

Aspects of the History of the Struggle for Modern Education in Colonial Bengal A Case Study of A Dalit Caste- Poundras (Pods)

Abstract

Access to modern education for the Dalits in Bengal was possible due to various efforts made by the government and some initiatives in the second half of the nineteenth century. This article weaves a narrative of the advancement made by the members of a particular caste – Poundra – in the first half of the twentieth century. It has been argued that the Dalits had experienced consistent denial to access to education till the colonial government initiatives came. Afterwards, improvements were made due to some enlightened people's initiatives. Education became the means of achieving the social status and economic mobility of Dalit middle class. However, the middle class Dalit came from few scheduled castes such as Namasudra, Sunri and Paundra castes. As numerically dominant, they tended to grab most opportunities. Overall, it made some impact for some dalit families but most of the people were not able to get education.

Keywords: Poundras, Namasudra, Bengal, Raicharan Sardar, Mahendranath Karan.

Introduction

In the year of 1891, according to a report on the state in education in the Bengal province by caste,¹ the Eurasians stood at the top of the list with four literate men in every 5 males, which meant that 80 percent of the Eurasians were literate. After that followed the Mahesris (705 literate males per 1000) and the Oswals (649 literate males per 1000). The high literacy level reported in both the castes was to some extent fictitious. They were mostly immigrants who had come to the province as traders, and almost all of them were adults.² Among the indigenous castes, the Baidyas took the first place (literate male population of 648 per 1000), followed by the Kayasthas (560 literate males per 1000), the Karans (528 literate males per 1000), the Subarnabaniks (519 literate males per 1000) and Gandhabaniks (510 literate males per 1000), the Aguris (498 literate males per 1000), and the Brahmans with (467 literate males per 1000) respectively.³ Perhaps the figures may have been higher for the true Kayasthas of Bengal Proper, but this caste was weighted, not only by the inclusion of a certain number of outsiders of lower rank, chiefly Sudras, who often pretended to be Kayasthas, but also by the fact that a certain portion of the community took to service, rather than to clerical work, as a means of livelihood. The educational status of the other high castes was comparatively low. Among the artisan castes of Bengal proper, the Kansaris, Tiliş, and Mayras were the most educated, while in Bihar the Halwai stood first.⁴

Lower castes generally occupied a very low place, as far as literacy is concerned. But an exception is furnished by the Pods of the 24-Parganas, amongst whom the proportion of males who could read and write exceeds 1 in 6 at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ It is a fact that the Pods became aware about lack of education since the second half of the nineteenth century and the educated ones, during the period under review, had left no stone unturned for the spread of primary education among their caste fellows. At that time their attempt could not reach the goal. The Census Report of 1911 mentioned that two ambitious castes endeavoured to raise their socio-economic status through education the Chasi Kaibarttas and the Pods. There was, however, a fall in the literacy level of Chasi Kaibarttas in 1911 compared with 1901, since a number of Jaliya Kaibarttas chose to call themselves Chasi Kaibarttas. The number of



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educated persons among the Chasi Kaibarttas was relatively two and half times greater than of the Jaliyas. The Pods, on the other hand, made great strides—the literacy level nearly doubled in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Namasudras and Rajbanshis also made considerable advancement, though only one in every 20 could read and write, whereas among the Chasi Kaibarttas one in nine, and among the Pods one in seven, could do so.⁶In fact, the Kaibarttas, Pods, Namasudras, and Rajbanshi all showed signs of improvement and among these castes the Pods specially made considerable progress.

On 16 March 1911, Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced his Compulsory Elementary Education Bill, which the nationalists supported whole heartedly. The United Bengal Provincial Congress, in its Calcutta session (December 1911), passed a resolution in its favour and urged the government to enact it into a law. In this context, a zamindar wrote the following to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, to express his opinion on the spread of education among the masses: System of the wholesale spread of education...will cause a great and violent disturbance in every phase of the present settled order of things, and will throw the whole country, as it were, out of equilibrium, and such a system...Will not only... spoil the temper of the masses, but will tend to upset and disturb the harmonious relation now existing between various classes and communities, domestic relations not escaping its disturbing influence.⁷

The above bill, though supported by majority but the orthodox people of Hindu society could not welcome or support it. They were afraid that if the lower strata of the society become educated, they would, by a spirit of insubordination, think reasonably and claim their legitimate rights. The depressed class with no exception welcomed the bill for their own interest.

