depressed classes in government employment. The Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas had a monopoly on government departments and local bodies. The census data of 1901 reported a dismal picture in the matter of government employment among low-caste Hindus. From the following tabular representation, the real picture becomes explicit:

Table II: Government Employment of the *Hindu Bhadrals* and the lower castes in Bengal (including the Divisions of Patna, Bhagalpur, Orissa, Chota Nagpur and Feudatory States)⁶⁶

Caste & Occupation	Officers of Govt.	Clerks, Inspector, etc.	Clerical service under Local Bodies.	Professors, Teachers, etc.
Brahman	326	6308	536	9722
Baidya	88	1033	74	838
Kayastha	372	9915	605	10881
Bagdi	0	7	0	19
Bauri	0	0	0	0
Chandal (Namasudra)	0	9	0	70
ChasiKaibartta	3	349	23	1204
Dhoba	0	16	0	32
Hari	0	0	0	0
Malo	0	0	0	0
Muchi	0	0	0	0
Pod	0	0	0	0
Rajbansi	0	17	0	246

Barring a very few exceptions, the Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas had been occupying almost all the public appointments, and the government took no proper measures for the employment of the depressed classes in Bengal during the past 20 years. After being nominated to the Legislative Council, Bhishmadev Das drew the attention of the government in this direction. Earlier in 1907, Bhismadev called on the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam as a member of a Namasudra delegation with the prayer of employment for the Namasudras. On September 2, 1921, Bhishmadev Das raised a question to the Member of the Appointment Department in the Council regarding the number and percentage of the appointments held by the depressed class members in the Bengal Civil Service (Executive and Judicial), Subordinate Executive Police Service, and in the Departments of Registration, Education, Excise, Agriculture, and Co-operative. In reply to his query, Sir Henry Wheeler, the Minister-in-Charge, stated, "The information is not on record."⁶⁷ Again, on February 20, 1922, Bhishmadev Das raised the following questionnaire to the member in charge of the Appointment Department:

- (a) How many graduates and undergraduates of the depressed classes applied in 1920 for appointment in the Bengal Civil Service, Subordinate Civil Service, Registration Department and Police Department and how many of them have been appointed?
- (b) Will the Hon'ble the member be pleased to state whether Government contemplate making suitable provision for adequate representation of the depressed classes in the various departments of Government service?

In reply to the queries of Bhishmadev Das, the member in charge of the Appointment Department, Henry Wheeler, reported that 32 depressed-class graduates and undergraduates had applied directly to the local government in 1920 for appointments. Out of these 32 aspirants, 10 candidates applied for the Bengal Civil Service, 20 candidates for the Subordinate Service, and 2 for the post of Sub-Registrars. Wheeler further reported that two depressed-class candidates were appointed to the Subordinate Service, one as Sub-Registrar, and one to the Bengal Judicial Service.⁶⁸ Regarding the government's desirability to make suitable provisions for adequate representation of the depressed classes in the various departments of government, Henry Wheeler asserted that the government desired to give an equal and fair opportunity to all communities, irrespective of caste and creed, with sympathy to the members of the depressed classes who would prove to be competent. He also reported that one member from the Mahishya community and another from the Namasudras had been appointed to the Subordinate Civil Service.⁶⁹

Bhishmadev Das knew that though the government had officially

deleted the "Chandal" epithet from them and approved their Namasudra caste name, the discrimination of their caste in the case of government employment continued. Bhishmadev wanted to uncover the deprivation of the educated Namasudras in government employment through his sharpened questions raised in the House. From the reply of Mr. H.L. Stephenson, the Member in Charge of the Police Department, to the queries of Bhishmadev Das in the Council on August 23, 1922, it was known that no Namasudra candidate was appointed as police sub-inspector in Bengal, though 27 from this community applied for the post in the last 4 years. Mr. H.L. Stephenson further stated in the House that the Namasudra candidates were not selected for the post of police sub-inspector either on account of their educational or physical disqualifications or because other candidates were considered to be more suitable.⁷⁰ On the same day, Bhishmadev Das raised another question to the Education Minister, asking him how many Namasudra candidates applied for the post of sub-registrar last year and the reason why none of them were nominated for the post. The Minister replied in the House that the two applications from the Namasudra candidates for the post of sub-registrar were not considered for appointment because those were nominated neither by the Commissioners of Divisions nor by the Inspector-General of Registration, Bengal, under the rules for appointment in the Registration Department.⁷¹ In 1922, the government introduced restricted competition among nominated candidates for the Provincial Services. Under the new system, the selection was required to be so made that not less than one-sixth of candidates shall be members of either Anglo-Indians or members of the depressed classes. A selection committee was constituted for this purpose, with Bhishmadev Das as one of its members. When the results of the competitive examination came out, it was realised that the depressed-class candidates were unable to compete with the Anglo-Indian candidates. Bhishmadev Das, therefore, criticised the rules for not providing adequate safeguards for the recruitment of the depressed classes.⁷²

