

# The Nath Community of Bengal : Question of Social dignity

Kamal Biswas

Researcher: History Department, Kalyani University

Indian, that is, the Bengal Society is very old and also the structure of it is very complex. Many races have enriched Bengal for ages and also have divided it. Resultantly, there has taken place the additions in people's behavior, habit of eating, religious principles and in attitude. In the middle age, there was a noticeable social change seen in the religion and culture. This time there was a background for the "Bhakti Movement", and the same way the society obtained a special religious establishment through Tantra, Hat Yoga, Sahajia, Saibachars. (1)

There initiated Yoga and Tantra practice Marg along with the Brahminism Culture. In 6 B.C. just the way there happened the religious revolution through protestism movement, so did there happen Yoga and Tantra worshipping through the Bhakti Movement. The Nath community entered the society and flourished along with the Buddhism during the Pal reign. We have come to know about the Yoga culture right from the birth-time of the ancient Indian civilizations. The yoga was a social and religious part of the society in the ancient Sindh civilization and the Vedic civilization. Later on, the Yoga culture became a chief and special religious culture to almost all the religions, including the Jainism, the Buddhism, and Ajibikism. When the Hindu society started religious practices chiefly in the folk-culture and ceremonies, the Yoga culture became limited only to the home-quitting saints. But it was the Nath Yogis that had introduced the Yoga transiently in their religion even after they had been detached from the Hindu systems.

Right from the deep in the long past a community of Lord Shiva worshippers have been known in the land Bengal. This community was identified as 'Yogis'. The caste that was given birth by Ganga's son, which was given birth by Besadhari's paternity has been explained in the Brahminbaibarta Puran, which was composed in the reign of Ballal. All over India at present there are a few hundreds of castes and tribes among which are a small numbers of castes have been labeled as the higher castes, the rest are the lower castes. The lower castes have been divided into three separate castes—a). Uttam Sankar, b) Maddhyam Sankar and c) Antaja Sankar. The Yogis were comprised to be the Uttam Sankar (4). These Yogis were the worshippers of Lord Shiva. (5) That's the reason they were called the '[Nath'. The word 'nath' means 'Lord', 'Swami' or 'God' (6) At the same time the 'Naths' in general refer to the caste of the human race. They have long been able to hold their existence through numerous highs and lows of their living line. They live all over India including Bengal. You can even find them existing in Nepal, Tibet, Pakistan and Bangladesh. They worshipped the Supreme Lord as the 'Nath'. By and by the worshipping word 'Nath' slipped into the use for their surname.

In the ancient time only the Vedic Brahmins and the yogi saints used to do the Yogas, religious Meditation, and the reading from the Vedas. The lower caste people had totally been kept away from those holy jobs and were deprived. On the other hand, the Naths were on with the worshipping, reading from the Vedas and yoga practices and many of them has achieved perfection in the Avatar of Shiva. (7)

But why there came a distinction between the Indian Brahmin society and the Nath Yogi society in the complexity of Indian social system is certainly arguable. In spite of the Indian Nath community's dignity, existence and their glory being downgraded from the very far in the ancient past—what is their position in the present days society and what the social views of the general communities to them is a big question. It deserves to be lighted upon.

In the ancient time religious meditation ran in two different lines; one of them was the Saiba Tantra, and the other Buddhism. The common factor lying in these two Tantra communities was the yogas. That's why the Yogis were honoured as the Guru in both the communities. Had the Yogis been Hindus, they would have been called the Siddhya or the Natha. And if they had been the Buddhists, they would have been called Siddhyacharya. Bengal's oldest Buddhist Sahajan Path is the worshipping of songs. Guessingly between tenth and twelfth centuries there were small episodes of social life in the Charzyapadas, right, but they did not spread out geographically the Bengali literature in the middle age like what happened for the Nath literature. In the Nath religious literature the social reflection came rather naturally and spontaneously. We learn about a part of the Nath literature by Gobindrachandra through the composition by Poet Bhabani Das, Abdul Sukur Mahammad, Durlav Chandra Mallick and Hasamadi that chiefly depict various aspects of the then Nath Society.