Mean while, in 1909, C. F. Andrews clearly stated that the degradation of the lower castes was India's open wound. But a certain group of educated upper caste people were not aware of the grave problems faced by the lower castes. *The Modern Review*, in an editorial comment in November 1912, expressed, 'If we had no pariah, no despised or untouchable castes among ourselves ... if we could march forward in a practically solid phalanx, the movement for the betterment of our international position would acquire a greater momentum than it possesses at present.'⁸ The famous Bengali scientist, Acharya Profulla Chandra Roy, wrote, 'Those who want to think of India as a nation cannot leave anybody aside'.⁹ It should be borne in mind that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was the missionaries who pioneered the education of the lower castes. Fresh efforts, often with the help of the missionaries, were made in the various districts of Bengal for the spread of education. But progress remained slow. In 1901, only 3.3 per cent of the Namasudras were literate, and in 1911, it rose to only 4.9 per cent.¹⁰ In the 1920s, the colonial government offered special scholarships and studentships for the education of the lower castes, and following that,

offered free hostel accommodation.¹¹ As a result, literacy improved further. In 1921, 8.5 percent of the Namasudras aged five years and over were literate.¹² Among the educated Namasudras, a marginal number made their way into the professional class, but their number, as has already been pointed out, was quite insignificant. One of the major reasons for such slow progress in the arena of education and employment, the Namasudras believed, was the competition they had to face from the better equipped members of the higher castes.¹³

Though the government did give out scholarships, these were meant for the best students, irrespective of caste and religion, and not the lower caste students exclusively. There were two main reasons why lower caste students could not access higher education: unaffordability and an indifference towards education. It is not always true that lower caste boys faced discrimination during admissions. The government sometimes admitted lower caste students in schools without any fees. Apart from this, the government opened special schools for them. In 1913, the Government of India provided a non-recurring grant of Rs. 3, 65, 000, of which Rs. 30,000 was spent on establishing free schools in backward areas. These schools did not charge their students any fees.¹⁴ On 28 February 1914, the Director of Public Instruction announced in the Bengal Legislative Council that 'one third of the boys attending primary schools in Eastern Bengal and one tenth in Western Bengal were reading practically free'.¹⁵

As a result the numbers of literate increased gradually. In Bengal 181 per mile of the male population aged 5 and over was literate and 21 per mile of the female population above the same age. Taking both sexes together the proportion was 104 per mile. Compared with European standards it was extremely low, but compared with Indian standards it was comparatively high. Thanks to the free instruction imparted in the monasteries / missionaries and the absence of the *parda* system that hampered the education of females in other parts of the country. Among the cultivating castes those belonged to central Bengal and the delta parts of western Bengal, the Pods and the Chasi Kaibarttas were considerably ahead of those who belonged to Eastern and Northern Bengal, the Namasudras, Rajbanshis and the Muhammadan Shekhs.¹⁶

According to W. H. Thompson, the term depressed classes has never been defined and it is not easy to define. It has not quite the same meaning as backward classes. The classes backward in education and in civilisation generally and yet is not quite conterminous with the lowest class in the Hindu social scale. There are classes among the Muhammadans which are very backward in education as there are Buddhist, Animist and Hindu tribes in the Darjeeling hills and in the hill tracts to the east of the Province, but when the question of proportion of representation of the depressed classes in the Democratic Government of the country is considered, it is obviously not intended that any Muhammadan section shall be included among them, for separate representation has been given to Muhammadans.

Education does not by any means go hand in hand with social position in the country. There are castes like, for instance, the Sunris and the Telis, who in education are far advanced, compared with castes which rank below or level with them in the social scale and I would certainly not count such castes among the depressed classes.¹⁷

No details have been provided in this Census Report on the literacy levels of women. According to the Bengali periodical *Bamabodhini*, 'obstacles of female education are-(1) wrong idea of natives about the purpose of education (2) child marriage (3) Non availability of female teachers (4) lack of sincerity. The native people thought that the aim of learning was mainly to earn money. As the girls in this society were not destined to earn their livelihood education was meaningless'. In response, *Bamabodhini* offered the following argument: 'Learning does not aim at earning only. It has a noble purpose. Its aim is to develop and enlighten the mental facilities gifted by God and to unfold the glories of Him'.¹⁸

