

Portrayal of the Matuas in the Christian Missionary Writings

Debabbrata Mondal*

Abstract

The paper exposes the socio-economic condition of the early 20th-century Matua community of Bangladesh. It unfolds how the Matuas strived for elevation to the mainstream of national life. They desired for upliftment by securing their rightful and logical position in the broader arena dismantling untouchability and social exclusion imposed on them. They took education as the most suitable medium to make them worthy for every sphere of life. It tells the Australian Baptist missionaries' outlook on the Matuas and their remarks on the Matuas' uplifting activities as well as the Matuas' gradually changing views on life and society. It reflects why the missionaries came to Orakandi. Every single issue of the community has been presented on the basis of the experiences of four missionaries who worked among the Matuas and/or collected a vast knowledge on this once despised backward class of people. Among the four missionaries, three are from the 20th century, and the rest one is from the 21st century and their four relevant books have been selected for this study.

Key words: Matua, Untouchables, Backward class, Namasudra, Orakandi, Missionary, Upliftment.

1. Introduction

The socio-economic condition of the early 20th century Matua community of Bangladesh (the then Eastern Bengal) has been presented in the writings of the missionaries of the Australian Baptist Missionary Society. After a minute survey, the missionaries could know that the largest number of the Matuas lived in the rice-swampy beels of Faridpur district. And Orakandi, the southern part of the district, was regarded as the heart of the Matuas. Again, they knew that Guruchand Thakur (Guru Charan Biswas), the most revered and undisputed leader of the Matua community lived in Orakandi village. As the missionaries found Orakandi as the heart of all activities of the community, they took Faridpur and particularly Orakandi as strategically important and the most appropriate working station for materializing their vision of expansion of Christianity through the mass conversion of the Matuas. The missionaries reached, and, facing much odds, began to dwell among the Matuas first at Faridpur in 1882 and then at Orakandi in 1907, respectively. Experiencing the

* PhD Research Fellow, Institute of Bangladesh Studies, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205

overall miserable condition of the community, the missionaries felt the pressing need to assist the community to earn recognition from the government.¹ What the missionaries experienced and felt about the typical life of the Matuas who struggled hard to get uplifted in society and desired for rightful and logical elevation to the mainstream of national life is really an invaluable record to know the Matuas as a whole. Thus, the relevant missionary writings present a vivid and picturesque account of the Matua community of Bangladesh.

2. The Matuas and the Missionaries

The term Matua, in this paper, collectively refers to those socio-economically backward classes of people of Bangladesh who were scripturally considered untouchable in and excluded from the Hindu society. Matua community generally consists of the Namasudras, the Paundrakshatrias and the Rajbanshis who were the largest backward classes of Bangladesh. However, the majority Matuas who are primarily farmers belong to the lowest and much despised Namasudra caste. In the first census of India in 1872, the Namasudras were enlisted in the Hindu fold under the ‘Semi-Hinduised Aborigines’ category with the hated ‘Chandal’ title which was officially abolished in 1911. In the missionary writings, the term ‘Namasudra’ has been written as ‘Nama Sudra’. Those who were termed early as Chandals and Namasudras are usually now called Matuas. As both the terms ‘Matua’ and ‘Namasudra’ almost stand for equal meaning with tremendous socio-economic backwardness, oppression and degradation of people, they are often used synonymously. Again, Matua is also synonymous to the *Tapashili* people—the Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes of Hindu society. Nowadays, to refer to the backward classes of the OBC, and the Dalits, the term ‘Matua’ is used with equal meaning and magnitude.

In 1865, the Australian Missionary Committee could know first through the speech of Reverend J.C. Page, a missionary from Australia worked at Barisal in 1865, that there were ‘no Christian workers were located’ in the Indian Eastern Bengal districts of Faridpur, Pubna, Mymensingh and Comilla.² The committee thought to send Christian evangelists in those Eastern Bengal districts. Then the South Australian Missionary Committee raised fund to support the Indian Christian evangelists at

1 Elva Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib: The Story of Dr Cecil Silas Mead*, 2nd ed. (Capalaba, Queensland: Even Before Publishing, 2013), p. 76. [2006].

2 Walter Barry, *There Was A Man: The Life of Cecil Silas Mead: Missionary-Doctor* (Melbourne: Australian Baptist Foreign Mission, 1952), pp. 32-33.

Faridpur, Bangladesh.³ It is to note that the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1863.⁴

In 1882, two young school teachers Miss Ellen Arnold and Miss Marie Gilbert were the first two Australian Christian Missionaries reached Faridpur, Bangladesh. Then another 4 young women missionaries including Alice Pappin who was a teacher came to Faridpur and the town was gradually turning into the centre of South Australian Baptist Missionary works.⁵ For doing missionary works wholeheartedly, Reverend Arthur Summers, the first male missionary from Australia, along with his wife came to Faridpur in 1887 and took charge of the Mission House. Arthur Summers was a good friend to Dr. C.S. Mead who did almost everything for the upliftment of the Matuas. As a missionary from Australia, on 08 November 1893, Dr Cecil Silas Mead reached Faridpur. To the Matuas - the untouchable Namasudras of Orakandi, Faridpur, Dr Mead is an unsurmountable blessing and a great friend to them forever. The first contact through correspondence between Mead and the Namasudra representatives of Orakandi took place during the last days of 1906.⁶ Mead replied the Matuas in January in 1907. Mead realized that the Matuas were not as illiterate as he thought them to be first. He along with his missionary wife Alice Pappin and two daughters reached and began to dwell in Orakandi from 1907.