Bhabani Das in his composition "Gopichander Panchali" depicted the Nath Religious philosophy and said that during the reign of King Manik Chandra of Meherkul there was a great social happiness. What we get it in Mainamati's expression goes like this—

Meherkuley bari chhilo muli banser bera  
Grihastha paridhan sonar pachhra  
Goribe choria firey khasa taji ghora  
Fakirer gaye dito khasa kapor jora

Tomar baper kaley sabey chhilo dhoni  
 Sonar kolsi bhori lokey khaito pani  
 Rupar kolsi bhori Dhupiye jol khay  
 Kiba raja kiba proja china na jai.

*In English it goes like this: ---*

Houses made of bamboo-sheet walls in Meherkul, they'd live in  
 The family heads used to wear golden scarf fine.  
 Nice Arabian horses would be ridden by the poor there  
 The Fakirs would have good costumes to wear.  
 In your father's time all were so rich,  
 Water from golden pitcher happily they'd drink  
 While the washer man would drink from a silver pitcher,  
 And hard to know who was the king or the subjects who were.

With the help from this depiction, Queen Mainamati has represented a picture of wonderful and stable social life of her husband's reign.

Along with the Nath Yogi Society, there were also Brahmins, Baidya, Kayastas in the society of other castes which was evident in the Gobindrachandra's verses.

Brahman, Kasto Boise Amar Sabhay  
 Raja Hoiya Hadipar Kamone Dhori Paaye ?  
 And there was a custom of class-based marriage custom found in Mahesh Chandra's writing; here it goes----  
 Raja boley dekho konna Jodi jogyo hoy  
 Saroopete konna dibo khohilam nishchoy.  
 It goes in English as follows: ---

“Find out a bride, eligible if,  
 Surely, daughters to the same caste, away I'll give.”

In the Nath literature, Gobindrachandra versed not only the Nath Religious Philosophy, but also their social and caste-identity, profession, foods, various ways and colours of eating, such as, ATAP CHAL, rice with ghee, KHEER, sweet yogurt, aurum stem, SHALI PADDY, flattened rice of Binni paddy, coconut balls, potato wine, etc. Besides, we get to know about the costumes of the contemporary society in the verses of Gobinda Chandra –such as, handloom sari, dhoti, etc. And farther to say, LAXMIVILAS sari, SHANKHANAL, MEGHDUMURI, BEURBAS sari, etc. have also been mentioned there. Back then, the business used to be performed by KADI. There have been found a lot of information about cosmetics and ornaments in the Nath literature. Ankle-let, TODA, MALL, PARAS PATHAR, GAJAMATI HAR, GREEN BOULI, nail polish, KUNDAL KINKINI, (SHIKHNI, a kind of earring, nose ring, ANGURI BAJU, etc were used. Besides, there were events of Shasthi Puja, Christening of babies, weddings, the Suttee, woman's freedom, polygamy, painting with vermilion powder on women's forehead to marry at a pair of temples, and such folk customs which are found in the Gopichandra's verses. (10)

The rise and fall in people's life goes as like as the tide in the sea shore. After a very long bright shining of the Nath's existence, there also came a fall to the Nath Community. For a long time the Nath Community had been going on all right with its superiority in their religion, society, culture and existence, right, but all on a sudden there came a downfall in the twelfth century, (11) during the reign of Ballal Sen (1158—1179).

