

**Caste Discrimination:An Educational Insight from Sri Sri  
Guruchand Thakur's Philosophy**

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**Abstract:** Caste and social hierarchy divides have existed in Indian culture since antiquity. Within the four-tiered structure of the caste system set by the dominant upper caste of Indian society, comprising Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, the Shudra community occupies the lowest stratum. Similarly, in undivided Bengal, the Dalit community is classified at the bottom strata inside the caste hierarchy set up by the upper-caste society. Those people classified as "Antyaja" or "Untouchable" due to their caste; they are even referred to as 'Chandala.' As a consequence of this societal division, the Dalit community is perpetually subjected to exploitation, oppression, and persecution as a marginalized population. Amidst such circumstances, as a social reformer, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur led a revolutionary and laborious attempt through the Matua movement to bring the untouchables inside the fold of education, which is the major purpose of the current research. On top of that, this research study endeavors to illuminate the life of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur and the societal reflection of caste-based discrimination throughout the 18th to mid-19th century. This study primarily employs a literature review methodology and utilizes multiple primary and secondary sources for data collection. Research findings provide clear evidence that Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur played an integral and highly significant role in the historical development and progress of the Dalit community.

**Keywords:** Caste Discrimination, Dalit Community, Chandala, Matua, Untouchables etc.

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## **Introduction**

India has historically been and continues to be a diverse nation in terms of class, religion, region, gender, and language, a reality that gives rise to various forms of social division. A substantial underlying cause of this diversity is the presence of a structured hierarchy and inadequate accessibility to India's resources (Chaudhry, 2013). During the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, India witnessed the decline of two centuries of Mughal rule and the inception of British dominion; throughout this period of British governance, marked by the introduction of English-medium education as well as British interference and oppression in all indigenous affairs, the Indian populace, incensed by these circumstances, organized various movements and uprisings against the colonial power (Acharya, 2025). The identity of an individual is deeply tied to their antecedent history; indeed, determining one's true identity becomes a truly arduous task in the absence of knowledge regarding one's past, origins, and traditions (Sankaran, Sekerdej, & Hecker, 2017). Just as history holds fundamental significance within the realms of our education and society, it is equally indispensable in our personal lives. However, the pivotal question remains: do these historical narratives compiled over the course of centuries invariably reflect the absolute truth? Have the scholars, social reformers, and eminent historians who made extraordinary contributions in their respective fields in the past truly received the recognition and rightful place they deserve within the annals of history? If they have, then why is there such a conspicuous absence of discourse or literature regarding the educational contributions made by Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur, specifically concerning his initiatives for Dalit education and his efforts to combat caste-based discrimination during his era? Therefore, the primary intent of this research is to present the educational contributions of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur with the utmost diligence and authenticity, a figure who emerged with the noble mission of liberating the so-called "subaltern" communities of India and Bengal from the shackles of oppression, injustice, educational deprivation, and exploitation.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The researcher examined the following objectives for the research study,

- To illustrate the social status of the caste hierarchy in Bengal and across India.
- To narrate the memoir of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur,
- To portray an evident description of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur's educational initiatives,

## **Methodology of the Study**

The investigators conduct the study by collecting data through various literature reviews. Because it enables the collection of substantive and descriptive data that cannot be captured by using quantitative approaches.

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## **Caste Hierarchy in Bengal and Across India**

Historically, the Indian caste system, like any other human society on Earth, was socially segmented by class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language at the beginning. However, this evolved into a rigid stratification system, known as a 'closed system of casteism', based on the unequal distribution of valued resources such as wealth, income, power, and prestige (Ramesh, 2020). Since the Vedic era, the social structure of the time comprised four classes, known as 'Varnas' (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras). "Varna" was decided by the oldest of the 'Smritis,' based on the religious scripture known as the 'Manusmriti', which also validates the impurity and subservient position of those outside the social hierarchical system (Goswami, 2022). The Manusmriti portrays a highly stratified societal structure and legitimizes inequality through religious authority. A tiered system that allocates duties and privileges based on birth (Olivelle, 2005). However, India's earliest written documentation, 'the Rigveda', a reference to the four 'Varnas', is captured just once, and even that occurs in a later hymn (Macdonell, 1914).

