

Spiritual Meritocracy and Social Emancipation: the Chaturayan Philosophy and Legacy of Sri Sri Biswabandhu (C.1883–1948 CE)

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Abstract-

This article delves into the socio-religious reforms, life, and philosophical teachings of Sri Sri Biswabandhu (c. 1883–1948 CE), a prominent Dalit spiritual teacher of the Bengal Vaishnava School. Most of the existing historiography of Namasudra emancipation is focused on the mass political mobilization of the Matua movement, and the political mobilization is often interpreted through the opposing lenses of Sanskritization and outright de-Sanskritization (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Biswas, 2015; Lorea, 2020). This paper examines the socio-religious emancipation of the Namasudra movement through a different, and potentially, an ignored critical dimension. Using a hermeneutic analysis of his (Goswami, 2021) vernacular works of Sri Sri Biswabandhu and his institutional records, this study argues that he constructed a “third trajectory” by reinterpreting orthodox scriptures (Vedic texts, Upanishads and Gita) to critique the ideological basis of the caste system. Key to his reform movement was the Chaturayan doctrine and the idea of “spiritual meritocracy” which, instead of hereditary privilege, re-constructed social dignity as a result of a systematic evolutionary process, that is, education, ethical behavior, and devotion (Biswabandhu, 2021). Beyond theological subversion, this paper highlights his pragmatic institution-building, particularly his radical advocacy for residential female education, rural healthcare, and vocational self-sufficiency within agrarian communities. Through this framework, this paper recontextualizes Biswabandhu as a self-sufficient creator of a divergent Dalit modernity, demonstrating that internal social reform and theological critique was a strongly sustaining, alternative form of the social emancipation process in early 20th century South Asia.

Keywords: Sri Sri Biswabandhu, Dalit Historiography, Spiritual Meritocracy, Namasudra Emancipation, Caste Mobility, Female Education, Colonial Bengal, Vernacular Language.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in rigorous historical and textual analysis. The primary sources are comprised of the vernacular Bengali compositions and the philosophical treatises of Sri Sri Biswabandhu (Biswabandhu, 2021) and the historical and institutional records preserved by his successor in the Premananda Rachana Samagrah (Goswami, 2021). Hermeneutic analysis is conducted on these texts to systematically decode the socio-religious dimensions of Biswabandhu’s thought and his theological deconstruction of the orthodox practice of birth-based caste hierarchy. In addition, the paper utilizes a comparative-historical methodological approach. By working with secondary sources concerning the Namasudra community, caste mobility, and Dalit socio-religious

reform, the research intends to picture Biswabandhu's contributions against contemporaneous mass mobilizations, specifically the Matua movement (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Biswas, 2018; Mondal, 2021). Textual interpretation and comparative historiography enable this study to situate Biswabandhu's creation of 'Spiritual Meritocracy' with reference to the broader concept concerning Sanskritization, de-Sanskritization, and the construction of a 'subaltern' identity in colonial and post-colonial Bengal.

Introduction and Historiographical Context

The socio-religious structures of late nineteenth to early twentieth century Bengal were marked by severe structural inequities due to a rigid, birth-based caste system (Jati) (Jaiwal, 1998; Sharma 1958). Among the most oppressed in this system were the agrarian Dalit Namasudras who experienced extreme subordination and the humiliation of untouchability (Ambedkar, 1979; Mandal, 2025). In the face of this extreme oppression, colonial Bengal started to witness large-scale socio-religious activism at the lower-caste stratum. The considerable body of work on the region's Dalit liberation has focused on large-scale sociopolitical movements, especially the Matua movement founded by Harichand Thakur and later, institutionally consolidated by his descendant, Guruchand Thakur (Biswas, 2020; Mondal, 2020). Pioneering scholarship by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Manosanta Biswas, and Carola Erika Lorea (Bandyopadhyay, 1997; Biswas 2015; Lorea 2020) have extensively captured how the Matua movement mobilized the Namasudra community through the formation of a collective identity, the establishment of a cohesive political agenda, and the assertion of an alternative cultural expression.

As a consequence, scholarly analysis of caste mobility and the subaltern religious movements of Bengal almost always adopt a strict binary. Movements are classified either as instances of "Sanskritization" (i.e. M. N. Srinivas suggests upward mobility as one imitates the rituals of the upper castes) or as "de-Sanskritization" movements, where subaltern groups totally divest themselves of Brahmanical control and construct alternative, self-governing, religious systems (Biswas, 2015; Biswas 2018). Although these schemas hold true for specific patterns of assimilation or rupture, the predominant concern of scholars with the overwhelming magnitude and complete severance of the Matua movement leaves other, potentially similar, intellectual lines of inquiry severely under analyzed. There is a notable scarcity in the scholarly literature regarding contemporaneous movements that sought social emancipation, not through sectarian or political means, but through philosophical and theological reinterpretation.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by putting the life, philosophy, and institutional reform of Sri Sri Biswabandhu (c. 1883–1948 CE) to the fore. Biswabandhu, a contemporary of Guruchand Thakur, emerging from a peasant family in the Faridpur district, sought to traverse a radically different path from the above socio-political and cultural movements for Dalit upliftment (Mazumder, 2021). He did not seek to create a sectarian space by going outside the orthodox Vaishnavism he sought to operate with. His philosophy is neither Sanskritized nor de-Sanskritized; rather, he undertakes a radical internal exercise of doctrinal reconfiguration. Biswabandhu, through a positive use of the canonical literature, i.e. the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and the Srimad Bhagavad Gita, provided a critique from within the tradition against the legitimations of the caste system based on birth (Biswabandhu, 2021).