On the distance of Orakandi from Faridpur Mission House, Elva Schroeder writes, 'Orakandi was only twenty-five miles southwest of Faridpur as the crow flies.'⁷ On Orakandi, Elfrida Hill writes, 'It is just a small group of islands artificially built up by excavating a spot in the boggy fertile land of the rice swamps (or beels, as they are called) of the Faridpur District, Eastern Bengal.'⁸ The collected soil heap up on the early higher portion and year after year the heaps became much lofty. Actually, Orakandi was made up of fifty or so such of artificial islands which were randomly scattered in the beels.⁹ To present a graphic account of Orakandi, Hill adds that the 'dotted little islands, which are built up high above the water line and crowded with small brown mat houses. These are the homes of the farmers, whose land is almost always under water.'¹⁰ Caste segregation kept Orakandi far off from the rest of the civilized world for centuries. The remoteness and unacquaintance of the village was

3 Ibid., p. 33.

4 Ibid., p. 32.

5 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 14.

6 Ibid., p. 66.

7 Ibid., p. 71.

8 Elfrida Hill, *Gathered Leaves* (Melbourne: The Australian Baptist Foreign Mission (Incorp.), 1934), p. 9.

9 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 72.

10 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 10.

so huge that even at the beginning of the 20th century, Orakandi was only known to the local Post Office and Police Station.¹¹ However, the former unknowingness of Orakandi vanishes quickly. At the beginning of the recognition of the Matuas, Orakandi gradually got known beyond the district boundary of Faridpur. And, Orakandi got acquainted ‘throughout Bengal and in many countries beyond the sea.’¹²

3. Why Did the Missionaries Come to Orakandi

When the missionaries in India found the caste Hindus unwilling to receive Christianity, they, in the hope of mass conversion, changed their policy and turned to the poor multitudes, the outcastes and the untouchables all over India. Actually, the mission authority found the ‘highest strategic value’ in the millions of socio-economically degraded masses. They sketched and turned ‘to capture the masses’ through a flanking movement.¹³ The missionary hopefulness for huge conversion of the masses is evident when Mead writes, ‘The richest promise lies before us in the lower classes, and the most urgent call to service is the cry that arises from their many-millioned mouth (sic).’¹⁴ The South Australian Baptist Missionary Society found Faridpur as one of the ideal locations for dealing with its missionary activities with the Matuas. To make its dream true, the Australian missionaries wanted to preach the Gospels and the sublimity of Jesus Christ and God among the Matuas. The missionaries, then, found Orakandi a remote and unacquainted village. However, Orakandi was the heart and hub of the Matua community. It is because Guruchand Thakur (Guru Charan Babu), the head man, the undisputable leader of the Matuas and a man of ‘very great and far-reaching influence,’ lived at Orakandi.¹⁵ His authority, wisdom, acceptance and reverence to the Matua community is perceived when Mead writes, ‘Humanly speaking, almost everything depends on what this man does. All eyes are upon him. Pray for him.’¹⁶ To expose the importance of Orakandi and Guruchand, Barry writes, ‘What was said and done in Orakandi was said and done by all Nama Sudras.’¹⁷ To the missionaries, thus, Orakandi ‘was the heart of things’, the true ‘strategic centre’ which must be occupied without fail.¹⁸

11 Ibid., p. 9.

12 Ibid., p. 12.

13 C.S. Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses* (Melbourne: South Australian Baptist Furreedpore Mission, Incorporated., 1911), p. 31.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 9.

16 Ibid.

17 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 136.

18 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 8.

The purpose of Orakandi Mission House is exposed when Mead explicitly says, 'My subject is Mass Movements, or God's way of winning India, and our way of winning the Nama Sudras.'¹⁹ When a deputation from Orakandi met Mead at his Faridpur Mission House and sought help for uplift, Mead as well other missionaries felt overwhelmed and got an immense opportunity to preach Christ's message among the unlettered Matuas of Orakandi. Mead says, 'This was the beginning of a contact which has caused us to see visions and to dream dreams.'²⁰ A more valid and strong proof of the missionary will becomes evident when, at the welcome note on their (Mr Mead and Mrs Mead) settling at Orakandi, Mead says, "I came to you with the Book in my hand; this is the reason for my coming amongst you. It has a message for you from the One who sent me."²¹ When it is expressed that 'education was not the chief instrument of the Holy Spirit in the field of mission,' the truth of the missionary purpose is exposed aptly.²² They wanted 'to set the name of Jesus on the lips of every Nama Sudra child,' and to cover the whole green rice-grown beel with His name.²³ Actually, they realized that such a suitable place was a tremendous blessing and the greatest opportunity to preach Jesus's message among the Matuas. As a result, the missionaries of the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society, Faridpur took Orakandi as the most suitable and significant locale for doing missionary activities for materialising their missionary purposes in Bangladesh through preaching gospels.²⁴

4. On Caste and Identity

The missionaries experienced that caste matters everything to the Hindus. Due to caste, the missionaries found fifty million men in all over India were 'sitting abject on the outskirts of Hinduism.'²⁵ They could realize that only caste determines one's social position in Hindu fold ensuring and securing learning, recognition, dignity, employment, acceptance, status, income, etc. which are the primary aspects of one's social identity. Along with its adjoining areas of Orakandi village and Faridpur, the missionaries could realize the lashing role of caste on Matua community from time immemorial. In that caste-gripped society, they found the Matuas socio-economically excluded and on the verge of extinction. Thus, the identity of the Matua community

19 Ibid., p. 27.

20 Ibid., p. 7.

21 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 143.

22 Ibid., p. 140.

23 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 46.

24 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 130.

25 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 27.

was wrapped in tremendous humiliation, negligence, indignity and fabricated and imposed untouchability.