Subsequently, during the period from 1812 to 1900 in undivided colonial Bengal, a distinct caste hierarchy emerged within society, wherein 'lower caste' and untouchable people were viewed with disdain by their upper-caste and Brahmin counterparts (Sarkar, 2016; Mandal, 2022). In consequence, a new social structure characterized by caste-based discrimination emerged, wherein people of dark complexion, alongside the Shudras, were designated as 'Chandalas' and relegated to the status of 'Antyaja' (outcastes) (Chowdhury, 2021; Patra, 2024). This entire system of societal hierarchical stratification is illustrated in the diagram below.

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The hierarchy of castes in ancient India and in Bengal is explored as well as described in further depth below.

## **Caste Hierarchy in Ancient India**

According to ancient and medieval historians, there are many religious, biological, and social reasons behind the origin of the Indian caste system. In which the 'Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda' compares the four classes of society to "primordial man/cosmic entities" - the four parts of the Purusha body (Parmar & Bhadauriya, 2021; Jamison & Brereton, 2014),

- The Brahmins materially originated from the mouth,
- the Kshatriyas from his hands,
- the Vaishyas from his thighs, and
- The Shudras from his feet.

So, the occupations of Brahmins were related to speech, knowledge, education, guidance, ritual, and industry; Kshatriyas' works were related to war, struggle, strength, protection, cooperation, and administration; Vaishyas related to capitalism, wealth,

patronage, and economy, savings, and Shudras with hard work, travel, service, and involved in the fact of work such as labor (Bhagwat & Knatekure, 2023).

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## **Caste Hierarchy in Bengal**

All the castes in Bengal are categorized into five broad categories: Brahmin, Kayastha-Vaidya, Navaskha or clean Shudra caste, unclean Shudra caste, and Untouchable or Antyaja caste. Where the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas did not even exist (Chowdhury, 2021).

In all aspects of Bengal society, Bengali Brahmins had little knowledge of the Vedas, so they occupied the highest position in society, even then, where the Kayasthas and Vaidyas were in the same position. That is, the social status of the Kayasthas and Vaidyas was much higher than that of other castes because they were always in contact with the Brahmins (Macdonell, 1914).

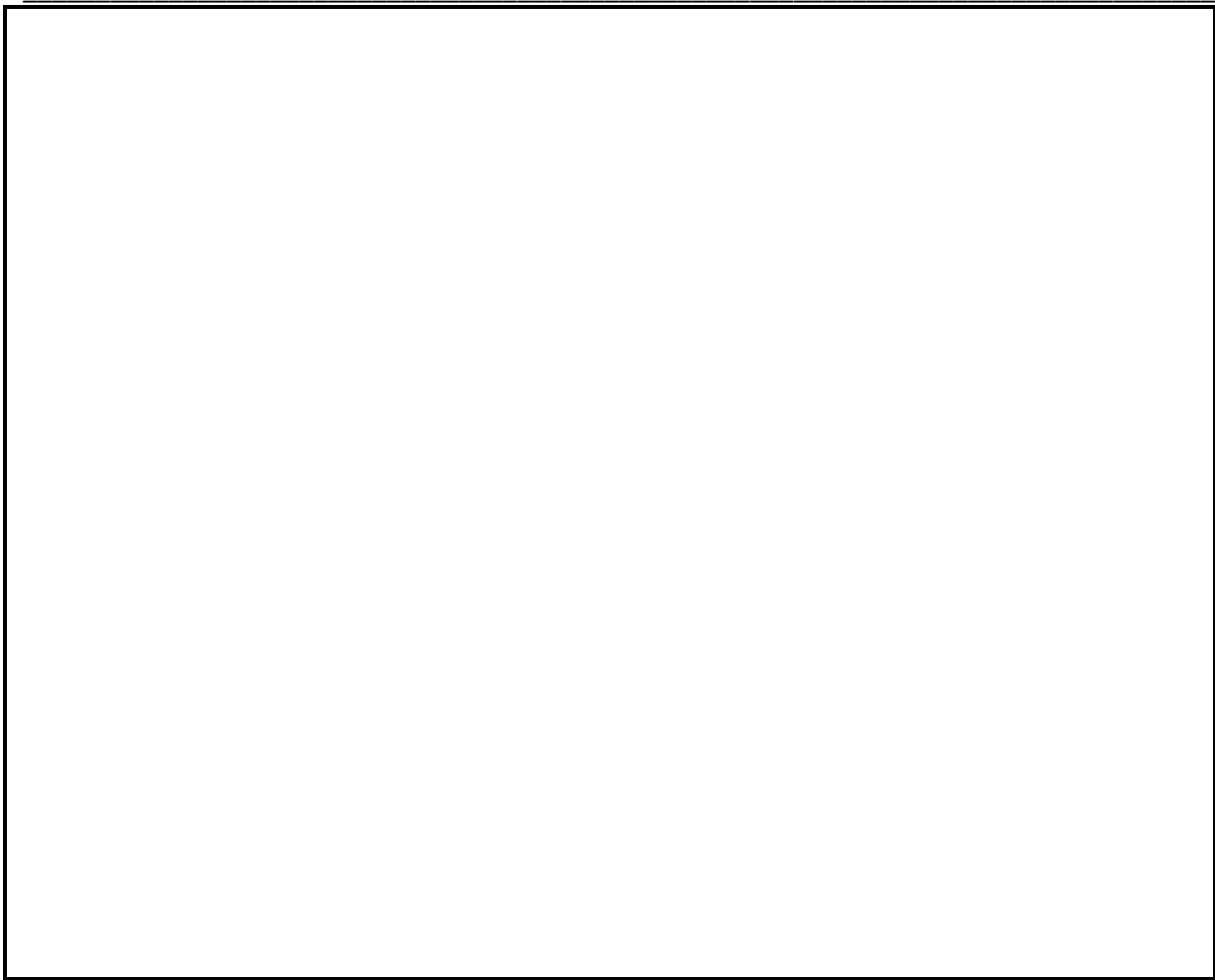
Shudras are those castes who are not entitled to give drinking water to clean Brahmins, and Kaivarta, Mahishya, Suvarnavanika, Saha, Teli, Dhoba, etc., belong to this impure Shudra caste (Mitra, 1953).