Aim of this Study

There have been many attempts over the past one hundred and fifty years to help increase the quality of life for the Dalits of India through development focused on enrolment in education. Education provides individuals with the means to increase their income and to engage in economic activities. In addition, this study can help empower individuals to lobby for social change through political activism. Apart from this the study is an attempt to show the position of the lower castes in colonial period which should be a subject to express throughout the world as it has never been a matter of concern for the scholars or writers for many years. There are so many things which I want to make visible as Dalit is a Caste who not only made a serious attempt to upraise their position in the society but also the educated Dalits were very much aware of the fact concerning of education for their fellow cast men. It deserves to be mentioned that this study has also a serious focus on how so many higher caste members of the society were so much eager to make the untouchables educated to make their own society to be uplifted. Non-Brahman intellectuals of the first two decades of the twentieth century importuned the British authorities to increase the availability of government education and employment for lower caste. I am conscious of the fact that if the untouchables come into existence in respect of education and employment the community will surely progress. In fact the progress of the society should be measured in terms of the progress made by its Dalit caste or lower caste members. I think every lower caste members should stand by their higher caste members of the society, not as his slave but as his contemporary. So this study provides a specimen of ability of the untouchables to be a important part of the social upbringing.

Distribution of the Educated Dalits' in Bengal

Among the natives of the country, the Baidyas were *facile princeps*.¹⁹ More than one of his females in every 4 could read and write. The question

that will probably be asked at once is where are the Brahmins? But in the province, as a whole, there position was very low and only about 26 females per mile were literate. In Bengal Proper the proportion rose to 56 per mile. The position of the Kayasths also was improved, if only Bengal Proper be considered, and here the proportion was nearly 80 per mile. The large number of females who were literate amongst the converts to Christianity from the Santals and Garo tribes was note-worthy. Such was the high place held by Sabarnabanik females. This, however, was to a great extent due to the fact that the proportions were calculated on 25,000 Subarnabaniks enumerated in Calcutta. They formed less than a sixth of the total population of this caste in Bengal, and were more advanced than their caste fellows in other parts of the province; if the whole community had been surveyed, then their position would doubtless have been lower.²⁰

Awareness among the Depressed Castes for their upliftment

In the first quarter of twentieth century the lower castes began to feel that they deserved special privileges to make good the handicap they suffered from as a result of centuries of social discrimination and economic exploitation. In other words, it was only through the intervention of the superior state power that they could circumvent their handicap. This attitude of the educated Namasudras, trying to carve out a place for themselves in the new competitive world of professions and institutional politics, brought them closer to the colonial government. And as a consequence, they also moved further away from the nationalist movement led, as it was, in the early twentieth century, by the high caste Hindu *bhadralok*.²¹ Sekhar Bandopphayay explains it in these words- 'When the lower caste began to oppose the nationalist demand for self-government in 1918-19, and asked for adequate safeguard for their own official rights, Acharya Profulla Chandra Roy described it as a penance for the Hindu society for its own meanness and accumulated sins had they not been subjugated in such a way for such a long time. Another Hindu social reformer wrote that they would not interpret self-government as a possible road of Brahmin oligarchy. This fissiparous tendency, he thought, was the main cause of Indians loss of independence and so, it had to be rooted out, the earlier, the better'.²²

Among the Poundras, there were some people who realized the importance of modern education. But these initiatives could give good results only in the 1920s. Raicharan Sardar, the first graduate and Bachelor of law among the Poundras who realized that every member of his community should be literate and with this end in view he established a number of primary and high schools in 24 Paraganas. He also founded a hostel *Arya Poundra Brahmacharya Ashram* for the Pod students in Calcutta. Raicharan Sardar established two other institutions namely Jagadishpur *Sitikanta Institute* and Gobindopur *Middle English School* in 1925 and with the help of other Poundra elite the Middle School was elevated to an English High School.²³ With the help of Khulna District Board a Middle English School was

established at Paikgachcha in Khulna. Rajendranath Sarkar was the Vice president of the school. Later a college was established at Paikgachcha. Some other Pod leaders such as Mahendranath Karan, Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, Benimadhab Haldar, Rajendra Nath Sarkar, Pandit Bipin Behari Moni Kabayasagar and Dr. Dhruva Chand Haldar etc. endeavoured to promote welfare and education of their caste fellows. It was because of the encouragement and financial help of Dhruva Chand Haldar a college was established in South Barasat area in 1965. Bankim Chandra Sardar, a great patron of education established *Bankim Chandra Sardar College* at Tangrakhali village of canning Police station in 1955. Fakir Chand Haldar College in South 24 Parganas and Sundarban Mahavidyalaya in the hinterland of Kakdwip were also established by the Poundra for development of education.²⁴