In Hindu society, caste plays the determinant role to locate people of various occupations. It is also true to the Matuas. It is caste that forced them to congregate and live in that inhospitable beels of Faridpur district. When Hill writes that “Originally, the Namasudras were driven into these way-back swamp lands by the Higher castes, who themselves did not desire to live at close quarters with those of such low caste”²⁶, it becomes easy to read that caste controls everyone and everything. To expose their social position and general attitude on them, Hill again writes, ‘people who lived in this district are particularly all farmers, and belong to the downtrodden and much despised Nama Sudra caste. Sudra means “foot” and because these farmer folk are of the lowest Hindu caste, the name applies.’²⁷ Thus, the missionaries found the Matuas in the most ignoble existence.

Through a close discussion held between the Matua representatives from Orakandi and Mead at Faridpur Mission House in 1907, the general acceptance of and social treatment on the Matuas is perceived well. Mead, then, came to know the form of misery which the Matua community faced for generations. To unfold the Matuas’ entanglement and wretchedness, according to the deputation’s handwritten document, Barry writes what the deputation delivered, ‘We come as representatives of a great, sad class—hated, despised, downtrodden, treated for centuries like dogs. We have at last wakened to the fact that we too are men; that the same great God Who made the proud Brahmin, made us, too.’²⁸

When Mead asked the deputation, ‘what do you see as the main problems confronting your people?’²⁹, Bhisma Deb Das, one of the representatives, replied that about two thousand years they had been deprived of receiving education and employment. What is the cause of their deprivation? The missionaries knew that it was because of caste segregation. In Schroeder’s words, Bhisma Deb adds, ‘The Brahmins have kept all learning confined to the higher castes and have treated our people like animals with no rights or standing.’³⁰ It was customary then that only the caste Hindus, from Bhisma Deb’s reply, especially the Brahmins enjoyed the sole authority over education and the rest privileges available in society. How their social exclusion means untouchability impeded them from receiving higher education in

26 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 9.

27 Ibid.

28 Barry, *There Was A Man*, pp. 136-137.

29 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 69.

30 Ibid.

Kolkata, Bhisma Deb Das discloses in Schroeder's words. To express the feeling of Bhisma Deb and Sasi Babu (Shashibhushan Thakur), Schroeder writes, 'Our fathers ... made great sacrifices to send us to school in Calcutta. Sasi Babu matriculated successfully and I passed the entrance examination (sic) to allow me to study law. Then our caste was discovered and we were barred from proceeding any further. We returned Orakandi feeling completely crushed.'³¹ This bitter tale, really, coated with harsh reality, brought much humiliation on their community as a whole. Becoming a teacher and again a Headmaster to the Matuas were quite problematic.³² When the government allocated grants for their English High School, no qualified B.A. degree holder from the caste Hindus wanted to become a (Head) teacher for the Matuas. Truly speaking, caste prejudice debarred the Caste Hindus even to educate a community. In this regard, Schroeder writes, 'The first head-master sent to them had soon decided he could not let go of his prejudices to become a friend to the despised Nama Sudras.'³³ It exemplifies that though they wanted and tried hard to receive higher education, they were denied and ill-treated on the very basis of caste system. No educated caste Hindu wanted to work and become sympathetic rather than friend to render education to the Matuas let alone provide respectable employment.

During their Orakandi days, the missionaries knew that the severity done to the outcastes and the untouchables through caste practices cost much to the Hindus and it moved and made repentant some caste Hindus. Mead notes that getting known the huge decrease of the Hindus through mass conversion, one article writes, "The wages of sin is death," ... "We Hindus have sinned deeply and damnably against the laws of God and nature, and we are paying the penalty."³⁴ Their repentance, actually, validates the huge ill-treatment done to the untouchables like the Matuas. They admitted that their deeds were much responsible for decreasing their number and increasing the number of Christians. Again, when the missionaries write that 'Abundant evidence was manifest on every hand that the impenetrable jungle of superstition, suspicion, caste custom and tradition was being torn away'³⁵, it exposes that unfathomable disgrace and degradation occurred to the millions of Matuas solely for caste. Moreover, the severity and magnitude of caste is also realized when, to expose Mead's feeling on the issue, Barry writes, 'Caste segregation among Hindus presents a problem of inconceivable magnitude...endless restrictions, incongruous

31 Ibid., p. 68.

32 Ibid., p. 90.

33 Ibid.

34 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 41.

35 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 132.

scruples and social distinctions.’³⁶ The missionaries experienced that ‘a low-caste man, no matter how well educated, or clean, or self-respecting, remains an outcaste, whose touch to a Brahmin is pollution.’³⁷ Thus, like millions of outcastes and untouchables of India, the Matuas of Bangladesh, being segregated on the basis of caste, were treated as pollution. The missionaries found people of the low castes untouchables were titled variously – *Chandal*, untouchable, outcaste, excluded, sin, criminal, waste, sheet, etc. Actually, people like the Matuas were also known as ‘the human debris of India’, ‘the despair and scorn of civilisation’, ‘men of low degree’, and ‘bruised and broken’.³⁸

As it was believed that the Matuas can defile anyone, they were taken as untouchable and named as Chandal. Being untouchable, they were ineligible for everything which is given to and done for a civilized community. They were kept away from enjoying social rights and privileges of employment, health facilities, etc. Caste segregation threw them off in the farthest line of uncongenial location for human habitation. They were made captive and crippled in their own land. From these ignoble and humiliating titles used to identify the untouchables, the wretched social status of the Matuas of Bangladesh can be perceived at least to some extent.