The house-pundit of Ballal Sen was Gopal Batta, who with the king's command had begun to write the Ballal Charitam in Sanskrit, which was completed by his son Ananda Bhatta later on. Ballal Charitam, in fact, is a caste-defining book in which the details of various castes and their emanation in Eastern India were recorded. (12). At the same time why and how different kinds of castes or communities were left out was all depicted in it. In the couplets 11-13 of Ballal Charitam, the Nath's being left out by the Ballal Sen have also been described rather evidently. Here it goes in Sanskrit:

Etosminnantare Kaley rajye dwijatibhish saho  
 Babhub boirabhascha Yoginag rajyabasinam (11)  
 Asha, Shib Chacudarshyanang nishithe Shankarasya cho  
 Jatesharasya pujarthang bahulokaya samagatah (12)  
 BaladevBhattanama rajpurohit stada  
 Kamyapujan karmarthang ragyohosou samupsthitah (13)  
 Bahu ratnani boi drista Yogiraj ubachatam  
 Yod yod drabyani Atroiba upsthatani pujane (14)  
 Ragyo ba aporeshang ba nitya kamyabratadishu  
 Yogibhogyani pujante nanyeshamodhikarita (15)  
 Etochchhrratta Baldevah probach teekhna bhashaya  
 Lobhang ma kuru Yogish parodrabya dhandishu (16)

So, from the interpretation of couplet No. 11-18 out of Ballal Charitam it is noticed that during that time there grew an enmity between Brahmins and the Yogis of the state. Once there had been a great get-together of numerous people at a place to worship Jateswar Shiva at mid-night on the Shiva Chaturthi night. It was then the royal priest Baldev Bhatta had turned up there to offer worship for the king. Seeing lots of jewels and money with him, the principal Yogi had told him, "All the things that have been brought up there on account of worshipping, should go to the Yogis only; and nobody else has a right to occupy them when the worshipping is over."

Hearing these immoral words from the Yogi, Baldev spoke hard to him, "Yogiraj, don't you be so tempted into other people's things or money."

Here go more Sanskrit couplets for more explanation:

Arakto chokkhu chakkhuyogindrashakar bakya piritto

Swabaleno baladebang tatsakashadwahiskritam .(17)

Baladesttohgachhathh songrudya rajsannidhou

Adyantambadang sarbang yatha sababamanitah

Abhiyogong tatashascruyorginang Shasanaya cha (19)

Etadakarnya sa raja krodhandha ghurnalochonoh

Dustamang darpa churnaya pratigyamakaroapta (20)

Purbasmath sa maharajo rudrajan brahmanan prati

Dantyagadwix ragah swapitirshradhabasare (21)

Purohitasyapamanath krodarkah prakharodito

Ballabhanandasambandhath prathamong yoh prakashitah (22)

Athasou raja Ballaleh krodhabesh Vikampitah

Chakar Shapathang tasyang sabhayang parjadambitah (23)

Anyway, more have been said in the couplet No. 17 to 23 that the Yogiraj being hurt in the heart had expelled Baladeva Bhatta from the place. Then Baladeva went back to the king weeping bitterly and depicted how he had been humiliated by the Yogiraj. The Brahmins also being insulted along with Baladeva demanded that the king punish the Yogis properly. When the king learnt all about it, his blood was up and promised to smash up the arrogance of the 'devil'. He had already been so angry over the Rudraja Brahmins for refusing to accept the things given away by the king on his father's reverence funeral. The king of Anantar having driven by anger took an oath shivering at the meeting house pronouncing: I was born of the Sen's royal family and am famous. If I do not turn the Subarna Baniks into a low caste, if I do not retribute Duratma Ballavananda and if I do not eradicate the over-arrogant Yogis, I will be condemned and sinned as much as sinning of killing a COW BRAHMIN or a woman; like the way Bhimsen had promised to massacre the hundred sons of Blind Dhitarashtra, we will promise the same way. From today on, those who will sit together on the same seat, or will accept the giveaways from them, will have them perform the religious works and funeral works, or even will help them shall also be left out in the society. So, the acceptance of Pattasutradi shall be failed. (14)

With the royal command from the king, the Yogis fled away somewhere else. Many of them ventured to live right in their native place with their real identity concealed. Again many of them took up various businesses quitting their own sign of Yogipatta and thus they gradually turned to be a low community. (15)