The arrival of primary press generate tremendous excitement among the educated depressed classes and Pods in particular who expressed their views through their writings towards the upliftment of socio-economic and political condition. The socio-economic changes taking place in Bengal helped them in creating the impression that only those who would be educated would achieve the benefits of employment and attain social prestige and political power. The educated leaders of the community started publication of periodicals and in those periodicals such as *Protigya* (1918), *Kshatriya* (1920), *Poundrakshatriya Samachar* (1924), *Poundra kshatriya Bandhab* (1951), etc. the glorious past history of Poundra Society, traditions, problems of the caste etc. were focused. The periodicals were published to awaken the large number of people of the society in lieu of confining the objective of the periodicals to a small number of people.²⁵ Some books had already been published earlier which had tried to prove that the Pods, the so-called low caste, untouchables, down-trodden and neglected ones were actually Kshatriya by birth. *Jativedek* (1891) written by Benemadhab Haldar is a treatise on the caste system and customs of Hindus where the author has shown a great zeal to prove the high position of the Poundras in the social hierarchy. Mahendra Nath Karan wrote *A Short History and Ethnology of the cultivating Pods* describing the glorious past of Pods. *Poundra Kshatriya Samachar* was a caste-oriented social mouthpiece where topics of contemporary Bengali Society like untouchability, Brahmin ate at Mussalman's house, social prejudices, caste issues etc. were published to eradicate social evils and establish equality in Poundra Society.²⁶

It deserves mention that the periodicals, books, and newspapers which were published by the leaders of Pod community raised voice against the oppression and humiliation towards the Poundra community by the Caste Hindus and desired to uplift the community by eradicating some social evils prevalent among the caste men and make the community aware of their glorious past. Papers like *Poundra Kshatriya Samachar* and *Pratigya* published the proceedings of meetings of the Poundras held at different places. It appears from the proceedings of

the meetings that the Poundras were very much aware of the shortcomings of their own community which they wanted to remove. Education was considered necessary and the leaders insisted the parents of Poundra Community to provide proper education to their children and prohibit child marriage. As Sri Anukul Chandra Das observed 'compulsory primary education is the only remedy of ills and evils in the community. If we want good result in education we have to utilize agriculture, commerce and industry. Ninety percent people of our community are agriculturists. Education will rectify us by eliminating prejudices from our society and will make us well behaved and integrated'. The periodical *Poundra Kshatriya bandhav* refused to support the idea of reservation of seats in the legislature and in employment as a means of maintaining parity with the upper caste Hindus. The only way of survival or progress, according to this periodical was education and eradication of prejudices, idleness and inexperience.²⁷

By this time Government had started giving a lot of facilities to the lower caste people in the name of education and reservation in government employment, which satisfied the lower caste elites and leaders for the time being. Though the nationalist press jointly condemned these provisions specially reservation in the name of communal re-presentation. In this context the reputed Bengali newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* 19th June 1927 wrote that 'this would lead to more communal quarrel and inefficiency'. Contrary to this the *Bangabasi* in the context of Gandhi's untouchability began justifying governments move, 'as a legitimate method of self-preservation'.²⁸

This is an attempt to highlight the role of educated Pods for the spread of education and the modern education in particular and its impact on the caste in the period under review. A detailed look into the life histories of the prominent members of Pod intelligentsia can be very useful in preparing an account of growing participation of the Pods in the social life of the region in which the Pods lived. It is a fact that the Pods became aware about lack of education since the second half of the 19th century and educated people among them during the period under review had left no stone unturned for the spread of primary education among their caste brothers; but their attempt could not reach the target. Even after more than six decades of independence, the standard of education is still not high. Only one third of their male members are matriculates and only about five (5) percent of literate boys are graduates. Women of the present generation are going to school but their percentage of literacy and level of education is not high.²⁹

Conclusion

With the establishment of the British administration in Bengal, some new opportunities for social mobility come in the way in the shape of Western education and new professions. The question of disseminating English education began to receive attention in nineteenth century The Pods concentrated as education with the belief that by virtue of being educated, power and prestige would

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automatically follow. The eminent personalities among the Pods such as Benimadhav Halder, Mahendranath Karan, Rajendranath Sarkar, Raicharan Sardar and others started uniting mobility to maintain their ethnic identity and try to convince the people that education was the only avenue that could transform their fates and played an important role in promoting education among their caste members. The leaders through their writings expressed their views towards the upliftment of socio-economic condition. In course of time Pods like many other depressed castes became conscious of their separate social identity and claimed higher status in caste hierarchy.

