

Myth as a Cultural Force: Reconstruction of Identity among the Matua Community from an Emic Perspective

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Abstract

The Namasudra-Matua community is the second-largest Scheduled Caste group in West Bengal, garnering significant academic and political focus due to its identity politics and ability to sway electoral outcomes. In the course of constructing and maintaining identity, the community has used various myths strategically. This study explores how myths influence identity formation in this community, using a functionalist and emic approach. Rather than treating myth as fiction or as unverified historical accounts requiring empirical verification, this paper argues that myth functions as a dynamic cultural force that deconstructs, reconstructs, and legitimises collective identity. Using qualitative micro-ethnography, including interviews, observation, and informal talks, this article examines community myths about their origins, the shift into untouchability, and liberation from stigma. These myths serve as symbols helping communities negotiate identity, dignity, social recognition, and collective mobilisation. The paper suggests myths do not arise from their historical accuracy, subconscious desires, or interest in origins, but from their social necessity. Their value lies more in circulation than origin. Myths help marginalised groups by giving moral legitimacy, reinforcing solidarity, organising social memory, and resisting dominant ideologies. Within communities, these myths are experienced as lived truths, shaping daily consciousness and aspirations. The study highlights the paradox of community resistance, concluding that myths are active cultural tools for interpreting the past, understanding the present, and legitimising claims, serving not just as stories of history but as vital parts of daily life.

Keywords: myth, identity construction, Namasudra-Matua, collective resistance

1. Introduction

The caste group we identify today as Namasudra, previously known as Chandal, had various names documented in historical travelogues, anthropological, and ethnographic studies conducted at different historical junctures. Chandal is a generic term used for various occupational groups found in different regions, stigmatised as inferior groups by birth and occupation. In the sixteenth chapter of the travelogue by the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-Hien, the mention of Chandal could be found, who were described as exceptionally ‘wicked man’ who lived outside the country, killing living creatures and drinking intoxicating liquor. When they were about to enter the city or a marketplace, they used to strike a piece of wood to alert

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others to their arrival (Fa-Hien, 1886/1971). His description is founded on the Middle Kingdom, encompassing regions that correspond to present-day Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. Historically, Chandals were an aboriginal tribe dwelling in the regions of Bihar before being driven into the present Bengal region (Yengde, 2025). On the other hand, the Iranian scholar Al-Beruni noted that groups like Chandal, Hari, Dom, and Badhatau were considered even more degraded than the *Antyaja*, such as shoemakers and weavers. He described Chandal as a non-Hindu, unclean *mleccha*, the illegitimate children of a Sudra father and a Brahmin mother (Alberuni, 1910). It is important to note that Alberuni's understanding of social stratification and its logic was partly based on his readings of Hindu theology, *Puranas*, legends, and Manu's *Dharmashastra*, among others.

In the colonial writings, they were Dravidian, aboriginal, semi-aboriginal, semi-amphibious tribes also known as Changa/ Chanral/ Chang/ Nishad, etc (Wise, 1883/2017; Beverly, 1872; Risley, 1903). They faced everyday humiliation, discrimination and exploitation due to their imposed status of untouchables. Bandyopadhyay (1997) showed that the community was referred to as *durbritto* (miscreant), *naradham* (devil), *ati adham* (wretch) jati, etc., because of their mythical illegitimate origin. He noted that approximately 12 endogamous sub-castes existed, each based on occupation, with their own panchayats and unique social and ritual norms. Later, the colonial administration and ethnographers combined several of these low-ranking occupational subcastes under the broad label 'Chandal'.

The community also negotiated with various religious groups, including Islam, Christianity, and Hindu sects such as Vaishnavism. But none of them truly provide a lasting sense of existence, identity, or the certainty of equality and dignity; instead, they offer only temporary relief. For example, Vaishnavism under Chaitanyadev emphasised spiritual egalitarianism regardless of castes without dismantling the caste system itself or advocating equal opportunity in material life. Again, spiritual egalitarianism disappeared after Chaitanyadev's demise, and Brahmin orthodoxy emerged, denying equal status in social and religious affairs. They acquired the label '*Jat Vaishnava*' as a symbolic indication of their lower status (Bandyopadhyay, 2018), based on long-established mythological stories and narratives that favoured particular groups in controlling others' thoughts and actions. When the British colony captured power, they aimed to manage fragmented communities divided by religion, caste, occupation, and language. They introduced census documentation to gain a structured understanding of the Indian population. As Bernard S. Cohn (1996) argued, the census was one of several 'investigative modalities' through which the colonial state sought to classify and understand Indian society, thereby rendering it more governable. The inevitable outcome of the census was not merely administrative control, but also the fixing of people's identities as static, thereby making caste unchangeable (Jaffrelot, 2000).