The reason for a great downfall of a community was the breaching of its ideal. During the reign of Ballal Sen the sacrificing yogis became consumers. Having lost their class and eligibility they were covetous, arrogant, selfish and megalomaniac. It was noticed that the Yogis had tried to rise back to their desirable position after they had been down for so long in miseries. In fact, in spite of being down in the slime / dregs of downfall, they had the feeling of their own aristocracy pricking them beneath like a spark of fire. That was the spark of pricking that encouraged and inspired them again. A few social welfare men being eager to do something about it put themselves in to bring back the lost honour of this community. They had risen out of the long running hesitation but they realized it after hundreds of centuries that not only by propagating the glory of their ancestors to rise back, their community couldn't be great. In 1871 census when the government shuduled them as a 'Lower Caste' (17), they realized it.

In the British India, the census was started in 1871 which still goes on the same way in every ten years. At that time the nationality, the community, caste, and educational qualification of the Hindus were registered. (18) Thus you would be able to have the proper count of each caste and community, especially, based on education and economic description the public privileges and jobs would be obtained.

The community that were big in population, had high educational qualifications and were much wise in politics had been provided with much government aid, and those that were backward in education, were ignorant about political

knowledge and also were unorganized would be deprived from government aid because of their professional details, caste identities, even if they would be in the same category of caste. The Nath's were one of the deprived communities.

And against this deprivation Sri Bharatchandra Nath of Noakhali (Bangladesh) quit studying for the B.A. at a college in the middle of the course and invested himself in collecting enough information out of various books and from Imperial Library, Asiatic Society Library to prove the superiority of his Nath community and sent an application with all the collected data proof to the Superintendent of the Census department of India Government, and thus he had it legalized that in the column of caste to write 'Yogi' and the column of surname 'Nath' for male a person, while in the column for a female to write 'Debi' and also to write 'Varna Hindu' for their community.

In spite of them being legally approved, the exact number of them, and their educational percentage have still been unknown or obscure because their details had been differently recorded in different censuses (19)

The following table represents different numbers of Yogis in different places.

**The Yogis in Bangodesh in 1891 census:**

District	Male	Female	Total
Rajsahi Division	17949	15782	33731
Dhaka Division	44318	42855	87173
Chatagang Division	72829	74493	147322
Burdwan Division	9844	10452	20296
Presidency Division	28434	26840	55274
Grand Total	173374	170422	343796 (20)
<b>Excluding Calcutta and Maldah --</b>			
<b>Total Male</b>	<b>Total Female</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>	
167848	167107	334955 (21)	

With the census imminent in India in 1911, the then Yogi leaders entrusted a grand responsibility of writing a book on their religious heritage in 1909 upon Professor Radhagobinda Nath of Kumilla village to keep intact their glory intact. Sri Radhagobinda Nath having studied various books on them wrote a book entitled "The yogis of Bengal" in English stuffed with lots of information. Mr Nath clearly explained the answers through his book "The Yogis of Bengal" to the questions on the origins of all communities and castes, their ways of living, their customs and the reasons for their downfall in Mr Rigele's book "Manual of Ethnography for India". Later n, on October 23 1910, 6<sup>th</sup> of Kartik 1317, a union of Assam-Bengal Yogis were established in Kumilla town with effort from Radhagobinda Nath intending to get the Yogis organized. After that every year there would be yearly conference with the Bengal-Assam Yogis to let everybody know about their past tradition and glory, but the problem rose another way; the person who had been conducting the agitation with his dedication to establish their lost glory and heritage converted himself from Saiba to Vaishnava.

The agitation for the existence and the caste of the Nath community took place because of Dr. Radhagobinda Nath's active efforts, because he became a Vaishnava from a Saiba in his advanced age. (22) As a result he was isolated from the main stream of the Nathism. The 90% Nath's that are found in the places after you have crossed Balagarh through Katwa up to Ajimgange are Vaishnavas. In Nabadwip, there are many weavers who belong to Nath community, and many more are Debnaths who live on pulling the riskshaw carts. It was mainly because the impact of Sri Chaitanyadeva, more people who live in Mayapur and the most people of Nabadwip became Vaishnavas than the Nath's living in other places across West Bengal. (23) Naturally the question bobs up in ordinary people's minds – what faith are they of? They are Saibas or Vaishnavas, or they are Brahmins !