It deserves mention that social mobility of the Pod Caste as also the other caste communities of Bengal was stimulated in the colonial period due to the spread of western education and new opportunities in employment. Educated section of the lower caste communities of Bengal had generated a sense of self-respect in their respective caste society.

Footnotes

1. E. A. Gait, *Census of India 1901*, 301–302.
2. E. A. Gait, *Census of India 1901*, 301–302.
3. *The low position of the Brahmans is due to the figures for Bihar, where only 273 men per mile of this caste can read or write. In Bengal proper, the proportion is 639 men per 1000, which is exceeded only in the case of the Baidyas.*
4. E. A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901, Vol. V, Part I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1902)*, 301.
5. E. A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901, Education, Bengal Secretariat Press Calcutta, 1902, Chapter IX, Para 488, p. 302.*
6. L.S.S.O' Malley, *Census of India 1911, Vol. V, Part I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1913)*, 360.
7. Cited in Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Cast Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872–1947 (Richmond Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997)*, 97.
8. C. F. Andrews, "A Review of the Modern World", *The Modern Review*, 1909, 11–12.
9. Profulla Chandra Roy, *Jatibhed O Patitya Syamasa in Benali (n.d.)*, 17–18 and 29.
10. L.S.S.O' Malley, *Census of India, 1911*, 359–356.
11. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, 52–94.
12. W.H. Thompson, *Census of India, 1921, Vol. V, Part I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1922)*, 292.
13. Mukunda Behari Mallick, "Forward", in Raicharan Biswas, *Jatiya Jagaran (Calcutta, 1912)*, 6.
14. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings (Calcutta: General Branch, Education, 1914)*, Progs. No. 59–60.
15. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings (Calcutta: General Branch, 1914) Vol. 46, Progs. No. 161.*
16. W. H Thompson, *Census of India, 1921, vol. v, part I, chapter VIII, published by Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1922, para-177, p. 293.*
17. W. H Thompson, *Census Report of India 1921, Vol. 5, Part I (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1922)*, 365.
18. Binoy Ghosh (ed.), *Samajik Patre Banglar Samaj Chitra, Vol. IV, 1966*, 571–573.
19. *Regarding education for women, the Baidyas were far more advanced than any other community, followed by the Brahmans, Kayasthas, Indian Christians, and some of the mercantile castes such as Subarnabanik, Shaha, and Gandhabanik. There were no castes in which education had made any considerable impression on the female population. "Literacy", Report on the Census of India 1901*, 302.
20. E. A. Gait. *Census of India 1901*, 302.
21. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Sekhar, Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937*, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 1990, p. 137.
22. Kabyavyakarantirtha, *Madhusudan, Nimna O Patit Jati, (in Bengali), (Calcutta, 1328 BS)*, pp.91-92, 137-157.
23. *Poundra Manisha, vol. I, pp. 11-13*
24. Naskar, Dhurjati, *Poundra Kshatriya Kulatilak, op. Cit. Pp. 70-71.*
25. Dilip Gayen, *Jago Poundrasamaj Jago, Kolkata, 2012, pp. 23-24.*
26. Benimadhav Deb Haldar, *Jativedik, 1891.*
27. *This report was sent by Panchkori Roy Mondal. It was first published in the Poundra Kshatriya Samachar, Pratham Varsha, Tiritiya Sankhya, Baishak, 1331 B. S. (1924.*
28. *Report on Newspaper and periodicals in Bengal for the week ending 10th January, 1925.*
29. *Majority of depressed class, the Dalit, all over India, even today live below poverty line. Therefore they have to struggle day in and day out for two square meals, when this is done they aspire for a roof over their head, a piece of cloth to cover their body. Then comes the question of health, hygiene, literacy and so on. But these later things came into consideration only after Primary education becomes wide spread among the people and when a good percentage of them became well educated. Today they understand that if one really wants to write the history of one's own caste, the best caste history would be the one written by the caste member, the people of their own community.* Singh, K. S. & Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *People of India, West Bengal, Volume XXXVIII, part II, Calcutta 2008*, p. 1023.