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# The South Australian Baptists in Colonial Bengal: A Historical Analysis of the Role of C. S. Mead in the Namasudra Movement

**Jyoti Biswas**[1]

[1]Assistant Professor
Department of English
Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata,West Bengal, India
Email:jbiswas.cu2015@gmail.com

*Abstract:The aim of the present paper is to historicise the role of the South Australian Baptists among the Namasudras in the formerly Eastern Bengal in the colonial period. In the background of the 1905 anti-British agitation led by the upper-castes in Calcutta, the Namasudras, one of the Dalit castes in Bengal not only distanced themselves from the anti-British agitation but also expressed their willingness to welcome the Australian Baptists to work among them. The leader in this missionary intervention was Dr. Cecil Silas Mead. From 1893 to 1921, his association with the Namasudras at Faridpur, especially Orakandi village resulted in the educational, social and cultural mobilization of the Namasudras there. Following a historical analysis and a discourse analysis, the present paper documents this missionary intervention among the Namasudras on one hand and evaluates the role of Dr. Cecil Silas Mead among the Namasudras at Orakandi on the other. If the modernization of the Namasudra caste became one of the outcomes of the Dalit movement in colonial Bengal, it is argued that this phenomenon was accentuated because of the missionary intervention among them in the colonial period.*

*Keywords: Australian Baptists, caste, Dalit, Dr. C. S. Mead, Missionary, Namasudra etc*

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## Introduction

The encounter between Christianity and India has a long history and a complex outcome. Scholars of different disciplines have interpreted it, presenting multi-dimensional perspectives. Firstly, it is seen as a distinct policy of the British colonialism to legitimise the Christian

nationalism and Evangelical commercialisation in India.[1] Secondly, it describes Christianity as an offshoot of the cultural imperialism that destroyed the harmonious fabric of the Indian religious tradition by introducing conversion of the natives to Christianity.[2] The third dimension holds the view that the charitable works of the Christian missionaries for the marginalised castes and tribes brought a radical change among them in the form of an access to modern education and government employability in the colonial period. It introduced literacy and rationality to the former Untouchables and the indigenous groups of people.[3, 4, 5] In continuation of the third dimension of the Christian intervention in India, some scholars have argued that it laid the foundation of the colonial modernity of the Dalits. It began in two ways: the recruitment of the former 'Untouchables' in the British army and the charitable and educational works of the Christian missionaries among them.[6, 7, 8] Later on, the Dalit modernity took a radical turn in the form of anti-caste movement across India. Out of the three interpretations outlined above, the present paper considers that the Dalit appropriation of the colonial modernity was accentuated because of the charitable works of the Christian missionaries among the Dalits.

The role of the Christian missionary associations in relation to the upliftment of the marginalised castes in colonial Bengal is the focus area in the present paper. The missionary intervention in the life of the Dalit castes in colonial Bengal was inseparably related to the caste system in Bengal and the caste-based marginalization of the Dalits. Sarma (1980) historicises the initial phase of the caste system in Bengal and commented that the reign of king Ballal Sena who ruled Bengal between 1158 CE to 1179 CE saw the climax of the development of the caste-based hierarchical structure in the society. During this time, the system of Kulinism was introduced and strengthened in the society. Sarma (1980) observes "The Vallala Charita recorded the heroic deeds of King Vallala Sena, and it provides us with the caste system of the society. The codes of Vallal Sena exist to this day and uphold the foundations of Bengali caste regulations".[9] The root of this system is the practice of untouchability and the groups of people who have been excommunicated for being untouchables began raising their voice against the caste-based hierarchy since the Bhakti movement in the fifteenth century in medieval Bengal. The anti-untouchability movement reached its peak in the colonial period when the spread of education among the marginalized castes paved for them a path to modernization.[10, 11] In other words, the caste-based hierarchical structure in Bengal was the root cause of the marginalization of the Dalits, and the missionaries sought to capitalize upon this phenomenon in different ways in the colonial period. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, phenomenon of the marginalization of Dalit castes offered a fertile ground for the Christian missionaries to initiate the charitable activities among them. One of such groups of people was Namasudra caste, and the particular missionary association that took special interest among the Namasudras in the erstwhile East Bengal was the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society. The man who was the centre of this missionary intervention was Dr. Cecil Silas Mead (1866-1940). From the time of his arrival at Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) in 1893 till his departure to Australia in 1921, the Namasudra movement became mature and the poor Namasudras at Faridpur became educated, organized and politically mobilized. This paper historicizes the intervention of the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society among the Namasudras and