Among the untouchable castes below the impure Shudras, who had no place in society, are known as Antyaja (outsiders to the varna system) (Goghari & Kusi, 2023).

## **Memoir of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur**

East and West were significant promoters of active transformation throughout science, philosophy, literature, society, economy, religion, culture, and all other fields in the history of undivided India in the nineteenth century. However, that transformation or renaissance was primarily limited to the upper and middle classes. Because of this, realizing the truth that the waves of religious, educational, and social reform had not yet reached every stratum of society, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur, following in the very footsteps of his father, stepped forward intending to achieve holistic development through the 'Matua' religious and educational reform movement (Halder, 2019). Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur elaborated the concept of Matuism with the objective of comprehensive emancipation by promoting the education of untouchables and backward Dalit communities with great prudence against upper-caste societal biases involving tyranny, exploitation, and landlord oppression common in society. Accordingly, first and foremost, it is vital to gain knowledge about his life memoirs.

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Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur incarnated in 1847 AD (1253 in the Bengali year, on Falguni Purnima) in the lap of his father Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and mother Shanti Devi at Orakandi village in the Gopalganj area of Bangladesh. In a socioeconomic context where Sri Sri Harichand Thakur grew up being considered untouchable by the highest echelons of society and commonly referred to as Chandal slang, he was barely able to obtain formal schooling for a few months. He pledged to provide a better education for his son (Kabiraj, 2021; Bhowmik & Maiti, 2022). As a grown, curious youngster, Sri Guruchand Thakur's tremendous desire to learn prompted him to begin his early schooling with Sadhu Dasaratha, a Padmavila native, and then study for three years with Golak Kirttanya, a Sarkashi villager. In keeping with this, his father, Sri Harichand Thakur, worked valiantly to have him entered into the village pathshala; however, he was unsuccessful simply because, according to Hinduism's teachings, people of lower castes had no rights to an education. Since he acquired Arabic and Persian at Maktab in Orakandi village, and at the age of twelve, he returned home and studied numerous scriptures and literature by himself. Afterward, reaching puberty and attaining adulthood, Sri Guruchand Thakur married Satyabhama, the daughter of Ramakrishna Biswas, a native of Sabvera village, a village neighboring Orakandi, and moved

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forward to live a prosaic life according to the ideas of domestic religion (Sarkar, 2019; Bala, 2013). From then, he began business and trade to earn money and started an investment business in the boat-driving industry. However, as instructed by his father, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur always thirsted for knowledge, avoided intercourse with his wife for sixteen years even within domestic family life, and through all religious practices, beliefs, and actions according to religious customs he immersed himself in the task of managing and controlling the six (foes) enemies, the primary cause of death of humanity (Halder, 2016. pp. 47).