Depressed Class Politics and Bhishmadev Das

Bhishmadev Das was one of the early leaders among the Namasudra caste. From the days of his early childhood, Bhishmadev experienced the outpouring of hatred of the caste Hindus towards his community. On the contrary, he got fair treatment from his European teachers during his studies at Dacca Collegiate School. From them, Bhishmadev learned the English language and the value of discipline in life.⁷³ He noticed impartiality in the judgment of the British civilians when he met them as a member of Namasudra delegations on different occasions. Bhishmadev Das joined his hands in depressed caste politics side by side with his practice in law. In those days, only a few of the Namasudras had knowledge of the Western language. Despite his busy schedule in the courts of law, he came forward to take part in depressed caste politics. In 1917, the All India Depressed

Classes Association was formed, which inspired many of these groups. Bhishmadev Das believed that the welfare of the depressed classes was possible through prayers and criticisms of the government. He had never encouraged any movement leading to the opposition of the British side by side with the caste Hindus. On August 29, 1921, Bhishmadev Das supported the proposal of Mr. D.C. Ghose, a member of the Council from 24-Parganas Rural South Constituency, and conveyed his "loyal and dutiful homage" to His Majesty the King Emperor on behalf of the depressed classes of Bengal.⁷⁴ Manindranath Mandal, a leader from the Poudra (Pod) community, made contact with many leaders, including Bhishmadev Das, and proposed establishing a general organisation of the depressed classes. Through his initiatives, the leaders of the depressed classes held a meeting on February 5, 1922, at the City College Hall in Calcutta with Bhishmadev Das as the President. Manindranath Mandal was the main organiser of this meeting. Leaders from all the major "depressed" castes addressed this meeting.⁷⁵ When the Congress called the non-co-operation movement against the British government, the Namasudras and other depressed classes remained aloof from the anti-British movement. Guruchand Thakur advised the Namasudras not to take part in the non-cooperation movement.⁷⁶ Before deciding not to join the movement against the government, Guruchand Thakur might have taken the suggestion of the educated Namasudras and his close associates in the province, like Bhishmadev Das.⁷⁷ Bhishmadev was a favourite of Guruchand on account of his personality, oratory, and knowledge of the English language.⁷⁸ He came forward and became a leader of the marginal classes, even when depressed class politics was in its infancy.

The leaders of the depressed classes of Bengal, especially those belonging to the Namasudra community, were maintaining contact with pan-Indian organisations. The All India Depressed Classes Conference was held in Delhi in 1926. Bhishmadev Das, together with two other Namasudra leaders, Birat Chandra Mandal and Dhananjoy Ray, participated in this conference.⁷⁹ Bhishmadev was the leader of the Namasudras, who began movements for the dignity and rights of their community at a time when they were designated as Chandals. He always came forward for the protection of the interests of his community. In 1930, the All Bengal Namasudra Conference was held in Khulna Sadar town. Bhishmadev Das actively participated in this convention. Guruchand Thakur presided at the meeting, and it was resolved that the emancipation of the depressed classes like the Namasudras would not be achieved until and unless they got their share of the political power.⁸⁰ Despite his busy schedule with his clients and arguing in courts of law on their behalf, he took part in and led the early depressed class movements in Bengal.

