

**From Chaitanya to Harichand: Bhakti, Caste and Social
Transformation in the Making of Matua
Identity in Bengal**

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the historical and ideological transition from the Vaishnava bhakti movement of Chaitanya in medieval Bengal to the emergence of the Matua movement under Harichand Thakur in the nineteenth century. Situated within the broader framework of caste hierarchy in Indian society, the study examines how Brahmanical dominance institutionalised graded inequality through ritual exclusion and social stratification. Although Chaitanya's devotional universalism appeared to transcend caste distinctions and attracted followers from diverse social backgrounds, its impact remained largely confined to the spiritual domain, leaving structural inequalities intact. The paper argues that while the Matua movement emerged from the Vaishnava devotional tradition, it moved beyond spiritual egalitarianism to articulate a form of caste consciousness and social transformation, thereby reshaping Namasudra identity in Bengal.*

***Keywords:** Namasudra, Matua Movement, Vaishnavism, Caste Hierarchy etc.*

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Introduction

Since ancient times, Indian society has been structured through a complex system of social stratification commonly described as caste. While classical Hindu texts articulated a fourfold varna hierarchy, the lived reality of social organization was shaped by numerous jatis, or birth-based communities, which regulated everyday social relations. The English term “caste” more accurately captures this intricate and historically evolved network of hierarchies than the schematic division implied by varna. Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal therefore considers it

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appropriate to use the term “Caste” as a synonym for jati rather than for Varna.¹ Similarly, Rup Kumar Barman observes that caste has been an intrinsic feature of Indian society since the early phases of Aryan civilization and, as a social institution, it has historically reproduced graded inequalities through the positioning of various varnas and jatis within a hierarchical order.²

The theoretical distinction between varna and jati gradually evolved into a rigid social hierarchy in practice. While varna functioned as an ideological framework of classification, jati operated as a lived social reality determining occupation, marriage, ritual status and access to resources. Over time, caste ceased to remain merely a system of social differentiation and assumed the character of graded inequality.³ The hereditary transmission of status, combined with religious sanction, transformed caste into a deeply entrenched institution governing both public and private spheres of life.⁴

In Bengal, the operation of caste exhibited certain distinctive features. Although the region did not always reflect the extreme forms of physical untouchability observed in some other parts of India, social distance and ritual discrimination were nonetheless pervasive. Lower caste communities were often denied equal access to education, temple entry, and positions of authority.⁵ Thus, caste functioned not only as a ritual hierarchy but also as a socio-economic structure reinforcing marginalisation.

It is within this broader historical context that the position of the Namasudra community in Bengal must be examined. Formerly identified in various textual and colonial records as Chandals, the Namasudras occupied a marginal location within the Hindu social order.⁶ Their social status reflected the tension between devotional inclusion and structural exclusion. Understanding this contradiction becomes essential for analysing the later emergence of religious reform movements, particularly the Matua movement, which sought to reinterpret spiritual equality as a foundation for social dignity and collective assertion.

The Historical Background

Theoretically, Varna means quality. For the purpose of social differentiation, each person was assigned to a particular varna based on his innate qualities expressed through his own inclinations and abilities. The concept of division of varna according to qualities extended to

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other matters. According to character traits, the varna system was classified into four classes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.⁷ In some cases, all Aryan varnas were entitled to the same rights and privileges. All Aryans were Dwija. However, only Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya had the right to this Dwija. Shudra did not have this right. All of them were formally entitled to a second birth by receiving the sacred sutras. Being Dwija, they had the right to observe the Vedic rituals and also to lead their lives in the first three stages of religion: Brahmacharya, Garhastha, Vanaprastha and Varnashrama.⁸

There was always a strong tendency to reduce the caste system to a hierarchical structure. The Brahmins were the educated class, the repository of knowledge and experts in classical rituals and magic. Their profession was to conduct classical rituals and impart education. The Kshatriyas were kings and warriors. They acquired political, administrative and military power by virtue of their position. The Vaishyas were farmers, artisans and traders. In the fully developed caste system, the Brahmins occupied the highest place in social precedence.⁹ It was on this basis that the hierarchical structure of the caste system eventually became hereditary and, with the sanction of the religious scriptures, the caste became a distinct inter-caste marriage-based group. Theoretically, this hierarchy was determined on the basis of the primacy of the qualities manifested through the actions and character of the different castes.¹⁰