In this backdrop, many marginalised communities resisted and demanded higher status and constructed mythological stories using the established symbolic grammar to legitimise the claims. The paper focuses not on when the myth originated or whether it is valid, but rather on how myths continue to play an active role in the lives of marginalised people, with the Namasudra-Matua community of Bengal offering an important example to examine. Existing scholarship has examined the Matua movement from historical, political, religious, and refugee

studies perspectives. However, limited attention has been devoted to understanding the functional aspects of Matua myths. Thus, the study first engages with the myths and related narratives that persist within the community and their significance in maintaining collective identity, collective consciousness, and, above all, resistance against the dominant caste narratives.

2. Literature review

Most studies on the Namasudra-Matua community have examined it as a religious reform movement. A Dalit identity movement or a socio-political movement (Biswas, 1998; Bandyopadhyay, 2009; Guha, 2022). They establish the historical and socio-religious significance of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur and Matua Mahasangha (Lahiri, 2022; Mandal, 2019; Pandey, 2023) but devote comparatively less attention to the continuing social function of Matua myths. Scholars have placed the Matua movement within the contexts of caste, religion, refugee displacement, and transregional networks. However, these analyses, while historical and ethnographic, lack an examination of myths as a form of everyday resistance functioning as symbolic language (Walker, 1999; Bandyopadhyay, 1995). Mukherjee (2018) focuses mainly on Matua Hagiography, examining its various editions and prefaces to explore how the community's relationship with Hinduism and caste politics has evolved. The analysis primarily centres on a single canonical text and does not investigate how myths function in contemporary community life. Roy (2019) examines myths as an analytical tool in shaping Dalit identity and counter-history. However, his research mainly focuses on the textual interpretation of Namasudra literature rather than emic ethnography. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring their myths as symbols of protest from the community's perspective.

3. Methodology

Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative micro-ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The study prioritises informal conversations with community members, as these help to capture authentic sentiments and insights beyond formal settings. Additionally, religious performances are closely observed to understand how they reinforce social norms, values, collective identity, historical memory, and shared solidarity. The study also uses primary data (i.e., census data) and secondary data (i.e., books and articles). The analysis prioritises participants' own interpretations as part of the emic approach (Pike, 1967), enabling the researcher to understand participants' perspectives, avoid imposing external biases, and ensure an authentic representation of shared meanings within the community. The sample districts of Nadia and North 24 Parganas were selected based on the numerical and political influence of the Namasudra community.

4. The plurality of myths within the Namasudra-Matua community

The myths and narratives surrounding those myths emerged in the nineteenth century, alongside the Namasudra anti-caste movement. The formation of the Matua religious institution by Harichand Thakur, a Namasudra caste member, and its further development by Guruchand Thakur towards various aspirations helped the community not only find spiritual satisfaction but also become aware of their imposed social position and gain the courage to

fight back against the suppressive caste order. Along with education, dignified and diverse occupational practice, and clean living, the community became involved in reconstructing their identity, rejecting the stigmatised identity they had been assigned. Now, scientifically, myths are the stories of suspicion, rooted in doubt and driven by a relentless quest to imagine unknown events, often shrouded in ambiguity and intrigue. Myths are traditional stories that are often celebrated and passed down through generations within a culture. They tend to portray individuals or deities as all-powerful, morally righteous, and possessing magical qualities. Myths sometimes describe the origins of the universe, tales of heroes, or foundational social structures. Due to their cultural importance and lasting impact, myths are often considered sacred and hold a special place in the spiritual and cultural identity of the communities from which they come. The myths, frequently endorsed by spiritual scriptures, are seen as unquestioning in their evaluation, arbitrary in their selection of incidents, and largely tolerated without challenge by society or the specific community. The power of myth lies in its ability to influence people's lives, habits, thoughts, and actions. Sometimes, myths serve to create a sense of 'othering' people and oppress certain groups. At other times, creating myths helps build resistance against dominant narratives and encourages practical change. Clearly, myths are more than just stories; they are tools used to justify claims, explain social values and norms, and determine what is right or wrong.

