

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

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***Abstract:**Indian society remains haunted by deep-seated caste stratifications that have historically stripped the marginalized of their dignity. This paper examines the unexpected alignment between Rabindranath Tagore's elite universal humanism and the Matua movement's subaltern rebellion. Both sought to dismantle the "religious form of social stratification" that governed Indian life. Using comparative discourse analysis and textual criticism of works like Gora and Matua liturgical verses, this study tracks how these disparate ideologies envisioned a post-caste future. The analysis reveals a striking convergence that the both schools rejected ritualistic dogma in favor of a human-centric spirituality. While Tagore attacked Brahminical orthodoxy through aesthetic prose and rural reconstruction at Sriniketan, the Matuas led by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur- sacralized physical labor and institutional education as tools for subaltern agency. This study suggests that liberation from marginality appears to be contingent on a synthesis of intellectual self-realization and pragmatic social reform. Although these paradigms have not fully eradicated structural exploitation, their shared emphasis on the dignity of labor and universal love offers a viable framework for modern inclusive societies.*

***Keywords:** Matua Ideology, Namasudra Movement, Subaltern Liberation, Religion etc.*

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Introduction

Indian society has been historically characterized by caste stratification, conflict and division since ancient times. This system has systematically created disparities among individuals under the guise of religious injunctions, thereby institutionalizing discrimination. Social divisions based on caste, vocation and birth have not only jeopardized the social status of the

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

deprived but have also perpetuated their marginalization for generations, where humiliation and stigmatization were inevitable. In the purview of social scientists and historians, this has been identified as the “religious form of social stratification”¹ in the historical context of India. “The multiplicity of the groups and the thoroughness of the whole system are due to the habit of the Hindu mind to create categories and to carry things to their logical end which characterized their literature, philosophy, and religious creeds.”² Consequently, this caste system was intellectually rationalized and legitimized through the synthesis of literature, philosophy, and religious dogma.

Although the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th century was mainly confined to the upper-caste intelligentsia, Rabindranath Tagore endeavored to strike a profound philosophical blow against the religious dogma and social discrimination prevalent in Indian society through his literature, essays, educational paradigms, and rural reconstruction efforts. At the same time, the Matua movement inaugurated by Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and propagated by his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur for the empowerment of the subaltern - emerged as a direct rebellion against social oppression. The first of these two perspectives is Rabindranath Tagore's universal humanism, which advocates for liberation through the intersection of individual self-development and social welfare. The second, the proletarian-oriented anti-caste spiritual movement of Matua religion, emerged as a crusade to establish the self-respect of marginalized communities through the construction of an inclusive and free society. This research paper will explore whether these two disparate ideologies converged upon a common goal in building a post-caste society. In doing so, this study intends to explore the philosophical underpinnings and anti-caste discourse of both schools of thought, compare their respective strategies for the social, spiritual, and economic liberation of marginalized communities, and to review the relevance of these two ideologies in addressing contemporary casteism and social inequality. Ultimately, the analysis will determine if the two ideologies, arising from different contexts, aimed at the identical objective of establishing transformative society transcending casteism.

Analytical Framework: Dialectics of Marginality and Social Liberation

The concept of ‘marginality’³ is multidimensional. In this case, from a sociological perspective, when a community is alienated and deprived of mainstream social, economic,

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

and cultural structures, the condition is defined as marginality. This deprivation is not merely material or economic but extends to cultural and symbolic power. On the other hand, 'liberation' is not restricted to spiritual salvation from a religious perspective but is identified as an integrated manifestation of establishing social rights, self-respect, and a distinct civic identity. Our primary inquiry examines whether Rabindranath's intellectual thinking and the praxis of Matua religion proffered a new conceptualization of liberation from the marginalization of the oppressed classes. For the purposes of research, textual criticism, discourse analysis and comparative sociological perspectives have been systematically followed.

Critique of the Caste System and the Ideology of Human Liberation in Rabindranath Tagore's Thought

Rabindranath Tagore was a rigorous critic of the pervasive marginalization engendered by the caste system intrinsic to Indian society, particularly within the Hindu social order, affecting the subaltern communities. In his works, he repeatedly elucidated how institutionalized religious system strip individuals of their inherent dignity. He criticized the inhumanity of the caste system and envisioned a society where no religion or social system erodes human dignity.