By doing this, he created a distinct "third trajectory" of social mobility that retained "scriptural" authenticity, yet challenged the orthodox interpretations that are self-serving. His central reformist effort in this regard is his Chaturayan doctrine, a doctrine of four pillars of spiritual practice (Brahmacharya), truth (Satya), service (Seva) and love (Prem). It was within the framework of this doctrine that he posited the theory of "Spiritual Meritocracy" in a rather radical manner, asserting that social respect and spiritual

upliftment are not conditions determined by birth, but are achieved through education, ethical behavior, and spiritual enlightenment.

Moreover, this study shows that Biswabandhu's theological subversion was pragmatically and institutionally anchored. With a strong humanitarian impulse, he blended spiritual knowledge (adhyatmavidya) with secular projects, advocating for and championing women's residential education, rural health care, and self-sustaining vocational training for the poor agrarian communities (Goswami, 2021). This study, by emphasizing the combination of secular empowerment and Vaishnava egalitarianism, underlines Sri Sri Biswabandhu's position as a significant, autonomous, and pioneering formative architect of an alternative Dalit modernity and, thus, shows that internal theological reform is a potent and remarkably durable means of social change.

The Advent, Spiritual Trajectory, and Ideological Formation of Sri Sri Biswabandhu-

The earthly sojourn of Sri Sri Biswabandhu Fatik Gossain—a prominent Dalit spiritual preceptor and social reformer within the Vaishnava tradition—is dated, according to the Bengali calendar, from 1290 to 1355 BS (c. 1883–1948 CE) (Goswami, 2021). According to primary accounts, he manifested at the auspicious dawn of Kartik Sankranti in 1290 BS, in a peasant household in the village of Khagail, situated in the then Faridpur district of the Bengal Presidency under British colonial rule—a region historically renowned for its fertility and agrarian abundance, now forming part of present-day Bangladesh (Goswami, 2021). According to contemporary primary accounts, he was venerated as a highly elevated spiritual figure. He simultaneously embodied the roles of a spiritual preceptor, philosopher, humanist, social reformer, poet, Mahaparivrajaka (The Great Peripatetic Mendicant), and litterateur. Despite lacking substantial recognition in terms of formal institutional education, the various treatises he authored have been incorporated into the academic syllabi of multiple universities across India and Bangladesh, where they are regarded as significant subjects of scholarly research (Mazumder, 2021).

He began to enlighten everyone spiritually from his very childhood. He started his creative pursuits by composing devotional songs, which were frequently performed in various congregations and Hari Sabhas. He dedicated a significant portion of his time to studying diverse religious texts, visiting temples, and attending yatra-palas (traditional folk theatre).

The trajectory of Sri Sri Biswabandhu's life as a socio-religious reformer was catalyzed by his sacramental initiation into the Krishna mantra under the tutelage of Sri Viraj Mohan Basu Thakur, popularly known as Viswaroop Goswami—a disciple of the esteemed Vaishnava preceptor Sri Srimat Dwarkanath Goswami, the then rector of a hermitage of the Madhvacharya-Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampradaya in the then Laur village of Jessore district (Goswami, 2021).

Primary accounts describe Fatik as the varputra—or spiritually blessed son—of Fakirdan Thakur, an exalted yogi and supreme ascetic (Goswami, 2021). Widely known by the epithet Kushindar Fakir (the Fakir of Kushinda), Fakirdan was an illustrious Islamic mystic who attained the zenith of spiritual realization through rigorous yogic disciplines. Purportedly possessing mastery over extraordinary mystical phenomena, he attracted a devoted, cross-sectarian following of both Hindu and Muslim disciples. Fatik's guru, Viswaroop Goswami, bestowed upon him the name Biswabandhu (Goswami, 2021).

From a tender age, Fatik displayed remarkable self-discipline and a deep scholarly commitment to scriptural works. After giving up materialistic things, he went on long pilgrimages within the Indian subcontinent, mostly barefoot. Along with his companions Sri Dhiren Baral Thakur and Sri Jagadananda Goswami, Biswabandhu carried out an extensive and orderly pilgrimage through a vast sacred space from

the Kedarnath Temple located in the Himalayan north to Kanyakumari at the southern tip of the Indian Peninsula (Goswami, 2021). Many of the major pilgrimage sites along the way were also included in the tour, such as Chandranath, Brahmaputra, Gangasagar, Nabadwip, Rameshwaram, Gaya, Hrishikesh, Prayag, Ayodhya, Vrindavan, Dwarka, and Badrinarayan. Biswabandhu's Jibanponji serves as a major historical travelogue documenting travel across the Indian Sub-Continental region (Goswami, 2021). This primary source of information provides insight into the socio-religious and cultural realities of India during the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. Biswabandhu's traveling throughout the Indian Sub-Continent provided him an opportunity to learn many languages. In addition to his native Bengali language and his already acquired extensive knowledge of Sanskrit, he systematically learned to speak many of the regional languages (Hindi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu) that he encountered on his travels. As a result of Sri Sri Biswabandhu becoming a polyglot, he was able to engage with the many different socio-culturally defined areas that he documented (Goswami, 2021).

Furthermore, he quickly learnt the Sanskrit language and its classical literature (Goswami, 2021). In little time, he became a highly learned scholar with great proficiency in scriptures like Smriti, Shruti, Nyaya (logic), and philosophy. He gained unparalleled proficiency in a vast array of classical subjects, including the Vedas, Vedangas, Puranas, Ayurveda, Rasayana Shastra (chemistry/alchemy), the Bhagavat, and Srimad Bhagavad Gita (Goswami, 2021). After completing the study of basic texts like the Chaitanya Charitamrita, the scholar Fatik Chandra underwent a transformation. Fully imbibing the famous saying "Trinadapi Sunichena" (to be humbler than a blade of grass), he became a most humble Vaishnava, completely free from false ego. Motivated by the general humanitarian urge to ease the physical sufferings of all sections of humanity, he applied his rigorous academic discipline to learn Ayurveda, Naturopathy, and Hydropathy (Mazumder, 2021). To achieve this goal, he trained the ashram's devotees in different fields of yoga, physical culture, and exercise. He also taught his close followers important lessons for the maintenance of the body through various practices like urine therapy. The Indian spiritual context has always used these modalities; in fact, ancient ascetics and sages (muni-rishis) employed these very modalities for bodily nourishment. At that time, unlike nowadays where doctors and clinics are available in abundance, people did not have a choice but to depend on nature completely. Biswabandhu played a significant role in protecting and transmitting these traditional techniques. Although he intended to serve humanity universally, he was adamant about his specialized attention on the underprivileged and marginalized sections of society (Mazumder, 2021).