4.1 Myths of the origin of the Namasudra community

There is an overwhelming consensus regarding the historical identity of the Namasudras, as observed in the field study. Almost every one of them replied that they are 'fallen Brahmins' in the question of their original identity. In the 1891 census, Risley cited an argument used by the Namasudra community to claim higher status, namely that they are descendants of the Brahmin sage Basistha, who was cursed by his father and lost his caste for absolving King Dasaratha, who had killed a Brahmin by mistake (Risley, 1891). The alternative myth, which Bandyopadhyay (1997) identified as more prevalent, concerns their association with the sage Kashyapa. According to the legend, Kashyapa engaged in sexual relations with his wife during her menstrual period, an act deemed illicit by the *Shastras*. The offspring resulting from this union were exiled to the forest, where they maintained close contact with tribal communities. Over time, these individuals gradually lost their Brahminical status, with some even abandoning their sacred thread. This lineage developed into *Parashab* Brahmin, believed to have descended from a Brahmin father and a Sudra mother. Nonetheless, this story is never recounted by any community member during field interactions, nor is it documented in any writings (apart from the narrative of them being *Parashab* Brahmin), including their two most revered religious texts and hagiographies, namely, *SriSri Harililamrita* and *SriSri Guruchandcharita*. The text of *SriSri Harililamrita* has raised many debated questions. One key issue is that the language used closely resembles the mythic and magical depictions of divine characters commonly found in Hindu texts, particularly in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. It is argued by community intellectuals and activists that Tarak Chandra Sarkar's orientation as a professional *Kabiyal* (folk singer), whose spiritual understanding revolves around Chaitanyadev's life journey and teachings, influenced his writing, as he consistently sang songs and prose related to Chaitanyadev. The book was initially titled *Sri Hari Charitrasudha*; however, later on, Harichand Thakur's grandson, Shashi Bhusan Thakur, renamed it as *SriSri*

Harililamrita, echoing the title of *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, where the term ‘*lila*’ signifies the divine play of Krishna as well as Chaitanyadev, who is regarded as an incarnation of Krishna (Halder, 2018; Mukherjee, 2018). Mukherjee (2018) has shown that since the original copy of SriSri Harililamrita was lost, many editions have been published with some changes, and one of them is that the community traces its origin to Ramdas Mishra, a *Maithili* Brahmin, and Harichand Thakur is a descendant of his family. This narrative is widely believed within the community.

More than the belief or pride in their being *Maithili* Brahmin, they place greater emphasis on their origin in the Kashyapa Muni’s lineage, and hence they identify their gotra as Kashyapa. Manu, the chief architect of the Hindu *Dharmashastra*, called Chandals ‘the lowest of mortals’ (Manu, 1964, p.407). However, the community consistently resists any form of humiliation imposed upon them, whether it originates from the authoritative Shastras or from social groups that arrogantly proclaim themselves as superior and pure based solely on birth. This steadfast refusal to accept such degradation underscores their resilience and firm stance against social discrimination and hierarchical oppression. They recount how they became Sudras despite their noble lineage. According to this myth, Namasa Muni, son of Kashyapa Muni, left his home for religious austerities while his wife was pregnant. Upon his return, his twin sons, Kirtiban and Uruban, had already crossed the age of the thread ceremony, prompting him to leave again to seek boons from Lord Hari. Eventually, his sons set out to find their father and married the daughters of a Sudra king. Lord Hari bestowed three boons upon Namasa Muni. These included that his descendants would be known as ‘Namasudra’; however, they could not wear the sacred thread, but would face no socio-religious restrictions and would maintain a status similar to that of Brahmins (Roy, 2016). The addition of the suffix ‘Sudra’ resulted from marrying Sudra daughters, and the restriction on abandoning the thread was due to failure to perform the thread ceremony on time. However, their arguments regarding Ballal Sen and their forced transformation into Chandal do not align with their previous myth of Kashyapa Muni. According to one version of the myth, the Namasudras were previously followers of Buddhism (often said to have converted to it), echoing the writing of *SriSri Guruchandcharita* (Halder, 2016), which states that during the Pala dynasty, there were only Buddhists and no Brahmins, and that it was the cunningness of Brahminism that incorporated some principles of Buddhism: *kichu kichu bouddha niti hindu dhorme nilo gathi* (p.29). But Ballal Sen, being an unjust pro-Brahmin king, tortured them, forced them to flee to the dangerous marshy tracts, and labelled them as Chandal. Another version of the myth is that Ballal Sen married a Dom woman, Padmini, and to introduce her to his subjects, he threw a feast that was refused by the Namah Brahmins. Enraged by this audacity, the king ordered their execution, and they fled to the marshy tracts of Jashohar, Khulna, Barisal and Faridpur. This story sometimes also claims that Namah Brahmins openly criticised Ballal Sen for his discrimination and torture towards other lower-caste groups, which brought them into the king’s anger. However, historian Nihar Ranjan Ray (2013) writes that the Chandal community was present during the Pala dynasty, which ruled before the Sen dynasty, and that it was treated as part of society, whereas it faced complete societal exclusion during the Sen dynasty. On the other hand, there is a story narrated by Dalapati Mrinal Kanti Biswas (personal communication, July 10, 2025) that Namasudras were the actual Brahmins from Kanauj who came here to perform rituals (as there were no Brahmins