In his seminal novel '*Gora*', Tagore articulated a profound critique of the parochialism inherent in Brahminical orthodoxy through incisive and resolute prose. "Gora kahilo, 'Ami Bharatbarsher sei Brahman.' *Dashjaner sange jarita haiya, byabasayer pakshelunthita haiya, arther pralobhane lubdha haiya, je Brahman shudrattwer phansh galay bandhiya udbandhane mariteche Gora tahadigake tahar swadesher sajib padarther madhye ganya karila na; tahadigake shudrer adham kariya dekhila, karan, shudra apan shudrattwer dwaray banchiya ache, kintu ihara brahmanyattwer abhabe mrita, sutarang ihara apabitra. Bharatbarsha ihader janya aj eman dinbhabe ashauch yapan kariteche.*"⁴

(Free Translation: Gora declared, 'I am that Brahmin of India.' Entangled in worldly affairs, plundered by commerce, and seduced by the lure of wealth, those Brahmins who perish by the noose of 'Shudrahood' around their necks were not regarded by Gora as living entities of his motherland. He viewed them as baser than Shudras; for while the Shudra survives through his own Shudrahood, these men are dead for want of true Brahminhood - hence, they are impure. It is for them that India today observes such wretched penance and ritual mourning.")

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

Here the moral decadence of contemporary Hindu society is starkly revealed. Brahminism is interrogated through Gora's statement. Similarly, in this novel, Paresh Babu observes the tension between the Brahmo Samaj and general Hindu society. Through Paresh Babu's statement, Rabindranath highlights the futility of religious communalism, "*Sampraday eman jinish je, manush je manush, ei sakaler cheye sahaj kathatai se ekebare bhuliye dey— manush Brahmo ki Hindu ei samaj-gara kathatakei bishwasatyer cheye baro kare tule ekta pak tairi kare— etakkhan mithya tate ghure marichhilum.*"⁵

(Free Translation: "Sectarianism is such a phenomenon that it obscures the simplest of all truths - that a human being is, foremost, a human. It elevates socially constructed labels, such as being 'Brahmo' or 'Hindu', above universal truth, creating a vortex of delusion - within which I have been wandering in falsehood for so long.")

Rabindranath's conception of social liberation was not limited to caste alone; it encompassed the empowerment of women. The novel also depicts women - who are marginalized in Indian society transitioning toward empowerment. Through the character of 'Sucharita', he highlights the demand for women's social activism. "*Jagater kaj hay amrao chalaba, nay amra bojha haye thakba; amra jadi bojha hai- takhan rag kare balben: pathe nari bibarjita! Kintu narikeo jadi chalte den, tahale pathei hok ar gharei hok narike bibarjan karar darkar hay na.*"⁶

(Free Translation: "Either we shall participate in the work of the world, or we shall remain a burden; and if we are a burden, you will say in frustration: 'Leave the woman behind on the path!' But if you allow the woman to walk beside you, then whether on the path or within the home, there remains no need to abandon her.")

A holistic analysis of the novel 'Gora' suggests that Rabindranath contended that true freedom and patriotism cannot be circumscribed by narrow caste or religious identity, but rather contingent on universal human love. In the novel, the character Gora serves as a symbol of Brahminism initially. However, in the climax, when Gora learns of his Irish heritage it is as if all his bonds - especially the shackles of social distinction - are severed. Then he says in a free voice, "*Ami aj Bharatiya. Amar madhye Hindu, Musalman, Khristan kono samajer kono birodh nei. Aj ei Bharatbarsher sakaler jati amar jat, sakaler annai amar anna.*"⁷

(Free Translation: "Today, I am an Indian. Within me, there is no conflict between the societies of Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. Today, every caste of this India is my caste, and the bread of all is my bread.")

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

Here Gora has risen above all religions and described himself as a Bharatvarshiya or Indian. In another quote, Gora is addressing Paresh Babu, “*Gaur kahila, ‘Apanar kachhei ei muktir mantra ache - seijanyei apani aj kono samajei sthan pan ni. Amake apanar shishya karun. Apani amake aj sei debatar-i mantra din, jini Hindu Musalman Khristan Brahmo sakaler-i - janr mandirer dwar kono jatir kachhe, kono byaktir kachhe, konodin abaruddha hoy na - jini keballi Hindur debata nan, jini Bharatbarsher debata.*”⁸

(Free Translation: “Gora said, ‘You alone possess the mantra of this liberation- and that is precisely why you have found no place in any sectarian society today. Make me your disciple. Initiate me into the mantra of that God who belongs to all- Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Brahmo alike- whose temple doors are never barred to any caste or individual, and who is not merely the God of the Hindus, but the God of all India.’”

This moment signifies the birth of a ‘post-caste’ consciousness in Tagore’s narrative, where the protagonist transcends sectarian boundaries to embrace a universal human identity. Tagore envisions a ‘Deity of India’ who transcends liturgical boundaries, symbolizing a secular and inclusive spiritualism that serves as the foundation for a post-caste, egalitarian society.