Caste is so powerful that it could make those Christian missionaries unfit who once met let alone dined with the Matuas. To the caste Hindus, the missionaries were also despised and untouchable. During scarcity of food, for survival the missionaries sometimes took food with the untouchable Matuas. But, this act of taking food with the Matuas was taken as a violation of the caste code. Thus, the missionaries along with the Matuas were similarly treated as untouchables.

5. On Economy and Occupation

The missionaries found the Matuas extremely poor and needy. They passed days in tremendous necessity, ignorance, poverty, etc. They had to pass their days in utter hopelessness and meaninglessness. Truly speaking, the Matuas had to struggle hard to cope with abound natural hazards. For survival, they had no alternative but to toil in the inherited swamps, fish, and ply boats from dawn to dusk. Again, they had to do every other menial work for an insignificant survival.

Unlike the missionaries and the few wealthy ones, the poverty-stricken Matuas could not afford themselves to shelter in well-protected houses. They used to live in brown-

³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁷ Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 35.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 27, 32, 35.

mat houses with earthen floors and thatched roofs with little grass and weeds. Regarding their dwelling, Schroeder writes, 'When Mrs Mead visited them in small bamboo and grass huts, she was amazed at how poor and sparsely furnished they were. Some had a wooden bed or a battered chair, but little else. Their clothing was hung over a cord stretched across the hut.'³⁹ Their huts/houses were built on man-made islands which were made higher every year with the hope of keeping them safe from the flood. But flood water did never pay heed to their effort and made them always helpless.⁴⁰ Their shabby huts were incapable to save them from the frequent natural hazards. Again, they used to face life risks both in houses and also in cultivable areas which were almost drowned under water for more than six months a year.

The Matuas were and still are primarily farmers. Rice is their staple food. As a result, rice cultivation was very common to the inhabitants of this region. However, a few knew and ran small business and trades. Though the land which they inherited was mostly swampy and inundated every year, it meant everything to them. On the type of land, details are known from the conversion between Dr Mead and the Orakandi representatives. Regarding the type of land, Bhisma Deb Das says and Schroeder writes, 'The swamps are formed by the numerous small streams that spread over the land from the Ganges River. When the monsoons come, the streams overflow and for six months of the year most of the area is flooded under ten to fifteen feet of water.'⁴¹ However, the missionaries found that wetland is suitable for rice cultivation and the ancestors of the community were compelled and used to do farming, fishing and boating for their living. Having swampy land, they could cultivate rice with a great ease. At the beginning of the monsoon, they started rice cultivation on the low land. However, getting a good harvest was totally uncertain as water rose gradually and limitlessly. If the rice could grow faster than water rose, they got success and could earn a good harvest. 'If it doesn't, the whole crop can be drowned and the people are left without rice for the coming year.'⁴² Rice production, actually, was continually impeded by flood, monsoonal rain and consecutive water logging. For this, very often their life became unbearable in want of sufficient food. As alternative and supplementary food items, they used to grow vegetables on the islands' slopes and on the floating bamboo rafts using a layer of straw and soil, and marrows on the

39 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 74.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

thatched roofs of the houses. ‘But without rice, they barely manage to survive to the next season.’⁴³

The delegation’s account is a fine proof of the community’s poverty and starvation which cost their life heavily. The missionaries found that ‘The swampy land they inherit from generation to generation is barely able to supply their own needs, with very little over to sell.’⁴⁴ Frequent flood brought frequent scarcity of food by drowning and destroying crops. As a result, they regularly found the Matuas in extreme want of food. The height of food crisis is also perceived through the missionaries’ own experiences. During their first days, they also experienced the shortage of food at Orakandi, and were bound to pass days in want of food. Getting no other way, they sometimes had to dine with the Matuas.⁴⁵ It proves that the Matuas had to fight against starvation which frequently visited them. Moreover, lack of balanced food let them live in perpetual sickness and malnutrition. Actually, the shortage of food compelled them to starve. As a result, famine occurred frequently and caused massive death in the area.

The practice of marriage reflects the socio-economic condition of the poverty-stricken Matuas. Due to extreme poverty, feeding the family members was a huge challenge to the aged male members of their typical large families. A father with young daughters generally fell in great problem of feeding. For solving the problem, a father used to marry off his little daughters in their tender and immature days. Sometimes infants and babies were married off to save other family members. As a result, the practice of early marriage especially of the girls was in vogue in the Matua community. But, male children had to wait a lot not to get maturity but to become solvent to support and maintain a wife. Poverty, generally, would affect the male members extensively. As most of the Matuas were in dire need of wealth, they could not get married happily. Actually, they were ‘so poor that often they can’t afford to marry at all.’⁴⁶

For communication, the Matuas generally used wooden boat. Even for selling their own crops and buying various goods for daily necessities boat was essential for the inhabitants. On the wide use of boats, Hill writes,

Except for six months of the year, when the water in the rice fields dries up, all the work of the field, travelling and marketing, must be done by boat. From June until December each homestead on its raised piece of land becomes an island. Inhabitants of all these

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 69.