It is not known whether the caste system arose as a result of the planned expansion of the caste system, or whether the caste system was a refined form of social division based on the division of labour existing in the pre-Aryan Copper Age Indian civilization, which was integrated after the Aryan culture-influenced caste system.¹¹ However, the spread of Aryan culture in various parts of India made the indigenous people consisting of mountain forest tribes and the Copper Age settlements hostile to Hindu society. The Copper Age settlements were defeated by the leadership of the Aryan culture and incorporated into Hindu society, and Hindu society also benefited from the technological experience of the Copper Age culture. The mountain and forest tribes gradually came under the influence of Hindu society. The bearers of the Aryan culture began to explore the mountains and forests in order to find stones, precious stones and, above all, metals for sculpture and construction. On the other hand, the tribes also established contact with the settlements to sell their manufactured goods such as baskets, ropes, food items collected from the forest and indigenously extracted iron, copper, etc. Contact with the Hindu society certainly influenced the life and culture of the

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tribes and for them the advanced technology and organized system of production and distribution of the Hindus became very attractive and even irresistible. The influence of the Hindu society changed the methods of production and distribution of the tribes. Through this process of change, the tribes finally became part of the Hindu society as a lower caste.¹²

However, modern historical scholarship has questioned the linear and civilizational interpretation of caste origins. Many historians and sociologists argue that caste did not emerge solely from racial or cultural encounters between Aryans and non-Aryans, but gradually evolved through complex processes of social stratification, occupational specialization and religious legitimation. The transformation of flexible social categories into rigid hereditary groups was neither immediate nor uniform across regions. Rather, it was shaped by political consolidation, agrarian expansion and the growing authority of Brahmanical texts.¹³

In eastern India, particularly in Bengal, the incorporation of indigenous and tribal populations into the expanding agrarian order played a crucial role in the formation of caste identities. As forested tracts were gradually brought under cultivation between the early medieval and late medieval periods, local communities were absorbed into the Hindu social framework in subordinated positions.¹⁴ This process often involved the redefinition of occupational groups as distinct jatis, thereby fixing their ritual rank within a hierarchical order.

Thus, the historical development of caste must be understood not merely as a theological doctrine but as a socio-economic process intertwined with land control, political authority and religious sanction. The emergence of lower caste communities in Bengal, including those later identified as Chandals or Namasudras, was closely connected with these long-term processes of agrarian expansion and social reorganisation.¹⁵

This broader structural background becomes essential for analysing later religious reform movements. By the nineteenth century, caste hierarchy had already acquired deep historical roots. Therefore, movements such as Gaudiya Vaishnavism and later the Matua movement did not emerge in a social vacuum; rather, they responded to centuries of accumulated stratification and marginalisation.

Origins of Namasudras

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One of the lower castes of the Hindu community living in Bengal is the Namasudras. Until the first decade of the 20th century, they were employed in various places in uncertain temporary occupations called Chandals, Chandals, etc. However, most of them were associated with agriculture and boating.¹⁶ The origin of the Namasudras is known as Namasuts, a name given to the pre-Aryan Brahmin Deval Shakadwipiya Brahmins.¹⁷ According to the history of Gaur, during the reign of the Pala Sena kings, many Hindus converted to Buddhism. When the Brahminical religion was reintroduced, they were accepted back into Hindu society.¹⁸ They came to be known as Namasudras in society. Later, they were called Matua under the leadership of Harichand Thakur.