evaluates the role of Dr. C. S. Mead in the historic Namasudra movement, with especial focus on the educational reform at Orakandi village which was the centre of this movement. The historicity of this neglected episode is based on the three primary texts: *The Nama Sudras: and Other Addresses* (1911), a series of lectures by C. S. Mead himself; *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* or 'The Narrative of the Life and Work of Sri Guruchand Thakur' (1943), a verse hagiography written on the life and work of the Namasudra leader Gurucharan Biswas (1846-1937) by poet Mahananda Haldar; and the autobiography of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur titled *Atmacharit ba Purbasmriti* (My Story or Early Memories) (1995). The secondary texts include seminal research works on the Christian missionary services in India, especially Bengal. It is a qualitative research project and the particular method for evaluating the role of C. S. Mead is the historical analysis. Discourse analysis of the primary texts is given importance, constructing a new historical narrative about Christian intervention among the Namasudras in colonial Bengal. This paper also uses visual images of the Mead High School and the Church, taken at Orakandi village, Bangladesh during the fieldwork from January to March, 2023.

## South Australian Baptist Missionary Society

The man who played a crucial role in the formation of the first organized missionary society in Australia was Silas Mead, the first pastor of the Flinders Street Baptist Church in Adelaide. Silas Mead was recommended by Joseph Angus, the then secretary, Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in this noble work.[12] Silas Mead, born, brought up, and educated in England, completed his MA and LLB at Regent's Park. In July 1859, he wrote to Joseph Angus, wishing to serve the non-Christian people in Australia. On July 13, 1861, Silas Mead arrived in Adelaide, Australia. Under Silas Mead's leadership the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society was founded at Flinders Street Baptist Church on November 10, 1864.[13] The South Australian Baptists took serious interest on Indian affairs, especially Bengal, the largest and most important province in the British India. Some notable indigenous converts, such as Kangal Mohan, a powerful man from Namasudra caste who embraced Christianity in 1845 carried out evangelist work among his fellow caste members at Barishal, Bakerganj District, East Bengal.[14] One incident shook the South Australian Baptists from their initial slumber. One indigenous convert, Mr. Panchanon Biswas, a member of Namasudra caste visited Australia in 1880 to get intimated with the Australian Baptists.[15] The visit of Mr. Biswas changed the perception of the Baptists towards the fertile land of Bengal which remained uncultivated yet. The result was the visit of two Australian Baptists, Ellen Arnold and Marie Gilbert to Bengal.[16] Ellen was 24 years old, and Marie was 26. They, under the guidance of Silas Mead, sailed for Faridpur in East Bengal on October 28, 1882. In a conference held at Flinders Street Baptist Church on October 22, 1885, it was decided that five women missionaries would be sent to Bengal. The combination of five women representatives being designated as "The Five Barley Loaves" were Maria Fuller from Victoria, Martha Plested from Queensland, Ruth Wilkin from Victoria, Alice Pappin and Ellen Arnold both from South Australia.[17] It was followed by sending the first two male Baptists to Bengal by Silas Mead. Rev. Arthur Summers went to Bengal in 1887, and Abia Neville in 1891. Both of them were known as "The Two Small Fish".[18]

## Cecil Silas Mead and the Namasudra Movement: Historicity and Significance

Cecil Silas Mead was born on October 18, 1864. His father was Silas Mead and his mother was Annie Staple.[19] At the age of eleven, he was finally baptized. Young Cecil earned his schooling at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide. After completing Bachelor of Arts from Adelaide University, Mead concentrated on medical studies. Cecil secured a first-class degree in MBBS in 1890 and was awarded with a gold medal. In 1891, Cecil was twenty-five years old. He was appointed as a Resident Medical Officer at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. He came to be known as Dr. Cecil Silas Mead.[20]


Fig. 1: Dr. Cecil Silas Mead (1864-1940) of the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society. Courtesy: *From Five Barley Loaves: Australian Baptists in Global Mission, 1864-2010*, p. 22.