Establishment of the Ashram and the Four-Pillared Philosophy

On 20th Falgun 1339 in Bengali year (equal to 1932/1933 CE), Sri Sri Biswabandhu set up an Ashram (Hermitage) in Malibata village, Gopalganj sub-division of present Bangladesh (Goswami, 2021). It was named 'Biswabandhu Sevashram' by him. In the same year 'Biswabandhu Seva Sangha', the administrative body of the Ashram was also formed. During the same time, the great spiritual leader revealed his original Chaturayan teachings, the four-fold philosophical system of Brahmacharya (spiritual discipline), Satya (truth), Seva (selfless service), and Prem (divine love) (Goswami, 2021). To make these principles more memorable to people, he encoded his philosophical teachings by instituting a four-colored flag (chaturvarna ranjita pataka) featuring red, white, green, and yellow. Ultimately, these four tenets served as the foundational bedrock for his entire pedagogical and philosophical system.

The Symbolism of the Ashram Flag

Red: The Struggle for Spiritual Discipline (Brahmacharya) The foundational segment of the flag is

red, a color chosen explicitly to symbolize rigorous internal struggle (sangram). According to Biswabandhu's pedagogical framework, the human mind inherently governs the ten sensory faculties—comprising the five organs of action (karmendriyas: speech, hands, feet, anus, genitals) and the five organs of knowledge (jnanendriyas: eyes, ears, tongue, nose, skin). The observance of Brahmacharya is posited as the initial and most critical step of spiritual practice (sadhana). It demands a relentless, daily battle to assert the mind's absolute dominance over these physical senses, worldly attachments, and the six internal adversaries (shad-ripu)- (six inner enemies)—kāma, krodha, lobha, moha, mada, and matsarya—represents the psychological and ethical obstacles to self-realization. The red band visually encapsulates this fierce, imperative struggle for sensory subjugation and self-mastery. (Goswami, 2021; Mazumder, 2021)

White: The Ontological Foundation of Truth (Satya) The second segment of the flag is rendered in white, signifying Satya (truth) and its inherent corollaries: equality, fraternity, peace, and purity. Within this doctrine, truth is not merely a moral guideline but the ultimate ontological essence of reality. Sri Sri Biswabandhu postulated that Satya is the very source of Dharma (righteousness/duty), which remains the sole enduring strength and refuge for humanity. The white band, therefore, represents the pure, unalterable foundation of truth upon which all subsequent spiritual and social actions must be built. (Goswami, 2021; Mazumder, 2021)

Green: The Ethos of Selfless Service (Seva) The flag's third segment utilizes the color green to represent Seva (service), establishing a profound metaphor between the natural world and humanity's entire moral and civic duty. Sri Sri Biswabandhu contended that just as nature unconditionally sustains all living beings, individuals are universally obligated to serve society with inexhaustible joy and patience. By elevating Seva to the highest virtue of human existence, the green band transcends the boundaries of traditional spiritual practice. It frames the "religion of service" (seva dharma) as an active, holistic commitment to the welfare of others, mirroring the boundless generosity of the natural environment. (Goswami, 2021; Mazumder, 2021)

Yellow: The Zenith of Divine Love (Prem) The final color of the flag is yellow, representing Prem (divine love), which serves as the ultimate culmination of the Chaturayan path. This concept is deeply rooted in orthodox Vaishnava theology. The Supreme Being (Param Purusha) is defined by the triune essence of Sachchidananda—the integration of Sat (Existence or Sandhini energy), Chit (Consciousness or Samvit energy), and Ananda (Bliss or Hladini energy). According to this framework, the condensed, ultimate manifestation of divine bliss (Ananda) is realized as Prem through the Hladini Shakti. Because the expression of this supreme divine love is metaphorically experienced as a profoundly sweet, yellowish spiritual radiance, the flag culminates in a yellow band. Attaining this state of Prem is framed as the absolute zenith of human spiritual endeavor. Therefore, the fourth and final color of the flag has been adopted as yellow (**Radha-varna**, the color of Radha), symbolizing Divine Love. (Goswami, 2021; Mazumder, 2021)

Activities In the Biswabandhu Sevashram Institutional Welfare and Global Service

The 'Biswabandhu Seva Sangha' mobilized its entire organizational capacity toward global service. Under the leadership of the Ashram's dedicated renunciates, intensive relief efforts were launched for those marginalized by natural disasters—including floods and droughts—as well as those suffering from epidemics, famine, and chronic poverty (Goswami, 2021).

Educational Reforms and the Ideal of the 'Global Citizen'

To facilitate the education of underprivileged students, a free primary school and an M.E. School (Middle English) for girls were established within the Ashram (Goswami, 2021). Residential facilities (hostels) were constructed for students traveling from afar, providing free lodging, sustenance, and educational materials.