45 Ibid., p. 73.

46 Ibid., p. 70.

island homes have no access to one another or to the fields where their green rice crops are swaying in the breeze, except by boat.⁴⁷

Natural calamities (flood, cyclone, heavy rainfall, tornado, tidal bore, extreme heat, vapour, drought, cyclone, and scarcity of pure drinking water) which used to hit Bangladesh so often and unnoticed every year that people like the Matuas were thrashed and got thwarted repeatedly and would find life totally meaningless. Losing their home-belongings as well the very little savings, livestock, food grains, etc., they were poorer and helpless. They almost always led life miserably. As a result, their very survival was at high risk. Moreover, the inhabitants and the missionaries in the swamp-beels of Orakandi had frequent life risks from the deadly cobras, scorpion, notorious six-inch krait snake, flying and crawling pests.⁴⁸

6. On Education

The Matuas were accustomed to cling to their ancestral lifestyle embedded in ignorance and prejudices. But the missionaries got some of the Matuas much educated. It is because the leaders or headmen of the community got realized the role and compulsoriness of education and they started their preliminary but auspicious activities. They felt getting educated under the British rule was the key to and gateway of socio-economic upliftment. To prove their great interest on education, Mead writes, 'At Orakandi we found them eager about their school.'⁴⁹ Actually, they found that an awakening spirit, a movement for learning and upliftment, had started some decades back before their coming and settling at Orakandi.

In an old house, a lower primary school, actually the first one, at Orakandi was started under the tutelage of Sasi Babu. About this earliest school at Orakandi, Schroeder writes, 'It was a primitive little building with matting walls and a dirt earthen floor, but it was the people's pride and joy. It seemed to represent the peak of their hopes and efforts to that time.'⁵⁰ When Mead reached Orakandi for the first time, he found the school on the highland. It was not so good but 'It truly represented the peak of their aspirations and mental efforts.'⁵¹ Mead found the Matuas keen and enthusiastic enough to educate both their sons and daughters.

The Matuas realized that only education can lead them to get uplifted. The imposed untouchability, chains of fake authority and caste superiority on them can be

47 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 25.

48 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 85.

49 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 14.

50 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, pp. 71-72.

51 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 140.

annihilated through being well educated. Bhisma Das says to Mead, 'To break out of this cycle, our people need to be educated and allowed to take positions in the outside community.'⁵² Thus, the Matuas ardently felt for the unconditional 'need of education both for boys and girls.'⁵³ Through their frequent uplifting meetings (*sabha*) held in many villages and towns on various occasions, they tried to get a proper solution to ensure providing education for every one of the community. As they were under British rule, they felt the necessity of education in English. When, through their own eagerness and effort and missionary assistance, their early primary school (lower elementary School/ *Pathshala*) turned to an English High School, they got very excited.⁵⁴ Actually, the Matuas felt to rise is to get educated.

7. On Health

Through the health lens, the missionaries could unfold new stories wrapped in multidimensional sufferings of and on the Matua community. They found ill health doomed the Matuas. Due to insufficient (balanced) food and age-long poverty, they were compelled to live under malnourishment and malnutrition. As a result, the Matuas were almost always found in ill health and often remained sick. Moreover, the overall health situation got deteriorated because of impenetrable ignorance, prejudices and firmness of their customs which nearly baffled missionary medical works. The seriousness of their sufferings caused by ill health often dismayed the missionaries even who did know nothing of medicine and medical works.

The missionaries found the inhabitants unhealthy from several issues. Various diseases frequently visited the area and the Matuas suffered unspeakably. How aptly Barry writes, 'Malarial fever was the greatest offender. Skin disease came next, with eye and ear disease a close third.'⁵⁵ As most of them were ignorant and unaware of health risks, they never minded to drink polluted water even during the contagious water-borne pandemic like cholera which was widely known as *Olaotha*. Again, they were in the habit of abusing the same 'water for washing clothes, bathing, watering their cattle and boating in, besides using it for cooking and drinking. The result was a continuous round of sickness and disease.'⁵⁶ To share a detailed account of their health, Schroeder writes,

Having repeatedly suffered the ravages of cholera, smallpox, influenza and other epidemics, as well as the continual rounds of dysentery and malaria, the people had very

52 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 69.

53 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 12.

54 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, pp. 90, 92.

55 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 40.

56 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 85.

little resistance to infection or disease. So along with straight medical treatment, Cecil tried to give the people a basic understanding of personal hygiene as well as the need to boil all drinking water. But he soon realized that it was going to take time to lift the standard of living in the area after centuries of the same lifestyle.⁵⁷

Dispensary run by the missionary doctors and nurses among the Matuas were called *House of Healing*. To reach doctors and get medicine from the government hospital beyond availing the missionary-run medical services was almost unthinkable to the Matuas. Thus, the dispensary at Orakandi was kept busy and crowded by the Matua patients who could get healing both in body and soul from the missionaries.⁵⁸ To do some medical works for the broken health Matuas was a tremendous blessing to the missionaries. Every day around 150 to 200 sick people used to receive medical assistance from Mead who regularly visited the sick and despairing ones at their homes. To note Mead's feeling in this regard, Barry writes, 'There was an unspeakable satisfaction in being able to relieve distress, and to see sufferers' radiant with an unwonted smile of gratitude was great compensation.'⁵⁹ The gravity of their health misery is perceived well at the 'health meetings' organised by the missionaries at Orakandi Mission House where the Matuas, with the hope of getting life back, flocked to the meeting by boat fleet. It is to note that the missionaries became very pleased with women patients who came with their little babies and sought mission help. Likewise, the missionaries were pleased seeing particularly the women in sincere gratitude towards the missionaries.⁶⁰ Their feeling of gratitude was treated invaluable rewards to the missionaries. Actually, through missionary medical services, they found a slice of healthy life.

8. On Matua Women

The depiction of the Matua women undoubtedly adds a new dimension on the community's misery. In a tradition-bound community, Matua women were insecure, deserted and meaningless both from economic and social grounds. Mrs Mead found them perpetually hopeless, joyless, loveless, and uncared indeed.⁶¹ Again, they were ignorant, weak, unhealthy, helpless, nameless, and even casteless. They were propelled on the sweet will of the male members of the community. It is noticeable that their miseries and ill-treatment did never to wane because of some existing social and community-based ill-practices.