The Chandals living in Bengal were never like the untouchable Chandals described by Manu.¹⁹ That is, the Chandals would live in the habitation of the beast caste outside the village, they would not have water pots, dogs and donkeys would be their property, they would wear clothes abandoned by dead bodies and ornaments made of iron, these characteristics were not present in the Chandals of Bengal. According to Nirmal Kumar Basu, in East Bengal, the Namasudras were hated everywhere as farmers and were forced to live in the beel areas on the outskirts of the villages as an untouchable caste. In the early 20th century, the lower castes in Bengal were considered as 'Ajal Chal' caste instead of untouchable caste.²⁰ A survey of the lower castes by the Indian Statutory Commission in 1929 showed that the social status of the lower castes of Bengal was relatively prestigious compared to the untouchable castes of other parts of India.²¹ In Bengal, although the level of physical untouchability was not deep, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the arrogance and slurs of untouchability repeatedly emerged in the language and usage of the gentry society. In the texts related to caste, derogatory language was used towards the Chandals or Namasudras. For example, Chandal, Durbratta, Naradham, Ati Adham etc. Brahmin priests did not participate in the religious and social activities of the Namasudras. All the Brahmin priests who did participate were also expelled from the caste and were hated as 'Chandraller Battan'. That is, in an alternative way, the social inferiority of the Namasudras was identified from different perspectives.²²

The transition from the designation 'Chandal' to 'Namasudra' was not merely a change in nomenclature but reflected a gradual process of identity rearticulation. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sections of the educated Namasudra leadership consciously sought to distance themselves from the stigma associated with the term

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‘Chandal’. The adoption and official recognition of the term ‘Namasudra’ in colonial census operations symbolised an attempt to negotiate a more respectable social status within the Hindu order.²³

Colonial administrative practices played a significant role in shaping this transformation. The census, by classifying and enumerating castes, inadvertently provided marginalised communities with a new arena for political articulation. Claims regarding origin, ritual rank and social status were increasingly framed in petitions and memoranda submitted to colonial authorities.²⁴ In this context, the Namasudras began to mobilise around issues of education, employment and representation, thereby moving from a dispersed agrarian community towards a more organised collective identity.

It is also important to note that the Namasudra experience cannot be reduced solely to ritual discrimination. Economic factors, particularly land relations in eastern Bengal, deeply influenced their marginal position. Many Namasudras were small cultivators or tenants dependent on upper-caste landlords, which reinforced their vulnerability within rural power structures.²⁵ Thus, caste for the Namasudras functioned simultaneously as a marker of ritual stigma and material disadvantage.

This evolving consciousness of humiliation and exclusion laid the groundwork for the later emergence of religious reform under Harichand Thakur. The search for dignity and recognition found expression not only in petitions to colonial authorities but also in the sphere of devotional religion. Consequently, the Matua movement must be viewed as part of a longer trajectory of social self-assertion among the Namasudras rather than as an abrupt religious innovation.

The Context of Vaishnavism

The emergence of Chaitanya in Bengal created a new movement in the society of medieval Bengal. The giving of Krishna name to Chaitanya's created a revolution in the society of Bengal at that time. In droves, people of all castes in Bengal, started to accept the Vaishnavism followed by Chaitanya. The love-bhakti theory of Chaitanya's Bhakti Vaishnavism movement influenced not only the people of Bengal but also the people of the whole of India. Bhakti was the main philosophy of the Chaitanya religious movement. Bhakti Ratnavali, a prominent collection of devotional verses from the Bhagavata Purana, was

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compiled by a monk named Vishnupuri during the time of Chaitanya.²⁶ Here it is said that devotion is a special philosophy of life and lifestyle, in which selfishness, greed, delusion, competition for honor and lamentation if honor is not received have no place. There is no place in devotion, hatred, arrogance and corruption. There is no caste distinction in devotion. All devotees could participate in the nama sankirtan, nagar parikrama and pankti bhojana ceremonies introduced by Chaitanya. The masses, deprived of devotional practices, were widely attracted by Chaitanya's devotional philosophy and were initiated into Vaishnavism. Many low-caste Vaishnavism gurus emerged. The Chandal caste of Bengal, like other castes, found their source of religious freedom in Vaishnavism.²⁷