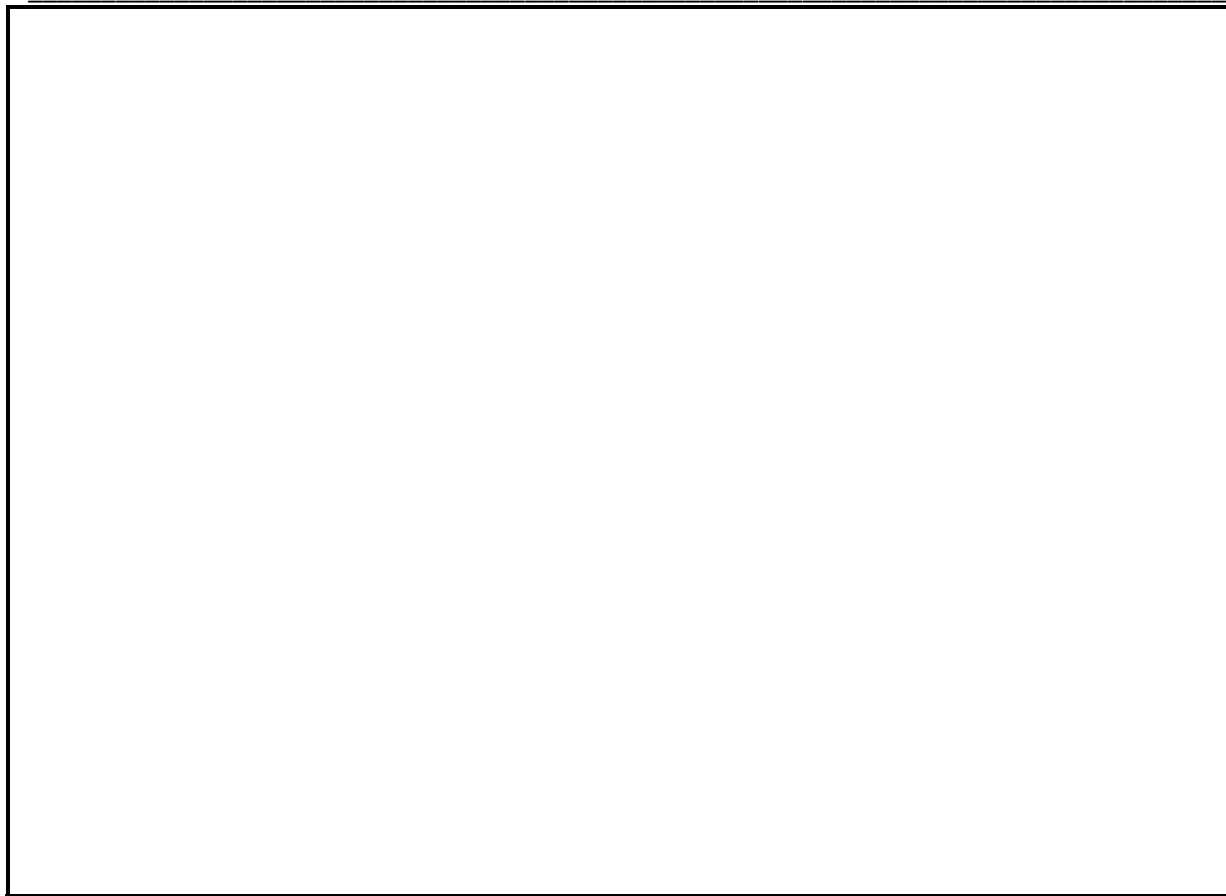
Throughout his austere life, Sri Guruchand Thakur realized at a young age that illiteracy and ignorance were the primary causes of the Namasudras' demise and that no-good enhancement was achievable without education. Hence, in addition to initiating measures for the educational upliftment of the Chandala community while also keeping in mind the availability of schooling for each of his children, he used his father's Matua faith as a fundamental weapon. As a result, his oldest son, Sashibhushan, first attended Ghrit Kandi, then Tarak Sarkar's residence in Jaipur. Finally, Lakshmi Pasha Vidyalaya, His second son, Sudhanya Kumar, was also a teacher, while his youngest son, Surendranath, passed the entrance exams in 1992 and got hired as a judge (Bala, 2013; Kabiraj, 2021). The aforesaid comprehensive biography and memoir of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur reveal the remarkable character of self-devotion in the expansion of education for the welfare of humankind.