Shi Sri Biswabandhu focused on the holistic development of the individual. Through a curriculum of secular education, character building, ethics and along with spiritual awakening within an ascetic environment, the institution aimed to cultivate true "**Global Citizens.**" (Mazumder, 2021) Furthermore, a rich library was curated, housing rare manuscripts and Biswabandhu's own philosophical treatises, including:

1. Biswabandhu Gitanjali (Vols. I & II)
2. Biswabandhu Sadhan Tattwa
3. Biswabandhu Gita & Biswabandhu Bani
4. Mahajagaran (**Biswabandhu,2021**)

Socio-Economic Empowerment and Grassroots Reform

To address rural unemployment, the Ashram inaugurated vocational centers for cottage industries, including **handlooms (Tant) and spinning wheels (Charka) (Goswami, 2021)**. Furthermore, a **College of Music** was established for the study of vocal and instrumental arts, alongside initiatives for agricultural research, the Ayurveda Vidyapith for instruction in traditional medicine, and a library of sacred texts alongside a **Chatuspathi** for the study of religious scriptures (Goswami,2021). Notably, meticulous arrangements were made within the ashram to host eminent domestic and international educators to impart these diverse disciplines.

The institutional framework developed by Biswabandhu demonstrates that his reformist vision extended beyond spiritual discourse into tangible socio-economic intervention. The establishment of educational institutions, vocational centers, and healthcare facilities reflects a holistic model of empowerment that integrates moral, intellectual, and material dimensions.

This approach may be interpreted as a form of subaltern self-organization, wherein marginalized communities actively construct alternative structures of knowledge and welfare. Unlike purely political mobilization, Biswabandhu's model emphasizes ethical transformation and social responsibility as the foundation of emancipation.

Gender Advocacy and Social Integration

Sri Sri Biswabandhu maintained that social evolution was impossible without the liberation and self-sufficiency of women (Biswabandhu, 2021). Despite the sociocultural challenges of providing residential education for girls in rural Bengal a century ago, he personally campaigned within agrarian communities (Goswami, 2021). This movement gained significant traction among the Namasudra community, highlighted by the participation of Ashwini Kumar Dutta—the first B.A. graduate from the Namasudra community in the Gopalganj Subdivision—who joined the mission to modernize and uplift his people (Mazumder, 2021).

Following Ashwini's decision to allow his daughter, Mandakini Devi, to study at the **Chatuspathi** and reside in the girls' hostel established by Biswabandhu, female education gained significant traction. From this point forward, the promotion and expansion of women's education were widely embraced within the Namasudra community. Consequently, it is not an overstatement to characterize the 1930s as an era of

educational renaissance for Namasudra society. This transformation was primarily driven by Sri Sri Biswabandhu's socio-economic initiatives and his advocacy for female emancipation, which he facilitated through a synthesis of caste-conscious spiritual and secular education. This socio-educational vision is encapsulated in his vernacular compositions, wherein he proclaimed -

মাতা না জাগিলে নাহি জাগে পুত্র গণ।

প্রথমে

প্রয়োজন নারী জাগরণ ॥

সত্য সত্য সত্য আৰ্য্য শাস্ত্রীয় বচন।

কর জন্ম জন্মান্তরের ভুল সংশোধন ॥

পুরাকালে ভারতীয় নরনারী যত।

নারী জাগরণ

চেষ্টা করিত সতত ॥

বালক-বালিকা তারা গুরু গৃহে দিত।

বেদ বেদান্ত তারা অধ্যয়ন করিত ॥

গুরু তত্ত্ব জ্ঞাত হয়ে গুরু অনুগত।

ব্রহ্মচর্যাশ্রমে তারা হইয়া সংযত ॥

ধর্ম জেনে কর্ম করুক পুত্র কন্যাগণ।

তাহলে এদেশে হবে মহাজাগরণ ॥

(Translation: Sons cannot awaken unless mothers awaken first, / Hence, the awakening of women is the primary imperative. / Profoundly true are the dictums of the Aryan scriptures, / Rectify the accumulated errors of past generations. / In antiquity, the men and women of India, / Constantly strove for the emancipation of womankind. / They would entrust both boys and girls to the preceptor's home [Gurukul], / Where they would study the Vedas and the Vedanta. / Comprehending the Guru's wisdom and remaining devoted, / They observed strict discipline within the Brahmacharya ashram. / Let the sons and daughters perform their deeds guided by Dharma, / Only then shall this nation witness a great renaissance.) (Biswabandhu, 2021)

In this composition, Biswabandhu strategically deploys an epistemological subversion that parallels his deconstruction of the caste system. To do this, he uses both the "affirmations of the Aryan scriptures" and the antiquity of the Gurukul system to authenticate women's emancipation as a return to the site's just and pure indigenous traditions—rather than the Western colonial imposition misunderstood by the general public. He calls the "contemporary disallowed education" of women "a compilation of errors made by the previous generation" and makes it clear the entrenched restrictions of patriarchy are not divine mandates but historical anomalies. In addition, this verse democratizes the very concept of an access to sacred knowledge by explicitly stating that both "male" and "female" have equally participated in this sacred text, the "Vedas and Vedanta" in the strict discipline of the Brahmacharya ashram. His long-term approach produces a matrilineal model of collective consciousness awakening for the country. He supports his argument by demonstrating that a country cannot have a wider "grand renaissance," unless the maternal system is enlightened, because "a son cannot awaken without a mother awakening." In this sense, women play an active role in the co-creational process of a new and improved society and are considered the epistemological support system for the entire marginalized community.

The expansion of institutionalized educational initiatives that realise Sri Sri Biswabandhu's vision for female liberation and socio-economic development of the marginalised Namasudra community was developed formally by his adherents and successors through the establishment of institutions throughout

West Bengal (Mazumder, 2021). One of the earliest signs of this institutionalisation occurred in 1967 when his devotee, Sri Devendra Nath Bain, founded a high school that was directly named after Sri Sri Biswabandhu, the 'Kalitala Biswabandhu Shikkha Niketan' in Bongaon, a district in North 24 Parganas (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2023). The organisational structure of the movement was further solidified in 1974 with the registration of the governing body, the Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, as a society under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961. The establishment of the Biswabandhu Seva Sangha was an important and ground-breaking administrative event that catalysed grassroots level initiatives currently in place for the welfare of the marginalised Namasudra community. The year 1983 also indicated a different historical significance; it was Sri Sri Biswabandhu's one hundredth birthday. To commemorate that landmark occasion, his son and successor, Srimat Premananda Goswami, initiated the establishment of the Biswabandhu Satabarshiki Balika Vidyalaya the following year, 1984. It is a charitable girls' school, in Betai in the Nadia district. The establishment of the school represented the culmination of Sri Sri Biswabandhu's lifelong commitment to the education of women (Mazumder, 2021).