The influence of Chaitanya on the society and religious culture of Bengal in the Middle Ages was far-reaching. His emphasis on passion, devotion, and religious worship was immense, which later created a rich literature and culture in Bengal. Chaitanya's Vaishnava literature was open to all people, regardless of their passion, religion, or caste. This universal attitude strongly contradicted the principles of orthodox Brahmanism. It was an important social revolution in its time, but after Chaitanya's death, the principle of love and devotion of Vaishnava religion, castelessness in the religious arena, and the equal acceptance of Vaishnava devotees of all classes did not last long.²⁸ Nevertheless, from this time on, the way the Chandals were attracted to Vaishnava religion, its full form, was the beginning of the Matua movement led by Harichand Tagore in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The renaissance of the nineteenth century, through the extensive reform of Hindu society in the Western liberal ideology, gave a well-thought-out blow to modern rational thinking and medieval social customs. A new dynamic stratification was seen within the stratified society, almost like a static pyramid. But this so-called renaissance remained limited to the elite society centered in Calcutta. The light of the renaissance failed to reach the lower caste society of rural Bengal. The social organization of traditional Hinduism, which was based on caste and caste divisions, was characterized by increasing inequality, educational-cultural inequality, modern educational initiation, and inequality in taking the benefits of mechanization and industrialization. As a result, the people of the lower caste rural areas remained degraded according to the old traditional social customs. The so-called Chandal or Namasudra caste people living in the rural areas of Jessore, Khulna, Barisal, Faridpur etc. districts of East Bengal are uneducated, engaged in agriculture, fishing, and agricultural laborers of the lower strata of society.²⁹ They take initiation from the 'Jata Vaishnava'

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religious gurus, and their religious position is also despised by the upper caste Vaishnava religious gurus. Due to the superstitions, rituals, monogamy, sexual intercourse etc. followed by the communities established by various minor Vaishnava religious gurus and smart Brahmin gurus, the social body becomes dilapidated. In this situation, the social and religious position of Namasudras and other lower class Dalits and fallen people takes the form of low and dishonorable as like the situation before Chaitanya.³⁰

The contradiction between devotional egalitarianism and social hierarchy thus became increasingly visible in nineteenth-century Bengal. While Gaudiya Vaishnavism had once articulated a spiritual inclusiveness centred on bhakti, its later institutional forms often reproduced existing caste distinctions. The growing divide between Brahmin Vaishnava authorities and lower-caste devotional practitioners created dissatisfaction among marginal communities who sought a more concrete expression of dignity and equality.³¹

In this context, bhakti began to acquire new meanings. For the lower caste followers, devotion was no longer merely a path to spiritual salvation but gradually evolved into a medium of social self-recognition. The experience of exclusion within both Brahmanical Hinduism and stratified Vaishnavism prepared the ground for an alternative religious articulation that would reject ritual dependency and priestly mediation.³²

Thus, the stage was historically set for the emergence of a movement that would reinterpret devotional practice in explicitly social terms. The Matua movement under Harichand Thakur must therefore be understood not as an abrupt departure from Vaishnavism, but as a critical transformation of its egalitarian impulse. By internalising the emotional core of bhakti while simultaneously challenging caste hierarchy, the Matua ideology marked a shift from spiritual universalism to organised community assertion.

Harichand Thakur and The Matua Movement

The Matua movement that began in Bengal under the leadership of Harichand Thakur was based on the Vaishnava religious movement initiated by Chaitanya. It was against this religious and social background that Harichand Thakur was born in the early nineteenth century in the house of a well-to-do Namasudra Vaishnava, Jaswant Thakur, in the village of Safladanga, Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district.³³ Jaswant Thakur was a devout

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Vaishnava and strictly observed Vaishnava religious rituals and practices. But from his childhood, Harichand Thakur did not look favorably on Vaishnava religious guruism, details, immorality, and caste discrimination in the name of Vaishnava service. However, Hari Bhakti and Harinama Sankirtan were in his heart and he often engaged in religious discussions with Hari Bhakti-loving saints. He also used to join in the Nama Sankirtan. Gradually, Harichand Thakur formed a Kirtan group on his own initiative and became popular in villages like Orakandi, Mallakandi, Ghritakandi, Rautkhamar etc.³⁴