The auspicious moment for Cecil came in 1893 when he, after the instruction of his father, sailed for Bengal to join those five missionary sisters and two missionary brothers. Mead was about to take charge of the missionary association founded at Faridpur, East Bengal, which was known as Furreedpore Mission. With his arrival at Faridpur, the fellow missionary brothers and sisters got exalted and rejuvenated. Being twenty-seven years in 1893, Dr. Cecil Silas Mead became popularly known as the beloved "Doctor Sahib" among the natives of Faridpur, East Bengal. Meanwhile Dr. Mead got married to one of the "Five Sisters", Miss Alice Pappin.[21] He, along with others concentrated on serious-and-constructive works, such as foundation of hospitals and missionary schools, training women in handlooms and handicrafts, and most importantly, act of conversion among natives. All these were introduced among the native people who were mostly Namasudras, an untouchable caste in the Brahminical social order in the colonial Bengal. Dr. Mead studied the local conditions in 1895-96, and presented his papers at the Convention of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society. He prescribed for an inclusive missionary activity among the native Namasudras.[22] His medical profession, missionary enthusiasm, close contact and good conduct with the native people, especially the Namasudras earned for him not only a wider popularity at Faridpur, Gopalganj and other adjacent places, but also established a close friendship with some of the Namasudra community leaders,

teachers, and doctors. One among them was a man called Gurucharan Biswas (1846-1937), popularly revered as Guruchand Thakur, a leader of the Namasudras at Orakandi, Gopalganj.

It is recorded that by the time the Australian Baptists began working among the marginalized Namasudras in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century in the formerly East Bengal, their population strength was tremendous: in Faridpur 244,448; in Dacca 204,953; in Bakerganj 261,606; in Jessore 166,966; in Mymensingh 151,495; in Tipperah or Tripura 83, 199; in Noakhali 19,957; and in Pabna 53,313. At the time of 1901 census, Namasudras were the second largest caste group in Bengal.[23] Despite having a large population, they were treated as Untouchables by Brahmins and Kayasthas, the two privileged castes in Bengal. Their social status being untouchable, they were deprived of fundamental rights, such as right to education, right to have religion of their own, right to access the public property, right to choose profession of their own, right to have equal social status and dignity, among others. This led to their social, cultural, and religious marginalization.

In this social scenario, the arrival of the Christian missionaries in their locality introduced a new episode of social and cultural transformation that had not taken place before. It was recorded that by the time the London Baptist missionaries and South Australian Baptist missionaries came to East Bengal, majority of the Namasudras were the followers of Vaishnavism. Baptist Missionary Society established its first missionary centre at Barishal in 1828, and it became active in missionary activities until 1838.[24] Kangal Mohan, a Namasudra was the earliest known native Christian preacher who managed to baptise many of his fellow people. The representatives of the South Australian Baptist Mission founded The Furreedpore Mission centre to accelerate the pace of their charitable works. First, they opened hospitals and schools for the Namasudras. This attracted thousands of natives to join with the missionaries. The major concern of the missionaries was to accomplish the conversion of the natives into Christianity. The native people, however, got benefited from the charitable works of the missionaries.

The respective members of the Furreedpore Mission centre were Dr. C. S. Mead, Alice Mead, Bertha Tuck, and Grace Thomson. They were accompanied by a native Christian, Rev. Akshoy K. Krista-Das. Miss Tuck arrived in Bengal in 1890, three years before Dr. Mead. She and her co-worker Grace Brown were already living at Faridpur and taking active part in helping the young widows in the countryside in different ways. It was Rev. Akshoy K. Krista-Das who was first sent to Orakandi, the centre of the Namasudra movement for introducing the missionary works already undertaken to the Namasudras.[25] The Furreedpore Mission's encounter with Orakandi was an unexpected aftermath of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Since both Muslims and Namasudras opposed the anti-Partition agitation led by the upper-caste politicians, like Surendranath Bannerji in Calcutta, a pro-British environment was created at that time temporarily. Dr. Mead was reported that Namasudras did not support the Calcutta-based anti-Government protest, and they were eager to welcome the missionaries to come and work among them.[26] It was Miss Bertha Tuck who made a fruitful contact with some Namasudra representatives at Orakandi in 1906.[27] In the same year, Dr. Mead received a letter from a Namasudra lawyer Mr. Vismadev Das, inviting him to come and inspect the state of