Furthermore, in the play ‘*Chandalika*’, Rabindranath Tagore calls for the dismantling of caste discrimination through the symbolic medium of the right to water. In the play, the character ‘*Prakriti*’ is depicted as a representative of a neglected society; the narrative provides a message of overcoming deprivation through the agency of a Buddhist monk named ‘*Ananda*’. The right to be respected as a human being by repudiating caste discrimination on religious grounds and above all the establishment of an egalitarian society are underscored in this play.⁹

Rabindranath sought to break the bonds of all kinds of discrimination not only through his writings but also through his socio-economic actions. On the one hand, through the binary institutions of ‘*Visva-Bharati*’ and ‘*Sriniketan*’, he aimed to establish universal unity by uniting humanity regardless of race, religion and caste. On the other hand, he sought to develop self-reliance among the marginalized communities by facilitating grassroots problem solving. The institution sought to achieve this through vocational training and hands-on pedagogical approaches, thereby empowering the rural community to sustain themselves with dignity. For this, he wanted to establish social equality by establishing cooperatives. The motto of Visva-Bharati University is “*Yatra Vishvam Bhavatyekanidam*”¹⁰ meaning, “Where the whole world meets in a single nest. (Becomes a dwelling place)”. That is, Rabindranath

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

Tagore wanted Santiniketan to be a place where people from all over the world would live like one family without any discrimination.

By establishing 'Sriniketan', Rabindranath Tagore endeavored to ameliorate the economic and social conditions of the marginalized rural populace. He aimed to render the villagers self-reliant by training them in modern agricultural methods, animal husbandry, and cottage industries.¹¹ Along with this, he tried to improve the economic condition of the villagers by forming small-scale industrial cooperatives. This was not merely an act of philanthropy, but a strategic attempt to awaken their intrinsic agency.

Matua Ideology: Liberation and Social Resistance from the Periphery

The Matua Dharma promulgated by Sri Sri Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) was fundamentally human-centric and based on the theology of the household. Under the leadership of his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur, the Matua movement assumed a revolutionary form. This Matua Dharma essentially a spontaneous rebellion against the hegemony of the Brahminical society by the lower castes, especially the Namasudras.

“Udara adarsa hena habe naka aar
Garhasthya dharmete srestha guruchad amar.
Tar baṇi tamra bhab jibe lao sukhe.
Laiya grhira dharma guruchad ḍake.”¹²

(Free Translation: “Such noble ideals shall never be found again, My Guruchand is supreme in the practice of ‘Garhasthya’ (domestic) religion. Embrace his teachings and his essence with joy in your soul; Guruchand calls upon all to follow the path of the householder.”)

Matua philosophy emphasized domesticity as a sacred space. It was a religious ideology that did not ignore temporal suffering and poverty of this world, but rather posited that one could attain transcendence by fulfilling the responsibilities of family life and engaging in honest living, and leading a peaceful domestic life.

“Hate kaj mukhe nam, dila sabe moksadhama,
Ghare ghare hari nama karila pracara”¹³

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

(Free Translation: "With hands to toil and lips to pray,
To salvation's door, you led the way;
From door to door, the Name was spread,
By the holy light that you have shed.")

The mantra 'Hate Kam Mukhe Nam' (Work with the hands, the Name on the lips) is central to Matua philosophy. It serves as a revolutionary synthesis of secular labor and spiritual devotion, challenging the traditional caste-based hierarchy that divorced physical work from spiritual pursuits. By sacralizing labor, Harichand Thakur provided the marginalized masses with a sense of dignity and a direct path to liberation within their mundane existence.

In this Matua religion, there is no distinction of race, religion, caste, or socio-economic strata. Everyone is called the children of God and it is preached that everyone is equal.

"Prasasta garhasthya dharma jibe sikṣa dite.
Harichand abatirṇa hana abanite.
Brahmaṇa, kayastha, jara sudra sadhu nar.
Chatrisa barṇer loke holo ekattar."¹⁴

(Free Translation: "To impart the teachings of a sublime domestic religion to all beings,
Harichand manifested upon this earth;
Brahmins, Kayasthas, and the virtuous Shudra saints-
People of all thirty-six castes were unified as one.")

This verse highlights the radical inclusivity of the Matua movement. By integrating highborn Brahmins and the marginalized Shudras into a single spiritual fold, Harichand Thakur initiated a practical blueprint for a 'post-caste' social order, where ritual hierarchy is replaced by moral and spiritual equality.