The simple views and path of worshipping God, intoxicated by the chanting of Harinam and devotional love of Harichand Thakur's kirtan group, attracted the local Nama Shudras in a short time. His rejection of Brahminical customs, avoidance of casteism and protest against narrow Vaishnavism in his words and actions made him acceptable to everyone. This community of devotees who followed Harichand Thakur became known as 'Matua'. The devotees of Hari while chanting would go crazy while dancing, sometimes falling unconscious. To the Amatua, this activity of Harichand was 'the epitome of madness'.³⁵ Vaishnava gurus and upper caste people used to mock them as 'Mato' or 'Moto' out of sarcasm and hatred. Despite learning about the ridicule and hatred, Harichand Thakur recognized the name 'Matua' as a way of identifying himself with his community.

The recognition of the term 'Matua' signified more than devotional enthusiasm; it marked the emergence of a collective identity rooted in shared humiliation and spiritual affirmation. Harichand Thakur's teachings gradually moved beyond ecstatic kirtan and devotional practice to articulate a critique of Brahmanical mediation. He rejected the necessity of priestly authority, ritual purity and elaborate scriptural formalism, thereby decentralising religious power from the upper castes.³⁶

Unlike the institutionalised strands of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the Matua path emphasised simplicity, household virtue and moral discipline. Harichand propagated the idea that spiritual fulfilment did not require renunciation or monastic withdrawal but could be achieved within the framework of garhasthya dharma (householder's life). This emphasis on domestic ethics made the movement accessible to agrarian and labouring communities who could not afford ritual expenditure or pilgrimage.³⁷

Equally significant was the social message embedded within Matua teachings. The rejection of caste discrimination, insistence on mutual respect and the discouragement of extravagant ritual practices collectively functioned as instruments of moral regeneration

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within the Namasudra community. In this sense, the movement was not confined to devotional revival but assumed the character of internal social reform.

The consolidation of the Matua community gained further momentum under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, who systematised organisational structures and promoted education among the Namasudras.³⁸ Through schools, petitions and socio-religious gatherings, the movement gradually extended its influence beyond spiritual practice into the domains of social mobility and political articulation. Thus, the Matua movement evolved from a devotional fellowship into a structured community movement seeking dignity and recognition within colonial Bengal.

Vaishnavism and The Matua

This Matua movement, which developed under the influence of Vaishnavism, later took on a widespread form. However, there is no way to deny that this trend of the Matua movement was somewhat different from Vaishnavism. Although the Vaishnavism religious movement united people of all castes on a religious or spiritual level, its disciples did not focus on any social reform work in the social aspect.³⁹ But in the case of Matua religion, along with the promotion of religious equality, there was an attempt to promote social equality, education, and even socio-economic development of their own community and enter the political arena. Chaitanyadev did not want to change the traditional social system, but in the case of the Matua religious movement, one of the goals was to destroy the dominance or dominance of the Brahminical priests. Chaitanyadev was the son of a Brahmin family, after the death of his first wife Lakshmi Priya Devi, he married a Brahmin girl named Vishnupriya. To complete the Shraddha rituals of his father, he offered a pinda in Gaya in accordance with the Brahminical tradition. In 1510, he took initiation from Keshav Bharati and renounced the world, taking monastic vows. In Matua religion, although Shraddha and afterlife rituals are performed, the necessity of Brahmin priests is avoided. In Matua religion, initiation and guruism are completely rejected. Matuas do not believe in taking monastic vows either, their religious foundation is the 'Garhasthya Prastha' religion.⁴⁰

The post-Chaitanya Vaishnava movement centered on initiation, the conflict and inequality between the 'Jata Vaishnava' gurus and the Brahmin Vaishnavas, the lack of