In order to expand and sustain this socio-educational movement, the registered Biswabandhu Seva Sangha has extended the scope of its operations by assuming management for several important facilities such as the Biswabandhu Shishu Vihar in Kolkata, founded by Sri Ranjit Sikdar, a Rastrapati Puraskar Awardee and the Biswabandhu Mission in Purba Bardhaman, founded by Dr. Biswanath Bala. Additionally, commitment to provide educational outreach continued into subsequent generations with Sri Krishanananda Goswami, who also established the Biswabandhu Memorial Institution, an English medium co-educational school located in Betai. The primary objective and philosophical basis of Sri Sri Biswabandhu was to become an ideal (adarsha purush) individual through the blending of spiritual knowledge (adhyatma vidya) with secularly-based education. He firmly believed that by shaping a child's moral character through this holistic approach to learning and continuous self-improvement, they could be molded into a truly **worthy** (yogya) human being. (Mazumder, 2021).

Biswabandhu's advocacy for female education represents a significant departure from prevailing socio-cultural norms in rural Bengal. By promoting residential education for women within a conservative agrarian context, he challenged deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. This initiative aligns with broader patterns of social reform in colonial India, where education functioned as a critical instrument of empowerment. However, Biswabandhu's approach is distinctive in its integration of spiritual discipline with secular learning, thereby framing female emancipation not merely as a social necessity but as a moral and civilizational imperative.

Caste Consciousness and the Question of Untouchability

Apart from his pioneer efforts in formal education, the socio-spiritual movement of Sri Sri Biswabandhu was deeply rooted in a caste-conscious awakening movement. To effectively mobilize the marginalized Namasudra caste and overcome the internalized social subjugation of the people of this caste, he made use of the highly popular and emotive tool of songs and discourses in the vernacular language. His songs and discourses in the Bengali language were a highly effective tool of ideological mobilization, which directly challenged the caste hierarchy and the need for collective dignity and self-determination of the people of this caste. By rendering complex theological terms used in Sanskrit scriptures into simple Bengali poetry, Sri Sri Biswabandhu was able to bring about the democratization of theological knowledge. The poems used by Sri Sri Biswabandhu have two distinct analytical layers. Firstly, they are an epistemological

dissection of the Jati system using orthodox religious scripts, and secondly, they are a sociological critique of the hypocrisy in the practice of religion.

The Epistemological Journey: Merit Over Birthright

Biswabandhu's approach to caste consciousness is firmly rooted in spiritual egalitarianism. Rather than rejecting the Hindu canonical tradition, he systematically weaponized it against the orthodox elite. In the following composition, he addresses the futility of hereditary pride:

যে জাত কুল বলে এত, টানাটানি করছে কত;
সে জাত কুল জন্মগত, নয়রে এ সংসারে,
তোর বাবার সঙ্গে মাটি খালি ভুল ধারণা করে;
তাই বলি মন দিন থাকতে শোন চল যাইরে স্কুলের ঘরে ॥
জন্মনা জায়তে শূদ্র, সে তখন অতি ক্ষুদ্র সংস্কারে দ্বিজ ভদ্র বেদ অধ্যয়ন করে।
বেদ অধ্যয়ন সাঙ্গ হলে বিপ্র নাম ধরে;
শেষে ব্রহ্ম জেনে ব্রাহ্মণ হবে ব্যক্ত আছে এ সংসারে ॥

(Translation: The caste and lineage over which there is such relentless contention / Such caste and lineage are not determined by birth in this worldly realm. / Existence is merely reduced to dust by harboring the false notions of one's forefathers; / Therefore I say, O mind, heed this while time remains: let us proceed to the house of learning. / By birth, one is born a Shudra [uninitiated], existing in a state of utter insignificance; / Through purificatory rites [samskara], one becomes a refined, twice-born [dvija] and studies the Vedas. / Upon the culmination of Vedic study, the title of Vipra [learned scholar] is assumed; / Ultimately, by realizing Brahman [the Supreme Reality], one becomes a Brahmana—this truth is manifest in the world.) [Biswabandhu, 2021]

In this verse, Biswabandhu executes a brilliant vernacular paraphrase of a foundational Sanskrit decree found in the Skanda Purana and the Atri Smriti ("Janmana jayate shudrah..."). He completely severs the link between genetics and spiritual status, reframing the human condition as an evolutionary process. He describes a "Spiritual Meritocracy" in which every person is born a Shudra (an unrefined or common state of being) and can only hope to achieve the level of Brahmana through educational pursuits and purificatory rites, and ultimately the attainment of the Supreme Reality (Brahman). By showing the oldest texts do not support the idea of hereditary supremacy, he destroys the religious basis of Untouchability. His final plea to "proceed to the house of learning" turns this theological tract into a practical and direct plea to the Untouchables to claim their place in the educational process.

The Sociological Critique: Colonial Modernity and Orthodox Hypocrisy

While his epistemological critiques dismantled the scriptural justifications for birth-based caste, Biswabandhu also deployed acute sociological observation to expose the hypocrisies of modern orthodoxy. He recognized that the practicalities of colonial modernity had already rendered rigid caste boundaries obsolete, making their continued enforcement an act of malicious subjugation rather than spiritual purity.