in Bengal at the time) and eventually became lower-caste untouchables. So, one can observe very clearly that even if there is a multiplicity of myths, each one justifies its claim to having once held the higher rank in the hierarchy.

4.2 Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur in Matua religious thought: from leaders to deities

It is worth noting that the religious founder of Matuaism, Harichand Thakur, was a staunch critic of Brahminism and Vaishnavism. He criticised exaggerated ritual functions and the worship of Hindu idols, rejected Brahmins as mediators between God and his followers, rejected the caste hierarchy, rejected the heaven and hell concept, rejected the initiation ceremony, and rejected the purity and pollution concept of the human body. He emphasised hygienic living, education for everyone, and economic upliftment (Sarkar, 1323 BS/ 1916). He viewed spiritualism as just one aspect of life, not the only or highest one. He believed human beings should take an active part in the material world and should fulfil their household duties towards family and society. His son, Guruchand Thakur, not only propagated his father's message but also actively dedicated his life to emancipating lower castes and untouchables from the confines of unjust norms, social humiliation, and economic backwardness. He encouraged his fellow members to participate in active politics to represent their own causes, which remained neglected and unrepresented by their privileged higher-caste countrymen (Halder, 2016).

However, those who criticised Brahminism as the protector of oppressive arrangements ended up becoming the reincarnation of the Hindu gods Vishnu and Shiva by their followers. Harichand Thakur became the reincarnation of Vishnu, Chaitanya and Buddha (these figures are considered among the *dashavatars* of Hindu mythology). They believe Harichand Thakur was the complete incarnation of Lord Vishnu, whereas Krishna, Chaitanyadev, and even Buddha were partial incarnations who failed to emancipate the untouchables, including Namasudras, from caste oppression and to uplift them. Since none of them was born into what is often called the polluted caste or untouchables, they never experienced their pain. Although Lord Buddha and Chaitanyadev attempted to emancipate them, they did not prioritise household duties and neglected their families. It was only Harichand Thakur, born into their caste, who experienced the oppression firsthand and fought in his human form to emancipate them (Field observation and conversation, 12 February 2025-14 February 2026). Besides, they believe in many magical events recorded in their religious texts that prove their leaders' divinity, such as the prophecy of Harichand's birth, the way his childhood plays were directly shown to resemble Krishna's childhood, the way serpents were torn by seeing him, the way he saved the life of his moribund friend, and the way he cured any diseases among many of his wonderous act (Sarkar, 1323 BS/ 1916).

5. Myths as a cultural tool for collective identity construction

The myths and narratives that emerged simultaneously with the assertive and organised claims of changing caste names and statuses. In the nineteenth century, as Risley (1891) observed, many aboriginal tribes that had recently become Hinduized sought to join prominent castes. They often invented mythical ancestors with the help of certain Brahmin priests, who, in

exchange for money, performed family rituals and claimed to link these tribes to long-forgotten clans. These communities adopted new names, and many identified their gotra as 'Kashyapa'. While exploring why these myths were constructed historically is beyond our scope here, our focus is on their current role. Specifically, we examine how these myths reinforce community identity, collective consciousness, and collective resistance. To change the caste name from a stigmatised ascribed connotation to a respectable strategic appropriation, Namasudras had used the same symbolic grammar already established and recognised with legitimacy. As Buswala (2023) shows, names, 'as symbolic objects and practice of indignities through them', create 'marginalised castes' material, political, and symbolic struggles in their everyday life'(p. 569).