social and economic affairs of the poor Namasudras. In this letter, it was mentioned that a large number of Namasudras were eager to embrace Christianity if the missionaries helped them in their social upliftment. At that time, Mr. Shashibhushan Thakur, the eldest song of Gurucharan was a student, studying in Calcutta. A team of two-members comprising the young lawyer Mr. Vismadev Das and Shashibhushan himself was sent to Dr. Mead in 1906.[28] After their appointment and negotiation, Rev. Akshoy K, Krista-Das was appointed to oversee the state of affairs at Orakandi. With this development, the Furreedpore Mission officially took part in their missionary activities at Orakandi. Orakandi was a remote village centre at Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district. Orakandi was the heart of the *beel* (low-lying swamp) area and is about twenty-four kilometres south of the nearest rail-head. It was in 1906 that Miss Tuck, Dr. Mead, Akshoy K Krista-Das wholeheartedly concentrated on Orakandi. It was Rev. Akshoy K Krista-Das who won the trust of the Namasudras at Orakandi. He soon became a close associate of their leader, Mr. Gurucharan Biswas. In this way, by 1906, the South Australian Baptists developed friendship with the people of Orakandi, Gopalganj. It led to the historic meeting between Dr. Mead and Gurucharan Biswas in 1906. On one hand, Dr. Mead extended his medical service to the common people; on the other hand, Miss Tuck, Mrs. Alice Mead and others worked among the young widows.[29] Meanwhile Gurucharan introduced Dr. Mead with his rural schooling system that he, along with his community teachers developed in the courtyard, in kitchen, and sometimes in cowshed across villages. It impressed Dr. Mead and he recognized Mr. Gurucharan's leadership and ambition. Dr. Mead soon became a close friend of Mr. Gurucharan. He called him 'Mr. Gurucharan Babu'. He played a crucial role as an intermediary between Namasudra caste and the provincial government in Bengal. A series of crucial incidents took place since 1906 that in many ways defined the fate of the Namasudras at Orakandi, Gopalganj, Faridpur, and other adjacent places the following years.


Fig. 2: Orakandi village in Bangladesh (shown in the blue circle). It was the centre of the historic Namasudra movement (1812-1937) in the provincial history of colonial Bengal. Courtesy: *Five Barley Loaves: Australian Baptists in Global Mission, 1864-2010*, p. 1.

Fig. 3: Orakandi Church under the parish of formerly Furreedpore Mission. Founded in 1906, it became the centre of the missionary activity at Orakandi and other adjacent villages. Courtesy: from the author's fieldwork documents dated March 7, 2023.

Reading some excerpts from *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* makes us knowledgeable about the eventful encounter between Dr. Cecil Silas Mead and Gurucharan Biswas. On their scheduled meeting with Dr. Mead, Vismadev Das and Shashibhushan Thakur intimated Dr. Mead about the state of the caste hierarchy in Bengal in the following words:

*O, Dr. Mead, listen to us about the caste system of Bengal,*
*All of them were placed vertically by one divine will.*
*There you find both Hindus and Muslims residing close to each other,*
*But among the so-called Hindus, there is no brotherhood ever.*
*Brahmin, Kayastha, and Baidya call themselves far superior,*
*Nine other castes boast like they are not inferior.*
*Brahmins drink their water, so they are called touchable,*
*What a fate that other castes are disgraced as untouchable.*
*Namasudra caste, being untouchable live with their fate,*
*Being illiterate others dupe them, such a matter of great regret*.[30]

Regarding the deprivation of the right to education of the Namasudras, Gurucharan exposed the social reality of the caste-ridden Bengal to Mead so that this foreigner could understand the plight and misery of the marginalized Namasudras:

*What a misery befallen upon us!*
*All upper castes are against the Namasudra caste.*
*We do not get any place to study beside them,*
*They drive us away from school if we go there to learn.*
*No one gives us any justice against this severe injustice*.[31]

Dr. Mead understood the plight of Namasudra caste and he sought to help them in various ways. Since his primary objective was to initiate baptism among the natives, he addressed the Namasudras in his first meeting in the following words:

*My dear friends, I am your guest in your country,*
*My lord Jesus may show his mercy upon the marginalized,*
*My life and work is moulded with my lord's command.*
*It is strange to see in this country the customs so barbaric.*
*People hate each other in the name of caste.*
*There is no sign of love among the people*
*That we find even among animals.*

*Namasudras seem to be very poor and miserable,*
*No education, no civilization, such a destitute life.*
*Your leader Gurucharan told me in distress,*
*Education for his people is the most important.*
*I held his words in a very high regard,*
*Let me humbly endeavour to do something in your favour.*[32]

Mr. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (1902-1994), the grandson of Gurucharan Biswas, and the founder of the Matua Mahasangha [Matua Association] in West Bengal, India, was a key witness to the Guruchand-Mead encounter at Orakandi. He recounted the works of Dr. Mead at Orakandi and other adjacent places in his autobiography *Atmacharit ba Purbasmriti* (My Story or Early Memories). He has given us a faithful account of how Christian missionaries introduced a new life at Orakandi which was a remote village in formerly eastern Bengal. On the arrival of Christian missionaries at Orakandi, he has written the following words:

> I have seen the people of Orakandi village living their daily life after traditional and old 'customs and manners'. But when Christian missionaries arrived for the first time at Orakandi in 1905-06 and initiated their missionary activities there, a new age began to unfold itself in the entire village. This remote village of Orakandi seemed to have peeled off its old lifestyle, and began a new life. The sprinting tide of educational reforms and new pattern of lifestyle were galloping all over this region.[33]