It had been being campaigned so long by the Assam-Bango Yogi Conference that they emanated from Rudra to Rudraja Brahmins, but, will they be from now on called Vaishnava Brahmins born off the Rudraja ? Because, it is observed that people attending the yearly Assam-Bango Yogi conference were wearing a Tulsi garland around their necks, and a *Tilak* on and above their noses. (24)

So, it is noticed that the high tide in the agitation under the leadership of Dr. Radhagobinda Nath after 1910 had gone down a bit. At the same time one more thing has also been noticed that many of them demand to be in the OBC category to have privileges available from the government. At the same time many of them, especially, in Assam have been agitating to get them comprised in the S.C. or S.T. category. So, now what it comes to the point of conclusion is that they had been Brahmins then, and they became Vaishnavas, and from that position they are inching forward to be the lower castes of OBC or SC or ST. Naturally there seems to be no end of curiosity about these people. Everybody wonders who they are in fact. Anyway it is explicit from researches that only those out of all the

Naths spread out over West Bengal are economically and culturally much ahead are now prone to rescue their past glory and heritage. And those who are left behind in economy and culture are more prone to obtain their right to privileges.

With the conflict of right to privileges this community split up. In 1979, the then Prime Minister Morarji Deshai created a commission for Backward Classes headed by one person according to the article 340 of the Constitution which was modeled according to B.P. Mondal had suggested (26). This commission made a separate list or chart for each different state. The list that was made for West Bengal had 177 castes comprised in it. Here to mention that the chart was done by the 'race' only, not by the 'caste' or 'class'.

Just as the way the chart has been made with the whole of the scheduled caste people, so has been the chart of the backward class people. There has been no difference in their economic condition here (27).

In December 1998, in the 68<sup>th</sup> yearly general conference, a Monmohan Nath brought in a proposal unofficially to comprise the Yogis in the Backward Class Commission which was constructed by the Janata Government. There was a long hard discussion over the issue, the members present there split up in two; one of the groups were too obstinate, who being determined about their own heritage and glory opposed to comprising the lower castes. And the other group forgetting their arrogant hard-line attitude agreed to a practical decision. They insisted on comprising themselves in the down-to-earth decision. They advocated strongly for their community to be comprised in the lower caste category. At last the responsibility for taking the final decision was entrusted upon the news selected committee. But the committee couldn't come to an effective conclusion because all the 24 members present at the committee split into 12 and 12 heads. Still later, on 26.08.197, it was not possible to come to a conclusion about it even in the general meeting by the Mondal Commission in the Mahabodhi Society Hall (28). For the final decision, a proposal was accepted to call on a special session about it. But before the time for the final decision at the General meeting came in three months' time, the hardliners opposed to get that community into the backward classes. In 1979 they founded an organization under the title "Rudraja Brahmin Sammilani" (29). The other group accepted a proposal at the Students' Hall on Bankim Chatterjee Street in Kolkata with a landslide support from many wise and thoughtful people along with ordinary people of their community on 10. 08. 80, where it was admitted that the 'Nath Yogis Community' were of the "Varna Hindu Brahmins." They somewhat fell behind educationally and economically, and that's why they should be comprised to the OBC category for government privileges in higher education, employment at government sectors, reservation at an election, etc (30).

In 1994, the West Bengal state Backward Commission takes the Nath Yogi community in the backward classes for their being left behind in education and economy.

So, it is observed that in a way the Naths are Yogi, Rudraja Brahmins and many of whom are Baishnavas, many of them are in the OBC category, many of them living outside of Bengal are SC, ST, but they are agitating for being comprised in the SC-ST category for privileges. So, other communities are naturally confused; those who do not know their past heritage and glory cannot mingle them with the general Brahmins with the Rudraja Brahmins. This is what the conscious, wise Naths, and the wise Nath Pundits have realized, and so they still have to run the movement of their dignity further on.