5.1 Exploring myths: A form of cultural resistance

The myths of the Namasudra-Matua community go beyond simple religious stories or folklore. They serve as social texts that shape collective memory, reflect a shared history, establish moral legitimacy, challenge caste hierarchy, and create an alternative understanding of history. The stories suggesting that the Namasudras were originally Brahmins harmed by historical injustice, that Harichand Thakur is an incarnation of Vishnu, and that Guruchand Thakur embodies Shiva, are not only about the past but also send messages about dignity, authority, and social hierarchy today. Malinowski (1926) argued that early societies mainly create myths as essential cultural forces, with limited interest in art or science. Because these communities focus on daily survival, their myths cannot be fully grasped solely through written records. Instead, they should be seen as living parts of the cultures where they are believed and practised. He highlighted that myths go beyond mere stories; they support religion, morality, customs, rituals, and social structures.

This insight is particularly relevant for the Namasudra community. The main question is not about their belief in the historical accuracy of myths, but about the roles these myths play. These stories act as a dominant truth in their everyday social and cultural activities, guiding moral decisions and behaviours. They foster a sense of self-worth and promote an egalitarian perspective that supports resistance within social and religious contexts. The community strongly rejects the descriptions of their origins provided by sage Manu and other Brahminical sacred texts, instead constructing their own history using the same symbolic language common and accepted in society. However, they turned this language against the very order it had supported, challenging it. Because the true origin of the Namasudra community is unknown and their social standing is based on Brahminical texts, constructing their own history was not about ideological submission. Instead, it was a way to challenge and reframe their narrative within the only social framework accessible to them. This approach aimed to end their humiliation, not to continue it.

Similarly, the identification of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur as Deities of Hindu mythology helps to sacralise the Matua community. The movement not only has charismatic leaders but also attributes divine power to its historical figures. Over time, they not only used these deities strategically but also questioned their actions or capacity that failed to emancipate them. They elevated their religious leaders above Hindu deity figures, acknowledging and condemning the caste system's evil while striving for liberation from spiritual, social, and economic oppression. For these individuals, modern education and employment are viewed not

just as rights but as divine obligations. Notably, venerating their two most prominent leaders alters the source of sacred authority from traditional Hindu mythology to Dalit historical experience, reversing the usual hierarchy of socio-religious authority. Omvedt (1976) contended that anti-caste movements are fundamentally cultural revolts that challenge Brahminical dominance through political mobilisation and the creation of alternative religious, ethical, and historical frameworks. Thus, claiming Brahmin status is not simply Sanskritization but a 'symbolic protest,' as Rao (1987) argued, against the monopolies of twice-born castes. Through their social identity reconstruction and material struggles, the charisma of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur provided legitimacy for a new value system. When structural conditions of deprivation exist, the ideologies of charismatic leaders and myths about their past mobilise social and cultural movements, fostering confidence and collective identity.

6. Conclusion

The myths of the Namasudra-Matua community are best understood as socially productive narratives that mediate between religion, politics and identity. From the outside, their cultural practices strongly suggest that they are completely assimilated into the dominant cultural and religious practices. However, a deep ethnographic, emic approach will help reveal the subtle truth of their identity politics and how they negotiate their identity through various phases. Matuas have a simple, distinct set of ceremonies in which Bengali is used as the language of chanting, enabling a direct rejection of Sanskrit. These ceremonies were performed by Matua *Dalapatis*, *Gonsains*, or *Gurus*. However, most of them now perform their ceremonies with Brahmins. When the researcher asked for the reason, given that it seemed to contradict what their movement stands for, the respondents' answers were often similar and highly interesting. In general, they indicated that although they know it is contradictory, it has become a habit through generational practices that they have failed to overcome. However, they also mentioned that it is not that they surrender to Brahminism; rather, they said that these Brahmins once exploited them, humiliated them, refused to serve them, and tagged them as Chandal, but now they not only serve them but also eat in their homes. Some community members argue there's no contradiction, asserting Harichand Thakur was a reincarnation of a Hindu deity. They do not see any problem in worshipping Hindu deities, emphasising how myths and stories influence their sense of identity, besides strengthening their resistance.

The paper concludes by arguing that local traditions cannot be fully understood through classificatory frameworks that assimilate them into mainstream cultures. Instead, they should be analysed from the communities' own perspectives, taking into account the meanings, strategic choices, historical contexts, and political goals involved in creating, negotiating, and maintaining these traditions. This approach treats subordinate communities as active creators of culture, not merely passive followers of dominant traditions.

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