জাতি জাতি ক'রে যেতেছ কোথায়।
আর্য ঋষিমত, ভুলে স্বীয় পথ, যেওনা যেওনা শমনালয় ॥
পুরাকাল হতে কৰ্মগত জাতি, মো'সম মূর্খেরা জানে না সে রীতি;

তাহাতে আজ এই অসীম দুর্গতি, ভুগিতে ভুগিতে জীবন যায় ॥
দেখ হে ন শূদ্রা ভগবদ্ভক্তা, লিখিলেন বায়ু পুরাণ বক্তা;
বুঝিতে আমরা অতি অশক্তা তাই দ্বেষাদ্বেষে এদেশ যায় ॥
তপস্যা ত্যজিয়া ব্রাহ্মণেরগণ, প্রাণপণে করে চাকরী অন্বেষণ;
স্টীমার গাড়ীতে একত্রে ভোজন, কিসে জাতি কুল থাকে বজায়।
অখণ্ড অসীম ভারত শক্তি, খণ্ড করিয়াছি ক'রে জাতি জাতি;
বিশ্ববন্ধু বলে মিলে শীঘ্রগতি, আপন শক্তি ধর ত্বরায় ॥

(Translation: Where are you bound, relentlessly obsessing over caste? / Forgetting your true path and the wisdom of the Aryan sages, do not drive yourselves toward destruction. / Since antiquity, Jati was determined by Karma (action and merit); fools like us remain ignorant of this ancient principle; / Consequently, we face this boundless misery today... Behold the decree, "A devotee of God is never a Shudra," as articulated by the narrator of the Vayu Purana... Abandoning their prescribed penance (tapasya), the Brahmins now desperately seek secular employment; / Dining together in modern steamers and trains, how can the purity of caste and lineage possibly be maintained? / The undivided, infinite power of India has been fragmented by our incessant divisions of caste; / Biswabandhu urges: unite swiftly, and urgently reclaim your inherent collective strength.) [Biswabandhu, 2021]

In this case, Biswabandhu plays the role of a theologian and a sociologist. Theologically, the author uses the Vayu Purana, "Na Shudra Bhagavadbhakta," to indicate that spiritual devotion is the ultimate equalizer, instantly dispelling the effects of the low castes to which an individual is born. Sociologically, the author observes the shared public areas, the steamers, and the trains, where the prohibition against inter-caste dining is openly defied. The author reveals the hypocrisy and contradiction in the behavior of the orthodox elite, who have given up their tapasya, or ascetic, responsibilities and are now aggressively pursuing secular employment in the colonial administration, while maintaining the pretense of ritual purity to oppress the lower castes. The threat that "undivided, infinite power of India is being split and shattered by caste hatred" situates the author's socio-spiritual reform agenda within the larger imperatives of national integration and colonial resistance.

Soteriological Universalism: Transcending the Illusion of Lineage

কে হয়েছে জীবনমুক্ত জাতি কুল বিচারে।
ব্রাহ্মণ ক্ষেত্র বৈশ্য শূদ্র কালের অধিকারে ॥
জাতি কুল থাকে কিসে, ভেবে পেলেম না দিশে।
সব জাতি খাচ্ছে মিশে, গাড়ী ইষ্টিমারে ॥
কালের এই কুলাচারে, জুতা চলে পাকের ঘরে,
তুলসীর মালা লাগে নারে, ভদ্র ব্যবহারে ॥
গোঁসাই বিশ্ববন্ধু ভনে, জাতি কুল ঘোর তুফানে
গুরু নামের বাদাম টেনে, যেতে হবে পারে ॥

(Translation: Who has ever achieved Jivanmukti (liberation in this life) merely by the virtue of their caste or lineage? / Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are all equally subject to the dominion of Time. / How does caste and lineage even survive? I find no logic or direction in this thought. / All castes are dining together, mingling within trains and steamers. / In the customary practices of this modern era, shoes now enter the kitchen, / And a Tulsi garland is no longer a prerequisite for cultured, gentle behavior. /

Gosai Biswabandhu declares: Amidst this severe storm of caste and lineage, / One must cross over the ocean of existence by hoisting the sail of the Guru's Name.) [Biswabandhu, 2021]

This composition serves as a direct assault on the concept of soteriology (salvation) being linked to genetic lineage. By emphasizing that all societal labels—whether Brahmin or Shudra—are equally subject to the indiscriminate dominion of time, Biswabandhu shifts the focus from the fragmented social body to the universal divine soul. He points to the complete collapse of traditional spatial and ritual purity (such as wearing historically "impure" shoes into the kitchen) to highlight the absurdity of modern caste enforcement. In the face of the "severe storm" of societal division, he offers a final resolution: universal spiritual assimilation. By hoisting the sail of the "Guru's Name," individuals are urged to transcend artificial human constructs and embrace a universally accessible path to liberation.

Through these vernacular texts, Biswabandhu emerges as a highly pragmatic reformer. He diagnosed the caste system not merely as a theological error, but as the primary engine of India's social fragmentation. His ultimate remedy—synthesizing educational awakening with collective spiritual realization—effectively neutralized the epistemological power dynamics of the orthodox elite.

Partition, Displacement, and Institutional Continuity

The settlement of Biswabandhu in Nabadwip during the late 1940's has to be understood within the wider historical context of Partition and the consequent displacement of populations from East Bengal. In particular, a large population of Namasudra community refugees was displaced during this time. In this context, the ashram re-establishment in Nabadwip is of more significance. It not only reflects personal renunciation but also represents the resilience and continuity of socio-religious institutions amidst displacement. Biswabandhu's movement, therefore, must be seen in the wider context of post-partition Bengal as a move for adaptation and reconstruction. In the month of Bhadra, 1354 BS [circa August-September 1947 CE], Sri Sri Biswabandhu left his countless devotees in East Bengal stranded in an unmeasurable ocean of separation.

He left a multitude of devotees in East Bengal at the Malibata ashram which had become an extremely affluent institution following many years of effort and arrived in Nabadwip completely impoverished. He was accompanied only by his wife, sons, daughter-in-law, mother, brother and numerous ardent followers. Such paradigms of renouncements are rare to find in this world.