Demand for Amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1855

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the occupation of the

majority of the Namasudras was the cultivation of land. From the 1911 census, it was found that out of 1,000 Namasudras, 815 persons were engaged in boating and cultivation in Western and Central Bengal. In North and East Bengal, the occupation of 725 Namasudras out of 1,000 was boating and cultivation.⁸¹ Though 77% of their population were cultivators, the majority of them were very poor and possessed only small areas of land. In those days, the *zamindars* severely oppressed the *raiyats* in various ways. Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua sect, and his family members were evicted from their ancestral inhabitancy at Safaldanga by the local *zamindar*, Suryamani Majumdar, on a fabricated charge of default in payment of arrear rent.⁸² Bhismadev Das was an advocate by profession and pleaded on behalf of the *raiyats* against the *zamindars* in courts of law in the matter of disputes related to land.⁸³ He knew very well about the flaws of the Bengal Tenancy Act that would support the whims of the landlords. He also had knowledge of what provisions of this Act were required to be amended for the protection of the interests of the poor and helpless tenants, who were predominantly Muslims and Namasudras in Eastern Bengal. On July 7, 1921, Bhismadev moved a resolution in the Council of Bengal with a proposal to form a committee that would look into and report what amendments were necessary in the existing Tenancy Act. He mentioned the shortcomings in the Bengal Tenancy Act and pointed out how the administrators could not protect the *raiyats* against the oppression of the *zamindars*. He complained, "The Act is silent as to the effect of dispossession by landlord, and the Courts in Bengal have felt compelled to apply the English law on the subject." He further clarified in the House that the absence of any provision for occupancy rights in areas that were not part of any village had proved a great hardship for the cultivators. He argued forcefully in the House in favour of the amendments in the Act for providing "a higher and better status to the *raiyats*" on their land. He also reminded the members of the House about the "upveals suffered in Russia and the neighbouring countries" and warned that it was high time to reform the Bengal Tenancy Act with a "bold and vigorous step to save the country from a violent convulsion." Bhismadev, the son of a cultivator, called for the amendments in the Bengal Tenancy Act to protect the *raiyats* from the "oppression of the *zamindars*" and from the "clutches of rapacious money-lenders."⁸⁴

Protest against Human Indignity

It was common practice in Bengal that the police would take the alleged offenders through public places by tying them with a rope around their waists after arrest. It was a very disgraceful act on the part of the police. Bhismadev opposed this inhuman practice and questioned on the floor of the Council on July 7, 1921, "Will the Hon'ble the Member be pleased to state whether such a practice exists in any other civilized country?" and demanded its cessation. In the civil courts of Bengal, a new form was

introduced where the heading "Caste" was inserted while recording the depositions of witnesses. Bhisimadev was against the insertion of the new heading where a witness was required to disclose his caste. During those days, the upper-caste Hindus despised the lower castes and treated them with indignity. The Namasudras and other marginalised Hindus knew it very well, and most of them hid their caste in society in order to avoid humility. It was a very embarrassing situation for them to become witnesses to the declaration of their castes. To lodge his protest, Bhisimadev Das raised a query in the Council on whether the member in charge of the Judicial Department knew what the reasons were behind the recording of the caste of a witness in the civil courts. He also informed the House that the witnesses of the depressed classes might feel a delicacy in stating their caste in open court, and the practice tended to accentuate caste distinction. Abd-Ur-Rahim, the departmental minister, just avoided the issue by stating that the High Court had considered references to the caste of parties or of witnesses as unavoidable and that the government could have no role in it.⁸⁵

Bhisimadev's Response to the Suffering of the Cultivating Class

The peasants residing in the *bil* areas of the *Pargana* Talihati in Faridpur District had been suffering from severe distress on account of crop failure caused by early flooding in low-lying tracts. But the Bengal government neither provided any financial assistance nor paid any attention to them. As their representative, Bhisimadev criticised the government by raising questions in the Council on July 4, 1921. He wanted to know from the Irrigation Minister, Maharajadhiraja of Burdwan, what steps the government had been taking to prevent the early flooding of the lowlands in the *bil* areas of *Pargana* Talihati in Faridpur District that resulted in repeated failures of crops for the last eight or nine years. The reply of the departmental minister was very insensible for the poor peasants when he stated that the Irrigation Department had no information about the early flooding in the *bil* areas of the Faridpur district during the last eight or nine years.⁸⁶

The agricultural crops of the cultivators were damaged almost every year due to inundation on both sides of the Tentulia-Amkandi *khal* under *Pargana* Talihati and its neighbourhood under Faridpur District. Bhisimadev Das knew the agony of the peasants of this tract, who were predominantly Namasudras and Muslims. He brought the issue to the government for a solution. On February 27, 1922, Bhisimadev drew the attention of the irrigation minister to the blockage of the Tentulia *khal* at its entrance into the *bil* route canal. He informed the House about the loss of the agriculturists and demanded an inquiry and appropriate steps from the government so that the agricultural condition of these areas would improve.⁸⁷ On November 27, 1922, Bhisimadev Das wanted to know from the Irrigation Minister whether the government was contemplating the opening of a sufficient number of sluice gates in the embankment on the