57 Ibid., p. 87.

58 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 57.

59 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 49.

60 Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 22.

61 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 74.

The Matua women generally were unrecognised and had no individuality in the community. Early marriage was in vogue among the Matuas. Without educating his daughter, a father only remained concerned for his daughter's marriage with a suitable bridegroom.⁶² Again, daughters' consent to marriage and the selection of suitable bridegrooms were always neglected. In the in-law's house, the Matua women had to do all household chores without recognition. During harvest time, they had very little time to spare. In family, the eldest wife entitled a special authority over the wives of the younger brothers-in-law. However, the women were not allowed to smoke *hookah*. Again, they were not generally allowed to be seen by the outsiders let alone a stranger from Muslim or Christian community or people of other castes/ races. Even at the death bed, they were not allowed to be seen even by the missionary doctors. It is because to see a woman's face was treated as shameful to her husband, family and society. If a male doctor treats a woman in her morbidity, he would not be allowed to see her face least he might meet and recognize her later. Community's customs, ignorance and prejudices let the women live in perpetual bondage and they were turned to be considered themselves 'as merely the possessions of their husbands.'⁶³

A girl after her marriage generally was not permitted to enjoy individual recognition by her family name but by her child's name. Again, like the Bengali Hindu mothers, if a male member (husband or child) died premature, a Matua woman was also severely scolded, humiliated and often driven out from family. It is because that the sons are usually taken as auspicious and heavenly blessings to society. It is practised in Hindu tradition that the soul/ spirit of the departed male is helped and assured an entrance into Heaven only by son's lawful sole right to light the funeral pyre of the deceased parents in funeral rites.⁶⁴ Again, the misery aggregated if a woman failed to give birth to a male child. Without a son and on the premature death of her husband, a woman was never allowed to enjoy her deceased husband's land and property right. Often she had to live on the bounty and pity of the brothers-in law. But, she was ill-treated and very soon was turned unwelcoming in her in-law's and even in her own father's house. She often experienced social boycott and could not participate in religious festivals and any auspicious, sacramental and ritualistic activities.

The missionaries, at first, found the older men much reserved and unwilling to their women's outside movement and education. Though the aged ones thought women's

62 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 24.

63 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 74.

64 Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 23.

education was only a wastage of time and money, the missionaries made them convinced by arguing that girls' education is a must for their desired uplift. When missionaries said the aged ones that 'the first responsibility of training your sons'⁶⁵ depends on their women folk, they agreed to send their girls to the newly established Orakandi Girls' school by separate boats.

The social condition of the Orakandi Matua widows presents a fine testimony of the Matua community. The nature and intensity of the Matua widows' grievances are varied and claim minute attention. Untold cruelty, violence, sufferings and wrongs were done to the widows on various grounds. It seems a girl of no certain age could become a widow because sometimes mere babes were married to much older men and tasted the reality of infant widowhood. They could not even name their family name and remember and realize what happened to them being widows. As a result, the Matuas, especially the leaders, were burdened with their widows who were taken as 'the plague-spot' of their community.⁶⁶ They were of no use like the pieces of earthen broken pots, they were treated as slaves and burdens to the family and society. The terms *domestic chattels* and *earthen broken pots* were used to indicate the Matua widows of Orakandi areas.⁶⁷ To expose their condition, Hill writes, 'A widow is despised, ill-used and spurned, wronged, cheated of her rights—a Broken Pot, as the widow is called in the Nama Sudra community. An earthenware water pot, once cracked, is useless, can never be mended: fit only to be thrown on the rubbish heap.'⁶⁸ The misery of the Orakandi widows has also been portrayed in Dr Mead's words:

Look! Can you see how the hands are quivering?
Hands hell-hurt, hands heaven-seeking, hands hopeless.
They are Orakandi Widows' hands.
The curse has fallen.
The hurt hands tremble, the seeking hands reach out and implore.
In vain are they clasped. There is none to help, nor any to
hear the wailing of wounded women. —C.S. Mead⁶⁹

To expose the extremely disgraced condition of the widows, Hill writes, 'There was in that land, ... a "sore" – a terrible, festering sore. ...The sore was the life of the widows of the Hindu Nama Sudra community.'⁷⁰ To the missionaries, the Matua

⁶⁵ Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 77.

⁶⁶ Mead, *The Namasudras: And Other Addresses*, p. 22.

⁶⁷ Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 130.

⁶⁸ Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 27.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

widows were known as the “Life’s littered floor”, “crushed crowns”, and “broken wings”.⁷¹ They found their lives twisted in peril and danger. Actually, the Matuas took the widows 'as a thorn in their own sides and as a blot on the community life.' For the widows, the whole community life was stained. They were, hence, called infectious sore. The situation sored up for practicing of early marriage and not for practicing of widow remarriage. Everywhere they became the victim and treated as the obstacle to the community uplift. Their grievance made the older people of the community concerned most. Actually, the condition was so serious that the leaders truly realized that before lessening the widows' plight, no real uplift of their community would materialize.

The widows were generally bound to perform all sorts of household chores with the hardest and heaviest tasks but were allowed to have only one meal a day or the least amount of food. They were not allowed to put on any jewelry, colorful sari and blouse and vermilion on the forehead. They were bound to wear white borderless (or with no red-bordered) *shari*. In the tradition-bound community, they were taken as a symbol of bad omens and misfortune bearer. As a result, they were kept absent from every sort of religious, holy, auspicious, and festive and joyous occasions and activities.⁷² In fear of social boycott, and being driven away from community, a father or husband of a widow did not allow her to live or stay with him. Thus, a widow was often turned unwanted in both in-law's and or father's family, and soon driven away (along with the little child/ren). As nobody did any responsibility towards the widows, she was free from community rules and regulations. Likewise, nobody held any legal authority and right on her actions. As a result, she could choose her shelter and dwelling except the caste and community arena.