#### SOURCE INDICATIONS

1. Dey, Gouri Shankar—Bharater Itihas Turk-Afgan Yug (1`200-1556) Kolkata; Progressrive Publishers, P. 154.
2. Purba Bharat; Manush o Sanskriti, Alipur Duar: Publishers: East Indian Society for the Studies of Social Science 2014.
3. Risley, H.H. —The Tribes and Castes of Bengal. Vol. II Calcutta, Firma Klm Pvt Let 1998, page 31.
4. Roy, Nihar Ranjan—Bangalir Itihas (Adiparba), Kolkata: Dey's Publishing 2003, p 28.
5. Dutta, Akshaykumar: Bharbarshiya Upasak-sampradaya (2<sup>nd</sup> Part), Kolkata: Karuna Prakashani, 4<sup>th</sup> Print Ashad, 1420, page 70.
6. Nath Majumder, Suresh Chandra—Rajguru Yogi Bansa, Kolkata; Publisher Priyanka Majhi, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition 1422, p 59.
7. Mallick. Kalyani—Nath Sampradayer Itihas, Darshan o Sadhan Pronali, Kolkata; Saiba Prakashani, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition.2008, P59.
8. Kar, Sujan Sarathi—Nath Sahitya, Dharma o Samaaj, Kolkata; Pustak Bipani, First Published 2012, P 199-200.
9. Ibid, p 202.
10. Bhattacharya, Ashutosh—Gopichandrer Gaan, Kolkata; Publiser: Kolkata Vishwa Vidyalaya, 1959, p 26-42.
11. Nath, Radhagobinda—Bangiya Yogijati, Hoogli: Publisher: Assam-Bango Yogi Sammilani, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2001, p 22.
12. Debnath, Upendrakumar: Nath Sampradayer Itibritta, Kolkata; Saiba Prakashani, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2008, p 87.

- 13 Bhatta, Gopal O Bhatta, composed by Ananda, and Ballal Charitam translated by Nath, Subodhkumar, Kolkata: Books Today, First published- October 2011, page 42.
13. Ibid , p43-46.
14. Nath, Radhagobinda—Ibid , p24
15. Ghosh, Baridbaran—Nath Sampradayer Itihas, Kolkata: Shri Publishing house, 2013, p24.
16. Cencious Report of India-1871, To be found at: Rajguru Yogi Bansha, Ibid, p 525.
17. Ibid
18. Nath, Radhagobinda—Ibid, p 66-57
19. Cencious Report of Bengal -1891, Availvble at Rajguru Yogi Bansha, Ibid p. 548-49
20. Cencious Report of Bengal-1891, Ibid, P.551.
21. Interview: Rabindrakumar Nath, Age-67, Employee at a Bank, 26.6. 2016, Sunday, Place- Dhakuria.
22. Interview: Rajdeep Nath, Age-46, Interior Designer, 16.7.2017, Sunday, Place Mahanad, Hoogli.
23. Mani TILAK-wearing Vaishnavas attended the Assam-Bango Yearly Yogi Sammilani general meeting 26.05.2016 at Sammilani Bhavan, Dakuria, Kolkata.
24. Brief interview—Rabindra Roy Bhowmik , Asst. President of Assam Provincial Yogi Sammilani, Age 68, a Social worker, 16.07.2017, Sunday, place Mahanad, Hoogli.
25. Mondal Commission Wikipedia.
26. Nath, Radhagobinda—Ibid -68.
27. Interview: Upendrakumar Debnath, Editor- Rudraja Brahmin Sampradaya, age 58, a Headmaster, 07.05.2016., Saturday, place Duttapukur, North 24 Parganas.
28. Ibid
29. Interview: Manilal Bhomik, Joint Editor—Assam-Bango Yogi Sammilani, age 78, a Government Employee, 26.06.2016, Sunday, Dhakuria, Kolkata.



Kamal Biswas

Researcher: History Section, Kalyani University

E-mail: biswas.kamal84@gmail.com