However, within no time, he set about forming a grand new ashram at Nabadwip's Charbrahmanagar. The ascetics, monks, Vaishnavas, and common people of Nabadwip were all very happy to have him. The ascetics, monks, Vaishnavas, and common people of Nabadwip were overjoyed with his arrival and it is said that 'Nabadwip Chandra' [a reference to the 15th-century saint Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu] was found again after four and half centuries. The new ashram of Biswabandhu was always joyous.

Bhabananda Babaji and Bishakha Sakhi, the renowned scholars of the era were his closest confidants. Bhabananda Babaji, who was a scholar wanted to be with him always. Therefore, at Sri Sri Biswabandhu's insistence, the devout scholar Bhabananda Babaji established 'Sarbojanin Gouranga Chatuspathi' (a universal/public traditional Sanskrit school) in Nabadwip to enable the general public to study Sanskrit. This move saw many poor and 'Nimnashreni' (lower caste) students from East Bengal to study Sanskrit for the first time in history (Mazumder, 2021). In Magh (January-February 1948 CE), national stalwarts poured into Nabadwip Ashram to have an audience with Biswabandhu. This delegation included Dr Amritalal Chattopadhyay, M.A., Ph.D (an in-law to Mahatma Gandhi), Niranjan Modak, Kamal Chattopadhyay, and former minister Ramendranath Mallick (Mazumder, 2021). It is noteworthy that

established political and intellectual elites actively sought the mentorship of an ascetic reformer from a marginalized background. By aligning themselves with Biswabandhu, these figures willingly subordinated their secular prestige to his egalitarian philosophy, culminating in embracing his doctrine of Prembhakti (devotional love) as transformative tenets for social and spiritual cohesion.

The Mahasamadhi and the Legacy of the Nabadwip Ashram

His mortal stay in Nabadwip was however short despite the socio-cultural revival Biswabandhu had initiated upon his arrival in West Bengal. The devotees were apprehensive and wondering if, “he will really leave and go away”. This was shortly followed by the death of Biswabandhu. This, according to the life records, happened in 1355 Bengali year BS, exactly fifteen days after the Raas Purnima festival, on Wednesday, the 15th of Agradhayan [around late November/early December 1948 CE] Sri Sri Biswabandhu, lovingly and reverently called ‘Fatik Gosai’ ended his mortal life. He took Mahasamadhi by leaving for the Akhanda Anandamay Nitya Dham (undivided blissful eternal abode). The epicenter of his final teachings and resting place is the Nabadwip Ashram physically located in the geographical location of Charmajdia, Charbrahmanagar in Nabadwip. The Nabadwip ashram is “opposite to the Charbrahmanagar market and neighboring the post office”. In modern times, the ashram compound is a grand historical monument of his teachings and beliefs. The compound has the beautiful Samadhi Mandir, which is the mausoleum that holds his mortal remains, as well as a Govinda temple, a large Natmandir (congregation hall for spiritual discussions), and a Yatri Nivas (guesthouse) built to house the many devotees and researchers who come to visit. (Mazumder, 2021)

Institutional Continuation and the Betai Ashram

After he passed away, the crucial task of preserving and propagating his egalitarian socio-spiritual journey was taken up mainly by his elder son Srimat Premananda Goswami among his two sons, Srimat Premananda Goswami and Srimat Nityananda Goswami. Srimat Premananda Goswami took significant steps to expand the institutional footprint of his father’s teachings. He established the 'Biswabandhu Sevashram' in Betai. It is a border village located approximately 50 kilometers away in the Krishnanagar subdivision.

He was instrumental in promoting the philosophical tenets of his father, Sri Sri Biswabandhu and dedicated his entire life to the universal welfare of humanity. He became the very embodiment of Seva-dharma (the religion of selfless service). The notable evolution of the ashram into an intellectual and spiritual hub followed frequent visits of numerous distinguished scholars and erudite thinkers, from both within India and the international academic community. Prominent academics, including Professor Dr. Bimal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Head of the Department of Bengali at Bhagalpur University; Dr. Tushar Kumar Chattopadhyay, Head of the Department of Bengali at Kalyani University; and Dr. Shishir Kumar Majumdar, Head of the Department of Bengali at the University of North Bengal, consistently maintained contact with him. Whenever and wherever discussions regarding Swami Biswabandhu took place—whether within India or in the international arena—these scholars would promptly apprise 'Gosaiji' [Srimat Premananda Goswami] via correspondence. The eminent professor and researcher from K.N. College [Krishnath College], Berhampore, Dr. Shaktinath Jha, was a regular visitor to his ashram. Moreover, various researchers from as far as Britain would consult him on diverse subjects. (Mazumder, 2021)

Institutional Legacy: The Biswabandhu Seva Sangha

The practical and institutional manifestation of Sri Sri Biswabandhu's egalitarian philosophy is most prominently realized through his brainchild, the Biswabandhu Seva Sangha. Formally registered as a socio-religious institution under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961, the Sangha operates with a comprehensive, multi-tiered mandate. In recent years, the organization has structurally expanded its administrative footprint by registering with the Niti Aayog, Government of India (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2023), signaling its transition from a regional socio-religious body to a formally recognized developmental non-governmental organization.

At its core, the Sangha's mandate is driven by the eradication of ignorance and superstition through structured educational intervention. Moving beyond foundational schooling, the institution has strategically advocated for advanced infrastructural developments, including ministerial-level dialogues for the establishment of the "Biswabandhu Karigari Mohavidyalaya" (a technical college) (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha 2019). Operating as a catalyst for subaltern mobility, the Sangha actively organizes campaigns to motivate unemployed, marginalized youth to pursue higher education and participate in competitive examinations (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha 2025), thereby fostering long-term socio-economic self-reliance.