southern bank of the Madaripur *Bil* route canal in order to maintain, during the rains, the same water level on both sides of the embankment. The departmental minister, Maharajadhiraja of Burdwan, assured Bhishmadev that the government was contemplating allowing sufficient waterway in the southern embankment of the Madaripur *Bil* route to keep the canal water level as low as possible.⁸⁸ Bhishmadev Das reminded the Irrigation Minister on January 24, 1923, about the urgent necessity of excavation of the Tentulia-Sripur *khal* and opening more sluice gates in the embankment on the south bank of the Madaripur *Bil* Route canal. The concerned minister recognised the demand of Bhishmadev and assured him that the matter was under consideration by the government.⁸⁹ Bhishmadev Das wanted the work on the soil, not the assurances. This is why he wanted a reply from the Minister in charge of the Department of Local Self-Government on February 23, 1923, on whether the Minister was aware that it was an urgent necessity to excavate the Tentulia-Sripur *khal*, for which the inhabitants of the adjoining villages had submitted a petition to the District Magistrate and Collector of Faridpur to take action under the Agricultural and Sanitary Improvements Act. The departmental minister, Sir Surendra Nath Banerjee, had only given him an assurance to the effect that an inquiry regarding the excavation of the *khal* would be taken up next April.⁹⁰ Bhishmadev had never forgotten the demands of the marshy tract peasants. The government later excavated afresh the Tentulia-Sripur *khal* and Madaripur *Bil* route canal in recognition of his repeated demands.⁹¹

Last Days of Bhishmadev Das

Bhishmadev was a successful lawyer. He earned much from his profession and bought large areas of land. He built a house on his land, measuring about one acre, at Gopalganj, where he lived with his 15 to 16 tenants. Later, he purchased two and a half *anna* shares of an estate, including the village of Orakandi. The people under his *zamindari* called him "*adhainar zamindar*." But he had never oppressed the peasants as a *zamindar*. On the contrary, he always helped the poor students with money for their higher education. On account of the burden of managing his estate, a large family, and the constraints of time because of his brisk law practice, Bhishmadev could not continue his political activity. He withdrew himself from active politics after 1930 and concentrated on social services and his law practice, fighting in civil courts on behalf of the poor peasants against the tyrant *zamindars*. When India was divided, Bhishmadev had already become an elderly person. After independence, he did not leave East Bengal and stayed in his home town of Gopalganj with his small family, including his grandson, Harinarayan. His brothers and other family members migrated to India after 1947. He died there in the year 1954.⁹²

Many leaders from the backward classes of Bengal have launched their movements against the hegemony of the upper-caste Hindus since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Bhishmadev Das of Orakandi was one of

them. For his own caste, Bhishmadev appealed to the British government for the deletion of the "Chandal" stigma, demanded more educational opportunities for the Namasudras, and claimed a share of government employment for them. When he entered the Council, Bhishmadev demanded occupancy rights for the *raiyats* and the cessation of oppression by *zamindars*. He repeatedly demanded the dredging of old canals and the setting of sluice gates thereto to save the poor peasants from the destruction of their crops by floods and moved to the government for financial assistance. Bhishmadev sharply criticised the government for its failure to set up schools in areas of marginalised castes and raised demands for their stipends and exemption from examination fees. He also lodged his protest for not providing adequate public employment for the depressed classes and urged the government to open separate hostels for their students in *mafassal* towns. In this way, Bhishmadev Das made a great contribution to the early movements of the marginal communities in colonial Bengal for their dignity and rights.

Notes and References (End Notes)

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- 2 J.M. Pringle and A.H. Kemm, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Nadia 1918-1926*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta (1928), p. 22
- 3 W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. V., Trubner & Co., London (1875), p. 285
- 4 Risley, Vol. I., pp. 43, 313-316, 360, 499; Risley, Vol. II., Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta (1892), p. 98
- 5 L.S.S. O'Malley, *Census of India, 1911*, Vol. V., Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I. Report, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta (1913), footnote, p. 229
- 6 Interview of Harinarayan Das, grandson of Bhishmadev Das, aged about 90 years, taken by Chanchal Chowdhury at 9, Shibtala Lane, Kolkata-700066, India, on 20.08.2023, 30.09.2023, and 26.10.2023. Harinarayan is the elder son of Bhupaldev Das, the elder son of Bhishmadev. Harinarayan, a highly educated person, was physically able and possessed sound mental health when he was interviewed. He lived with his grandfather, Bhishmadev Das, for a long period until his death. Considering his age, he was asked the same questions about his grandfather on three different days of the interview, and he always gave the same answers to the questionnaire (hereinafter "Interview of Harinarayan").
- 7 Mahananda Halder, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (in Bengali), Thakurnagar (2006), pp. 156, 163
- 8 Guruchand Thakur was born in the year 1846. Bhishmadev's elder brother, Kamalakanta Das, married the elder sister of Satyabhama Devi, the wife of Guruchand, and during the interview, Harinarayan Das stated that Bhishmadev was not less than 15 years younger than his elder brother. Considering these, it is deduced that Bhishmadev Das was born around the