On the first arrival of Dr. Mead at Orakandi, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur has given the most intimate account:

> Around that time Dr. Mead was residing at Faridpur, dispatching his medical duties among poor people…. Besides, he provided financial help to others to open schools for the boys and girls of marginalized castes…. Once it was decided that Dr. Mead would visit village Orakandi to inspect its social and financial conditions. Orakandi was a swamp village at the south of Faridpur… During monsoon, Dr. Mead came to visit my grandfather (Guruchand Thakur). My father and grandfather welcomed him cordially and arranged his hospitality in our house. Other villagers also attended this meeting to meet Dr. Mead. I did not see any white sahib before this event. We, all friends flocked around and went to see a white sahib. I could not imagine that a person's complexion could be as white as milk. We were looking at him with our mouth wide open in wonder.[34]

Dr. Mead's educational works at Orakandi since 1906 has been depicted faithfully by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur in the following words:

> The first attempt of Dr. Mead was to open a school among the illiterate people of this region so that they could be educated. To fulfill his noble mission, he established a primary school in his house at Orakandi. In January, 1908, first English High school was established and one headmaster and a number of assistant teachers were employed there…. This school was registered under University of Calcutta in 1911.[35]


Fig. 4: Orakandi Mead High School at Orakandi village, founded by Dr. C. S. Mead in 1908. Courtesy: from the author's fieldwork documents dated March 7, 2023.

His autobiography was one of the most valuable written documents for another reason. Before Dr. Mead left Orakandi for Australia in 1921, he wrote a letter to Gurucharan Biswas. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur published this historic document unabridged in his autobiography and made it available for his readers. In this letter, Dr. Mead expressed his gratitude to Namasudra community and to Gurucharan Biswas for the hospitality he received. He wrote about Gurucharan that "Guru Charan Babu is a great leader of outstanding ability and of widespread influence. In the various activities of my missionary life he has made possible many things that without his backing could not have been carried through".[36]

## Conclusion

It is needless to say that Dr. Mead became a trusted friend of the marginalized Namasudras. One of the most significant contributions of Dr. Mead was his loyal intervention with the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Lancelot Hare who visited Faridpur in 1907. Dr. Mead first met the Magistrate to grant permission for arranging a meeting with the Lieutenant-Governor. Thereafter, he arranged everything for Gurucharan's meeting with the Governor. In that meeting, Gurucharan and other representatives of the Namasudra community appealed to the Lieutenant-Governor to abolish their derogatory caste name 'Chandal' and replace it with 'Namasudra'. In the history of entire Namasudra Movement, this incident was the most important and Dr. Mead was the main organizer of this event. The next important event in which Dr. Mead played the role of a mediator was providing an application to the Lieutenant-

Governor Lancelot Hare for seeking government jobs for educated-and-eligible youths of Namasudra caste. The year 1907 was a landmark year in the Namasudra history. Many educated-and-eligible youths, including Shashibhushan Thakur got government jobs in that year. Dr. Mead was the main initiator in this regard. In 1908, the Orakandi Mead High School was established.[37] It was a milestone in the modern history of the community. In 1911 census report, the previous 'Chandal' name was replaced with a new name 'Namasudra' for the entire community. In 1912, Dr. Mead again played the role of mediator between the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Lord Carmichael and Gurucharan Biswas. In that meeting, Gurucharan was awarded with a medal for his service to his people.[38] Dr. Mead himself was awarded with the Kaiser-i-Hind for his missionary works among the Namasudras.[39] In all these development, Dr. Mead appeared as a great messenger of God, who came to this remote village of Orakandi, East Bengal all the way from Australia to promote civilization and modernity among the marginalized people who had always been subjugated and oppressed in caste-ridden Bengal. Dr. Mead departed from Faridpur and eventually India in 1921. He was a multidimensional man, yet a minority figure in the entire history of the Christian missionary services in India, especially Bengal. He was not the kind of illustrious figures, like William Carey and Alexander Duff. He did not even contribute anything significant to Christianity, since the baptism of the Namasudras was a failure. Although there were a few cases of conversion before the arrival of Dr. Mead and during his stay at Faridpur, his ambition of bringing a marginalized-yet-populous community into the Christian fold remained futile. Despite all these odds, the life and career of Dr. C. S. Mead among the Namasudras at Faridpur in erstwhile East Bengal was a boon to them; and the consequence was a social and cultural modernization, especially modern education among the Namasudras.

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