Beyond intellectual empowerment, the Sangha executes highly localized, grassroots public health and civic awareness programs. Demonstrating a pragmatic synthesis of traditional wellness and modern medical infrastructure, the organization actively aligns its initiatives with the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) to deliver accessible healthcare to vulnerable demographics. This intervention includes rigorous community workshops aimed at motivating institutional deliveries to systematically reduce Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) and Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR). Furthermore, the Sangha acts as a vital intermediary between the state and the subaltern by actively educating rural populations on how to navigate and utilize modern government healthcare provisions, such as the Swasthya Sathi card and Ayushman Bharat schemes. (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2025)

These health initiatives are concurrently supported by broader civic awareness campaigns targeting safe drinking water, sanitation, female literacy, and the demotivation of early marriage. The Sangha also functions as a critical first-responder during environmental crises, mobilizing its network to provide rapid material and financial relief to marginalized communities devastated by natural calamities, such as the Amphan cyclone. (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2021).

To ensure the epistemological survival of Biswabandhu's philosophy, the Sangha has undertaken extensive archival and publication efforts. The compilation and publication of the multi-volume Biswabandhu Rachna Samagrah (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2021) and Premananda Rachna Samagrah (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2022) have democratized access to their vernacular theology, providing an invaluable primary resource repository for contemporary researchers, educators, and the general public. The organization also sustains continuous ideological dissemination through its monthly journal, Bandhu Bani.

The profound, enduring impact of these sustained welfare activities has garnered significant state validation. The Government of West Bengal honored the Sangha with the prestigious "Thakur Harichand Guruchand Award" for the 2016–2017 cycle, formally cementing the institution's contributions to the social upliftment of backward classes. Furthermore, the official inclusion of the Sangha in the Nadia District Gazetteer, alongside its integration into government-sponsored Heritage City renovation projects in Nabadwip (Biswabandhu Seva Sangha, 2019), illustrates the successful spatial and historical anchoring

of Sri Sri Biswabandhu's legacy within the civic narrative of Bengal. Ultimately, the Biswabandhu Seva Sangha stands as a testament to how internal theological reform can be successfully operationalized into a resilient, secular framework for social justice and subaltern emancipation.

Comparative Perspective: Matua Movement and Biswabandhu

Both the Matua movement and the socio religious reform undertaken by Sri Sri Biswabandhu shared the ultimate objective to emancipation the Namasudra community, A comparative analysis reveals that these two parallel pathways have fundamentally divergent methodological trajectories. Led by the Thakur family, the Matua movement united large groups of people to build their own independent religious identity. Their movement developed an affinity towards politics to challenge upper-caste dominance. On the other hand, Biswabandhu chose not to break away to form a separate sect or get involved in politics. Instead, he operated firmly within the established Vaishnava tradition. His aim was to focus on internal philosophical reinterpretation and grassroots institutional reform. While the Matua tradition evolved into a formidable socio-political force, Biswabandhu's paradigm remained resolutely socio-spiritual and educational. This crucial as well as subtle distinction highlights the profound plurality of Namasudra Dalit reform strategies in early twentieth-century Bengal, effectively challenging monolithic interpretations of subaltern socio-religious movements.

Conclusion

This research will expand upon this recognition of plurality within the historiography of the Namasudras in Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal and also to create a scholarly work that recognises the unique specification of the Matua movement. The Matua Movement, which involved mass sectarian mobilisation of the Matua community, is representative of one of the historical trajectories of Dalit struggle in the region by providing clear cut examples of community based activism against upper caste domination and oppression. This was not the only way that the Dalits resisted upper caste oppression however. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to highlight another equally important intellectual tradition of Dalit resistance, which was led by "Sri Sri Biswabandhu". His reformist vision can be understood as a unique intellectual framework which eluded (or bypassed) the conventional sociological dualities of Sanskritisation and de-Sanskritisation. That is, he did not choose simply to assimilate into the orthopractic of the upper castes or disassociate from the Hindu sacred text altogether, but instead developed a strong epistemological subversion from within the existing orthodox framework. One example of this is his use of the doctrine of "Spiritual Meritocracy" which used sacred texts to create a theoretical decoupling of spiritual legitimacy from social dignity based upon genetics. In creating this theoretical decoupling of spiritual legitimacy from social dignity based upon genetics, he was in effect dismantling the justification of social inequalities which were mediated through the hereditary practice of untouchability, and subsequently establishing a methodology for enhancing the status of humans as being an evolutionary process, to be based on ethical behaviours, education, and devotion to divinity.

It is of great importance to note, that the socio-spiritual ideology developed by Biswabandhu, was not limited to discussing this ideology, but rather he used his ideology to catalyze grassroots institutions throughout society and to develop the working classes as a streamlined collective of individuals. By utilising the ethical mandates of his Chaturayan Philosophy, Biswabandhu was able to transmute the spiritual universalist perspective into a pragmatic blueprint to promote community welfare. The fact that Biswabandhu created many of the first-ever initiatives aimed at promoting female education among Dalit

Nmasudra community through residential educational institutions within conservative agricultural societies as well as creating healthcare and/or vocational centre for women, all demonstrate a cohesive moral, educational and financial empowerment through a systems-based network of institutions. In addition, the institution that was built by Biswabandhu proved to be extremely resilient, they provided an enduring model of upliftment to marginalized and vulnerable communities, particularly during the tumultuous structural violence and dislocation that occurred as a result of the partitioning of Bengal. This research ultimately establishes the idea that Sri Sri Biswabandhu was a pioneer who built the foundations of a modern Dalit empowerment model rather than being simply an ascetic who existed in his own time and place. This work forces the need to rethink subaltern historiography and shows the dismantlement of the caste system and the development of alternate ways to empower Dalit people through theological and philosophical reinterpretation of norms and through creating an educated and awakened society. This work analyses the contributions of Biswabandhu, and positions the term 'Spiritual Meritocracy' as the primary theory for understanding how various agents of change were able to create egalitarian changes during the many different historical periods in South Asia.

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