## **Educational Initiatives of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur**

The education system in the Indian province of Bengal was entirely under the patronage of Brahmins, i.e., elite moneylenders, through whom zamindars, merchants, businesspersons, and civil servants participated in vocational education for their own financial needs from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. The group of Shudras, Untouchables, and Chandals, known as the poor lower classes in the caste-ridden Bengali society, were designated as 'Adham' by the proprietors and were entirely deprived of economic, social, political, and educational opportunities. In the Indian social structure, as a traditional system of Vedic Hindu culture, an ugly attempt to keep Shudras, lower castes, and women out of the realm of knowledge remained prevalent since ancient times (Pal, 2015; Kabiraj, 2021).

In 1881, Shri Guruchand Thakur of Orakandi stood at the first Grand Conference (Mahasammelan) of Namasudras at the house of Zamindar Ishwar Gain in Dattadanga village of Khulna district, where he sent the message to educate the Namasudras and also stated that the status of the nation will increase only if they are qualified to get government jobs. Therefore, public schools should be established in villages rather than temples; regardless of the Namasudras' financial situation, the children must be educated (Bala, 2013). However, realizing the social situation at that period, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur showed some alternative ways to promote education in rural areas (Biswas, 2017). Among these, the notable steps are depicted through an illustration,

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- In 1930, when the communal identity of the Namashudra sect suddenly fragmented from its peak of solidarity to constitutional politics, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur devoted himself to promoting unity, political power, and education on the social ladder. He directed that education be provided through cleaning cow barns (cowsheds) during the daytime in destitute and rural locations where an academic institution system wasn't possible to establish. Where parents send their children, including the girl's child, to school by any means possible (Lorea, 2020; Haldar, 2016).
- Although the shortage of schools was mitigated by the above measures, it still seemed impossible to find suitable teachers to teach, and some literate Namasudras began receiving training at Orakandi Middle School. It afterward became a training school (Haldar, 2016; Mandal, 2022).
- Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur's third important step was 'Mushti Bhiksha', also known as the Tandul system. Tandul is a rural system of storing in which a handful of rice is left aside twice a day before cooking, and all of the accumulated rice is collected and sold at the end of the month to pay the school teachers and to purchase all of the pupils' books and notebooks (Haldar, 2016).
- Another innovative step is the boarding system, where poor intellectual students first study on their own in a relatively well-off family, then tutors the children from their home

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in the mornings and evenings, and sometimes helps with house chores, and that well-off family in return pays for their boarding and meals (Biswas, 2017).

- Lastly, on women's education. While well-known social reformers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century indulged in urban revival, Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur came forward to improve the lives of rural poor, underprivileged, and downtrodden women through education. Using the Matua religious educational movement, he created an elementary school for women in Taltala, near Orakandi. Later, at Orakandi, he founded other schools, including "Shanti Satyabhama Balika Vidyalaya" and "Taltala Gadadhar Balika Vidyalaya." Moreover, in undivided Bengal, he established more than 1600 schools with the help of Christian missionary C. S. Mead (Kabiraj, 2021; Halder, 2019).

Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur promoted the specific ideal of 'Equality of Men and Women' for the upliftment of women in society by raising knowledge of their responsibilities, rights, and obligations, as well as self-empowerment and self-development. On the other hand, through Matuaism, the religious educational sect, he relentlessly pushed for the lower castes to become educated and experienced.

## **Conclusion**

The aftermath of this study revealed that the central aim of Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur was to educate the deprived and neglected Namashudra tribe to improve their living standards and develop a happy and peaceful society. To achieve that goal, he embedded the Matua movement to promote education beyond the Dalit group to the greater population. By which not only the Namashudra community but also other downtrodden segments of society and even the Muslim community benefited from his enlightenment. He and his disciples established more than 5000 schools. His initiative in many key measures of educational growth, such as 'the creation of pathshalas in cowsheds', 'musti bhiksha or tandul', 'teacher training', 'women's education', and 'lodging system', illustrates his creative and critical thinking skills. He also delivered the idea that to find a decent life mate, women should first educate themselves. He advocated, irrespective of race, religion, or caste, for girls to be educated before marriage to balance their married lives logically and provide a good home environment for their children. It has shed new light on the Indian societal history for the Dalit, the underprivileged, disadvantaged, and those who had previously been deprived from educational opportunities. Even though the contribution of the great philanthropist and social reformer Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur could not occupy such a prominent place in the history pages as the tremendous contributions of Raja Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and others had done. The number of research investigations on the significant contributions made by Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur and his father, Sri Sri Harichand Thakur, for the educational developments of Dalits is scanty, so the researcher has attempted to bring the main issues to the fore through this study.

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