- year 1870.
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 - 10 Kapilkrishna Biswas, *Guruchand O Tar Onugamider Shiksha Andolon* (in Bengali), Nikhil Bharat Prakashani, Ganti Thakurnarar (2009), p. 19
 - 11 Interview of Harinarayan; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh* (in Bengali), U.M. Printers, Calcutta (1997), p. 200
 - 12 Interview of Harinarayan
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 - 16 Interview of Harinarayan.
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 - 19 Naresh Chandra Das, op. cit., p. 164
 - 20 Interview of Harinarayan
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 - 22 W.W. Hunter, op. cit., Vol. V., p. 285
 - 23 Letter from *Magistrate of Furreedpore to Commissioner of Dacca Division* vide No. 340, dated Khalia Khal, the 8th April 1873, para.15; W.W. Hunter, op. cit., Vol. V., p. 285
 - 24 Leaflet dated 20th May, 2012 on '*The 1873 Movement for Dignity and Equality before Law*' published by Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal.
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 - 26 Interview of Harinarayan
 - 27 Ratan Kumar Biswas, *Namasudra Movements in Bengal (1872-1947)*, Progressive Book Forum, Kolkata (2010), p. 29
 - 28 L.S.S. O'Malley, op. cit., p. 443
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 - 32 Naresh Chandra Das, op. cit., p. 56; Mahananda Halder, op. cit., p. 229; Kapilkrishna Biswas, op. cit., p. 47
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 - 34 C.S. Mead, *The NamaSudras and other Addresses*, Hussey & Gillingham, Printers and Publishers, Adelaide (1911), p. 8
 - 35 Interview of Harinarayan
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 - 37 Mahananda Halder, op. cit., pp. 214-219; Naresh Chandra Das, op. cit., pp. 123-125
 - 38 Mahananda Halder, op. cit., pp. 173-174
 - 39 Ibid, p.403
 - 40 Interview of Harinarayan
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- 123-124
- 42 Kapilkrishna Biswas, *op. cit.*, p. 27
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- 45 W.H. Thompson, *Census of India, 1921*, Vol. V., Bengal Part I., Report, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta (1923), pp. 365-366
- 46 Minute on the "depressed classes" by M.B. Mullick, M.L.C., Member, Bengal Provincial Franchise Committee, dated 12th March 1932, *Indian Franchise Committee*, Vol. II., Central Publication Branch, Calcutta (1932), p. 254
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- 50 W.H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 306
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- 52 *Ibid*, pp. 91-92
- 53 BLCP, Vol. IV., BSBD, Calcutta (1921), pp. 350-351
- 54 BLCP, Vol. VII. No.3, BSBD, Calcutta (1922), p. 92
- 55 BLCP, Vol. X., BSBD, pp. 73-74
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- 59 W.S. Wells, Magistrate and Collector of Furreedpur in H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal 1872*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta (1872), Appendix B, p. VI
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- 77 Bhishmadev was not only an associate of Guruchand but also a relative

- residing in the same village. Bhisimadev's elder brother, Kamalakanta, and Guruchand were brother-in-laws by their matrimonial relations. Kamalanta's wife, Sabitri Biswas, was the elder sister of Satyabhama Biswas, wife of Guruchand Thakur, and both of them were the daughters of Ramkrishna Biswas of village Satbaria. Interview of Harinarayan; Naresh Chandra Das, *op. cit.*, p. 55
- 78 Interview of Harinarayan
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- 80 Nityananda Halder, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar* (in Bengali), Thakurnagar (1393 B.S.), pp. 142-143; Naresh Chandra Das, *op. cit.*, p. 58; Mahananda Halder, *op. cit.*, pp. 439-444
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