The practice known as *Ranr* which allows keeping widow, and even unmarried woman as wife or concubine, made widows' existence more perilous. A man, even the priest, with affluence and riches, could sportively keep young and mature woman in his family except his wife/ wives. Being widows, they were prey to the wealthy ones. The missionaries found that the practice even among the priests.

Widows' returning to or entering into the community hardly happened. For this, the widows had to undergo various cleansing processes. On the one hand, the widows who had babies needed to face much more harsh community reality. They were not allowed to return to their husband's family along with their child/ children. Then the widows were forced to leave their children to someone/ orphanage/mission to enter

71 Ibid., p. 60.

72 Ibid., p. 78.

the caste community. Hill writes, 'A Hindu widow may get back into caste after wrongdoing if she gives up her child, but never with it.'⁷³

When widows were driven out from the family, they were handed over to and taken shelter under the care of a Holy Man (*Fakir/ Sannyasi*, the wandering mendicants, *guru* or religious advisor, also known as *Baba*). The widows did accomplish every single chore (begging, cooking, cleaning, caring, etc.) for the Holy Man, and were bound to follow the man widely according to his sweet will and wishes. Actually, a widow was used as a wife of the Holy Man, but never was titled as a wife. Besides, if a Holy Man got tired of any particular widow, 'he may cast the girl off anywhere or at any time. The misery of a young widow is almost unspeakable.

Getting known the widows' distress, the Orakandi missionaries, to reduce their and the community pains, built a separate residence at Orakandi. It was named the Light House/ 'The House of Light'/ the Home of Light /Orakandi Widows' Home/ Widows' Home. It was also known as *Dipti Bhaban* (House of Light) of Orakandi. It started working on 10th August 1909.⁷⁴ It was dedicated for the destitute—widow, orphan or parentless child, uncared ones, who were treated as a burden to the nearest and dearest ones of their families and relatives.⁷⁵ Miss Bertha Tuck and Miss Grace Thomson had an immense effect at least to have a shelter to the abandoned and suffered women of the community. Hill aptly writes, 'So often the little, unloved ones brought to the missionary are weak and sickly, suffering from neglect and even from attempts to poison, and thus get rid of the unwanted life.'⁷⁶ Thus, a separate shelter, a cottage, for the children named 'The House of Joy' was also built. All these efforts were done to reduce the grievances experienced the Matuas. Actually, the 'Light House', and 'The House of Joy' both present the never-ending tales of the sufferings of the Orakandi widows.

9. The Way to Upliftment

The Matuas strived for a rightful and logical position amongst the people so that they could get sitting and identity in society. Through Mead's devotion, perseverance, grace and constructive efforts, the closed doors gradually began to open and widen. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the Matuas began to lift their heads. Through missionary and government assistance, their long-cherished rightful demands began to be fulfilled. Actually, they realised the necessity of breaking out of

⁷³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷⁴ Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 82.

⁷⁵ Hill, *Gathered Leaves*, p. 26.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

the cycle of their traditional life. By arranging regular uplifting meetings known as 'Sava' for community awakening, the Matuas got known about their progress, problems, weakness, failure and necessities. Thus, it helped them a lot to sketch and define their road to uplift by preparing directives and initiatives, and implementing and monitoring them regularly. Due to spread of education and missionary efforts, the century-long rigidity on ancestral occupations, caste customs, prejudices and some other practices began to be abolished positively among them.⁷⁷

Regarding changes in various grounds of Matua's life, Barry writes that Mead 'changed the face of things, gave the people a new outlook on life, and made for new opportunities, new avenues of self-expression'.⁷⁸ They could realize that they have equally been created by the same God who made men of the rest castes. Changes of the Matuas are also evident in the report of Rev. Hedley Sutton who visited Orakandi after Mead's departure for Australia from Orakandi. Sutton satisfactorily found them with a changed belief. The Matua widows were no longer treated as a burden to their people. And, the light of education began to enlighten both the boys and girls. On the Matuas, he reported that 'I marked a new order of life. The old order changeth.' and 'There is education where formerly there was ignorance.'⁷⁹

Visible changes took place in education rendered for the Matuas. In 1908, Sasi Babu's elementary school turned to the first English High School for the Matuas. 'The work in the boys' schools had progressed remarkably.' The government recognition of the Orakandi Mead English High School from the Calcutta University brought huge inspiration for the Matuas. Schroeder writes, 'What a day of rejoicing it had been when the school finally received official recognition, ...towards the end of 1911, the Nama Sudra people had finally seen the fulfillment of one of their main goals.'⁸⁰ The aged ones agreed to send their girls to newly established school for being learned, healthy and noble inheritance-making ideal mothers. During his visit to the Orakandi Mission House in 1911, Mr Nathan, the District Commissioner, was pleased with the noticeable progress of the Orakandi girls' school established in 1908 and assured to assist in missionary activities for uplifting the community. Actually, this episode made the Matuas optimistic about receiving higher education abroad. As a result, from the next decade, they secured opportunities to 'studying in Europe to become barristers, engineers and artists.'⁸¹