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successors to 'bhakti and prem' under the influence of Mantratantra and Brahmanism, and gradually became a dry riverbed, losing its universality. According to scholars, the Matua Dharma movement emerged as its rightful successor in the second half of the nineteenth century. It accompanied love with devotion, denied guruism, devoted itself to religious social reform, and even declared loudly in an attempt at political internalization that one who does not have a party has no strength. It recognized education as a religion in order to occupy a respectable place in society. The Matua movement has adopted much more progressivism here than the Vaishnava movement. Later, in the crooked course of time, it flowed into many branches and offshoots, taking on a different form in each sect of Hindu culture.⁴¹

The divergence between Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the Matua movement may therefore be understood at multiple levels ritual, social and political. At the ritual level, Vaishnavism retained a framework of initiation, lineage-based guru authority and scriptural mediation, whereas the Matua path deliberately simplified devotional practice and decentralised religious power. By rejecting compulsory initiation and priestly dependence, the Matua ideology transferred spiritual agency directly to the community of believers.⁴²

At the social level, the difference becomes even more pronounced. While Chaitanya's movement symbolically challenged caste exclusivity within the devotional sphere, it did not translate that spiritual equality into a programme of structural reform. The Matua movement, by contrast, consciously addressed issues of social humiliation, access to education and collective uplift. Education was not merely encouraged but sacralised as a religious duty, thereby linking spiritual dignity with social mobility.⁴³

Politically, the implications of this shift were significant. The Matua community gradually began to articulate demands for representation and recognition within colonial administrative structures. Through petitions, organisational networks and community mobilisation, the movement expanded beyond devotional fellowship into a platform of caste-based assertion.⁴⁴ In this respect, the Matua movement may be interpreted as an early form of Dalit public politics in Bengal, preceding later twentieth-century identity movements.

Thus, although the Matua movement drew emotional and theological inspiration from Vaishnav bhakti, it cannot be reduced to a mere extension of Chaitanya's devotional legacy. It represented a reinterpretation of bhakti within the lived realities of caste subordination. The transition from mystical love to organised community consciousness marks a critical moment

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in the evolution of lower-caste religiosity in eastern India. In this transformation, devotion became inseparable from dignity, and spirituality from social justice.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be said that the social revolution that Chaitanyadev brought about using his Vaishnava movement as a tool has been effective even in the modern era, transcending the boundaries of time and era, and this is one of the proofs of this Matua religious movement. Although this movement belonged to the Namasudras, that is, the Matua group, its roots were spread within the Vaishnava religious movement introduced by Chaitanya. The social revolution that Harichand Thakur initiated using the Matua Sangha as a tool, rejecting Brahmanism and focusing only on the chanting of Harinama, has also emerged as a particularly significant event among the reform movements of the modern era.

The historical relationship between Gaudiya Vaishnavism and the Matua movement thus reveals both continuity and rupture. While Chaitanya's devotional universalism created a spiritual space that temporarily softened caste boundaries, it did not fundamentally dismantle the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. The Matua movement inherited the emotional and theological core of bhakti but redirected it towards the lived realities of caste oppression. In doing so, it transformed devotion from an inward spiritual discipline into an outward collective assertion of dignity.

The significance of the Matua movement lies not merely in its religious innovation but in its capacity to generate social consciousness among a marginalised agrarian community. By rejecting priestly mediation, ritual expenditure and caste-based humiliation, the movement articulated an alternative vision of religiosity grounded in equality and self-respect. Its emphasis on education, moral discipline and community organisation gradually expanded its scope beyond devotional fellowship to socio-political mobilisation.

Therefore, the Matua movement may be interpreted as a distinctive moment in the evolution of lower-caste religio-social modernity in Bengal. It represents a reinterpretation of bhakti within the historical conditions of colonial society, where questions of identity, representation and dignity assumed increasing urgency. Rather than viewing it merely as a sectarian offshoot of Vaishnavism, it is more appropriate to understand it as a critical reconfiguration of devotional ideology shaped by the experience of caste marginalisation.

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In this sense, the trajectory from Chaitanya to Harichand Thakur marks a broader transformation in the religious history of Bengal from spiritual inclusiveness to organised community assertion. The Matua movement stands as an important example of how subaltern religiosity can function simultaneously as faith, reform and resistance.

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