The Matuya ideology strongly rejects Vedic rituals, incarnation theories, and sacerdotal rule of Brahmanism. The followers of this philosophy have introduced separate rules or regulations for themselves in the field of social rituals such as child-naming, marriage, Shraddha, etc.¹⁵ even separate rules of worship have been introduced according to the Matuya philosophy.¹⁶

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

Guruchand Thakur and the Vanguard of Subaltern Social Reform

After the demise of Harichand Thakur, his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur intertwined the idea of spiritual liberation with the attainment of education and social rights. He transformed the Matua Dharma into a powerful social and political movement. He established many schools to spread education among the lower classes.

“Pathasala na thakile kotha siksa pabe.
Pathasala kare prabhu iha mane bhebe.
Nijagriha pare prabhu kare pathasala.
Desabasi chatra asi karila jatala.”¹⁷

(Free Translation: If there is no school, where will you get education?)

Prabhu made Pathshala or school with this in mind.

After his home, the Lord made the school.

Nearby students came for admission.)

This verse documents the foundational moment of the Matua educational revolution. By transforming his private residence into a public space for learning, Guruchand Thakur democratized education for the formerly untouchable masses, challenging the traditional monopoly of upper castes over intellectual capital. For Guruchand Thakur, education was the pivotal tool for eliminating social backwardness.

“Ye jatir ghare bidya nahi bhare’
Durbhaga janibe tare.
Dhana-mana-brtha bidya nahi jatha
Loke upahas kare.
Bidyar karone muni rrhishigane
Tapasya karila kata.
Bidya chila bale ei biswbatale
Prithibi sundar eto.”¹⁸

(Free Translation: The lineage that harbors no wisdom within its home shall be deemed ill fated. Wealth and honor are futile where knowledge is absent; such a people become the objects of ridicule. For the sake of enlightenment, the ancient sages and seers practiced

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

rigorous penance. It is through the power of knowledge that this worldly sphere, this earth, has become so beautiful.”)

“Khaw ba na khaw tate kono dukkho nai,
Chele pule siksha dao ei ami chai.”¹⁹

(Free translation: Whether you feast or endure hunger, let there be no sorrow;
My only mandate is this: empower your children with education.)

While Tagore's 'Gora' seeks spiritual and intellectual liberation through self-realization, Guruchand Thakur identifies 'institutional education' as the primary tool for the material and social emancipation of the subaltern. Both visions converge in the belief that a 'post-caste society' is impossible without a revolutionary shift in consciousness through knowledge. Matua ideology accords due respect to women, recognizing equal rights advocating for widow remarriage, and opposing child marriage.

“Eknari brahmachari palo grihadharma,
Grihadharma nosto hole nosto sob karma.”²⁰

(Free translation: Practice the sanctity of domestic life with unwavering devotion to one's wife; for if the foundation of the household is ruined, all noble endeavors shall perish.)

It has been said again,

“Grihasrama 'pore sorbbo dharmmo bosu roy,
Grihasrama raksha hole dharma raksha hoy.”²¹

(Free translation: All spiritual virtues reside upon the bedrock of the household; When the sanctity of the home is preserved, the essence of Dharma itself is upheld.)

By elevating '*Grihasrama*' (domestic life) as the locus of all spiritual and social virtues, Matua philosophy challenges the traditional ascetic tradition that often marginalized women. Harichand Thakur's mandate for '*Eknari Brahmachari*' (monogamous devotion) and the preservation of the household's sanctity repositioned women not as obstacles to liberation, but as essential partners in the quest for social and spiritual dignity.

A pivotal milestone in Guruchand Thakur's socio-political activism was his successful campaign to reconstruct the caste identity of the marginalized masses. Prior to the

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

Census of 1901, the community was officially categorized under the derogatory term '*Chandal*'. Recognizing the psychological and social burden of this stigma, Guruchand Thakur launched a persistent movement, appealing to the colonial administration and judicial authorities. His efforts culminated in a historic victory where 'Namasudra' formally replaced the term '*Chandal*' in official records. The 1901 Census of India mentioned the term 'Chandal Namasudras' as a caste, and the 1911 Census of India used only the term 'Namasudras' to refer to that caste.²² Thereby reclaiming a sense of social status for his people.

Discussion: Finding a Common Path in both Philosophy

The aspiration to establish a post-caste society was a shared objective in Rabindranath's thought and Matua religion. Both philosophies repudiate the inherent differences between people and view complex religious rituals as a tool of social oppression. Both ideologies simplify religion, reject artificiality and emphasize the human heart and conduct. Although Matua is a theological framework and Rabindranath's thought is a modern philosophy of life. The desire to establish an egalitarian, dignified and exploitation-free society is strikingly congruent in both philosophies.