77 Barry, *There Was A Man*, p. 35.

78 Ibid., p. 143.

79 Ibid., p. 149.

80 Schroeder, *Doctor Sahib*, p. 90.

81 Ibid., p. 106.

Along with their ancestral agricultural works, the Matuas, to add their income, started running some unconventional economic services which were forbidden early. Schroeder writes, 'Outside markets had been opened up for the people to sell the goods they now produced, and this in turn had led to a rise in the overall standard of living.'⁸² Getting educated and in light of Christian messages and values, many widows, receiving new skills and understanding, became self-reliant. Thus, they secured their position in society and let the traditional outlook on them get changed tremendously. They earned their own identity. And for this, they began treated worthwhile members of the community.⁸³

They could realize and identified that both early marriage and absence of widow remarriage are the roots of all sufferings of their widows, especially the child widows. Thus, they compulsorily decided to ban early marriage at any cost among them and their vicinity. Again, after much calculation and discussion over the traditional outlook, widow remarriage began in them. The practice of widow remarriage opened a new horizon over their way of traditional life. As they began to maintain hygiene strictly, the health condition of the Matuas improved significantly. As a result, malnutrition and sickness decreased among them. Thus, their living standard began to change gradually. They repeatedly thought about their solvency, and the wellbeing of their children.

For the rehabilitation of the Matua widows, Guruchand Thakur laid the foundation stone by enrolling the first widows at the Orakandi Widows' Home. On the 10th August 1909, along with Bindu Bala, a widow, he brought one of his own nieces to the home and inaugurated the mission work. Schroeder writes, 'Here, he said to Miss Tuck, 'are the foundation members of the home. Unless I take the first step and bring my own relatives, no-one will have the courage to act.'⁸⁴ That initiative of Guruchand made other widows assured and other widows began to live by ones and twos. The Widows' Home flourished and was running noticeably. For this, Mr Nathan promised and assured the then Orakandi Mission authority Miss Tuck and Nurse Thomson that he (Mr Nathan) would 'try and secure a government grant to help them in their work with the widows.'⁸⁵ At the Light House, the widows did sewing and weaving. They got skilled and showed path for earning and meaningful living. Their tales of becoming self-reliant and self-respectful inspired not only the widows and women folk but also the whole community. Actually, their spirit brought

82 Ibid., p. 100.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid., p. 83.

85 Ibid., p. 82.

tremendous hope for the Matuas who gradually began to change their outlook positively on the widows.

They could know well of their well-wishers and friends who were none but the Christian missionaries and the government. Thus, they did not pay heed to the frequent warnings and opposition made by the caste Hindus against Mead and other missionaries. During the 'Swadeshi Movement' began in India in 1905, the Matuas like some other backward classes of Bengal came to know that they were not completely meaningless to the caste Hindus and the British rule. This helped them envision a new horizon and they became hopeful for securing a parliamentary recognition.

When Sasi Babu became sub-registrar of the school department, this position with dignity, government acceptance and recognition of an untouchable Namasudra brought tremendous effect to the whole community as well to the people of the surrounding areas. Schroeder writes that this position of a sub-registrar 'gave him considerable importance and standing in the community.'⁸⁶ On their gradual attainment of securing posts and positions in public affairs, Schroeder adds again, 'Among the Nama Sudra boys who were early students in the school, many had gone through college successfully and now held positions of importance as police inspectors, school inspectors, deputy magistrates, headmasters of minor schools and other government positions.'⁸⁷ Besides, the overall condition of the women changed noticeably. Schroeder writes, 'Many of those formerly despised girls had gone on to become fine nurses in various hospitals. Others had become teachers in established girls' schools, while still others had been able to establish loving Christian homes because of the training they had received at Orakandi.'⁸⁸ It is worth mentioning that Bhisma Deb Das from Orakandi became one of the first members 'to represent the depressed people of India on the Legislative Council of Bengal.'⁸⁹

10. On Rituals

The Matuas were found to observe some cultural activities. Baruni Snan or Barani Festival or Bathing Festival used to be celebrated even in the early days of the missionary activities at Orakandi. When Mead came to Orakandi in 1907, having been invited, he visited this annual gathering of the *Baruni Snan* and experienced some other activities performed. Schroeder writes,

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 106.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Early in April Cecil was invited by Guru Charan Biswas to come down to Orakandi for the Barani Festival and then to chair a large "Uplift" gathering afterwards. During this festival, several thousand people gathered at Orakandi each year on the thirteenth day of the waning moon in April. Braving the possibility of snapping crocodile jaws and poisonous water snakes, they would take a ritual bathe in the tributary of the Ganges River nearby to wash away their sins for another year.⁹⁰

During processions and cultural gatherings, the Matuas are found bearing flags, drums and wind instruments playing and dancing unitedly.

11. Conclusion

The Matuas, to some noticeable extent, are on the move. Facing harsh realities from various grounds, they are stepping forward aiming at securing their long-cherished upliftment. For achieving and ensuring a standard way of living, they left no stone unturned. From the very beginning of the 20th century, the missionaries found the Matuas motivated to materialize their community upliftment. Under the supervision of Dr Cecil Silas Mead, huge uplifting activities for the Matuas began. After doing missionary activities at Orakandi, Faridpur for nearly a half-century, the missionaries found the Matuas in gradual upliftment to some noticeable height. However, Mead could realize very well that the demands of Orakandi were unlimited and tremendous collective efforts were needed to elevate the Matuas to the mainstream of national life. But Mead felt rewarded for his sincere and earnest efforts done to the Matuas. To express his expression on the rise of the Matua community, Schroeder writes, 'There had certainly been problems and disappointments through the years, but the great gains in the lives of these formerly despised and hopeless people had been very rewarding.'⁹¹ Thus, it is found that the tradition-bound Matua community began to move slowly but surely with a changed and broad outlook.

90 Ibid., p. 73.

91 Ibid., p. 99.