Both schools consider economic independence and the dignity of labor essential for social liberation. Driven by this vision, Rabindranath established 'Sriniketan', primarily aimed at rural reconstruction and fostering self-reliance. On the other hand, in Matua religion, in opposition to the asceticism of upper caste thinking, domestic religion is recognized as the pinnacle of practice. In Rabindranath's thought, 'Brahmah' is formless and universal. In all his writings, devotion to 'living people' supersedes ritualistic deities. Similarly, in Matua religion, man is the manifestation of God. Therefore, 'Hari' in Matua philosophy is basically a symbol of anthropocentrism, contrary to the concept of Brahmanical gods and goddesses. Humanity has helped both frameworks rise above caste differences.

Influence and Contemporary Relevance

Rabindranath Tagore's thought sensitized the educated society to the harmful effects of caste discrimination and narrow nationalism. His Visva-Bharati institution worked as an

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

experiment to eliminate social and cultural differences. On the other hand, the Matua Movement was one of the first organized freedom movements of the lower castes in colonial India. In fact, it was a platform for resistance against social oppression. Its primary legacy was the escalation of education, self-esteem and political awareness among the lower castes under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur, which later played a special role in the rise of Dalit politics in Bengal.

Conclusion

There is a rare convergence between these two schools of thought in the quest for the liberation of marginalized people. However, these two streams have not yet completely dismantled the caste-based structural exploitation rooted in the society. Therefore, the relevance of both paradigms persists. In an era where the contemporary world is once again fractured by religious and ethnic stratifications, these two profound paradigms- Tagore's universal humanism and the Matuas' spiritual-domesticity of labor and liberation- offer an indispensable roadmap. Together, they guide us toward the realization of a post-caste, egalitarian, and truly humane society, liberated from all forms of exploitation. Both streams have rejected the religion of rituals and sought to establish love for people, the dignity of labor and the inherent value of people above birth identity. In modern India, where casteism and social inequality still prevail, the combination of these two ideals can be the main step towards building a truly inclusive and free society. Ultimately, the synthesis of Tagore's aesthetic spirituality and Guruchand Thakur's pragmatic activism creates a holistic framework for human dignity, proving that the dream of a 'post-caste society' is not merely a poetic ideal, but a tangible social necessity.

Notes and References

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² G. S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 148.

³ Charles Varghese and Sheethal S. Kumar, "Marginality: A Critical Review of the Concept," *Review of Development and Change* 27, no. 1 (2022): 23–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09722661221096681>.

⁴ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, Rabindra Racanabali (1393; Viswabharati, 1422), 3:650.

⁵ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, 3:557.

⁶ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, 3:454.

⁷ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, 3:664.

Seeking Liberation from Marginality: The Vision of a Post-Caste Society in Tagore's Philosophy and Matua Ideology

⁸ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, 3:664.

⁹ Rabindranath Thakur, *Rabindra Racanabali*, Rabindra Racanabali (1396; Viswabharati, 1426), 12:211–27.

¹⁰ This verse is an excerpt from a hymn in the Vajasaneyi Samhita of the Shukla Yajurveda. It was the eminent scholar Pandit Vidhusekhar Shastri who brought this shloka to Rabindranath Tagore's attention, subsequent to which Tagore adopted it as the foundational motto (Sankalpa-vakya) for Visva-Bharati.; Additionally, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visva-Bharati_University accessed on 12.02.2026 at 1.01 pm)

¹¹ Furthermore, the project aimed to enhance rural healthcare systems, facilitate disease prevention, and foster awareness regarding hygiene and sanitation among the villagers.

¹² Tarak Chandra Haldar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita* (Thakurnagar, North 24 Pargana, 1419), 300.

¹³ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 6th ed. (Resolution, 1418), 126.

¹⁴ Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh*, 2nd ed. (Dipali Book House, 1997), 54.

¹⁵ Sri Nirod Boron Howladar, *Matua Dharmadarsha Mate Bibidha Kriya Karmer Bidhan*, 2nd ed. (Matua Mahasangha, Sridham Thakurbari, 1990).

¹⁶ Sri Nirod Boron Howladar, *Matua Dharmamate Puja Paddhoti*, 2nd ed. (Matua Mahasanghadhipoti, 2001).

¹⁷ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 102.

¹⁸ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 126.

¹⁹ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 144.

²⁰ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 14.

²¹ Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 14.

²² Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita*, 255–58.