Research in Progress: Radical-Pragmatic Debate over Reservation: A Study of the Naths of West Bengal and Assam

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Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 4 (1), April 2020, pp. 135-148

Published by: Indian Sociological Society
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A Study of the Naths of West Bengal and Assam

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Abstract

The Nath sampradaya (community), one of the ancient communities in India, comprises of two groups – the ascetics Yogis and the householders. The householders later formed an endogamous caste known as Yogi or Jogi in West Bengal and Assam and they commonly use their surname ‘Nath’ or ‘Debnath’. The Naths of these two states believe that they are the descendants of a priestly community, but, later degraded by the then king of medieval Bengal. The Naths have been showing their resistance against the brahmanical society since the late 20th century CE and projecting themselves as the Rudraja Brahmana having every right to be a priest. Inclusion of this caste in the OBC list led to an intra-community identity conflict and contention over the reservation. The ‘radical’ Naths want to forsake the OBC status, whereas the ‘pragmatic’ Naths want to retain the OBC status.

Key words: Caste association, Nath sampradaya, OBC, Rudraja Brahmana, Yogi

Introduction

The Nath sampradaya has been an age-old community of the Indian subcontinent. The householder Naths of West Bengal and Assam formed an endogamous caste known as Yogi or Jogi. The Bengali householder Naths commonly use their surname ‘Nath’ or ‘Debnath’ indicating the direct lineage of Lord Siva who is regarded as the adinatha. Exclusion of this caste from the mainstream Bengal society occurred long back in the then medieval Bengal. Followers of this caste have undergone great hardships over the centuries. Even now some of the Naths ‘are highly educated, but in general, level of literacy is low’ (Chowdhury, 2008, p. 554). Owing to their socio-economic and educational backwardness, they are declared as Other Backward Class (OBC) by the central government and the respective state governments of West Bengal and Assam.
However, a section of the Naths have been showing strong resistance, since mid of the 19th century CE, against the manner they are being looked down upon by other castes, especially by the *brahmanas*. They often cite some legends as well as literary works where their glorious past has been recorded as proof of their claim. It is widely believed by the Bengali Naths of these states that once the Yogis of Bengal were engaged in priesthood (Mallik, 1946; N.C. Nath, 1995; R.G. Nath, 2001; H. Nath, 2014; Nath Majumder, 2018). The Jogis of Rangpur (now in Bangladesh) once claimed themselves as the descendants of the priest of King Gopi Chandra (Wise, 1883; Mallik, 1946), but ‘the recent status of this community in contemporary social structure is really thought provoking and agonising too’ (Ghosh, 2011, p. 30). Theologically the Naths are followers of the Natha *panth* (cult) which is philosophically against the institution of caste (Ray, 2013). But ‘in Bengal, the Natha cult is practically dead’ (Sen, 1956, p. 280). Today, however, the householder Naths is quite distinct from that of the ascetic branch. The former branch maintains an endogamous caste framework called Yogi or Jogi, but the latter is beyond the *varna* system since the religious practices they observe do not conform to the Puranic version of Hinduism. Just a few decades ago, a large number of the householder Naths were engaged in weaving and cultivation. A small number of the Naths were engaged in small businesses, public or private sector offices, and in educational institutions. The OBC status indicates the community’s socio-economic and educational backwardness, but the attitude towards the OBC reservation is ‘surprisingly contested’ among the Naths in both West Bengal and Assam.

This paper will touch upon the history and identity of the Bangali Naths. The discussion on history and identity of the Bangali Naths is central because contentions over the reservation are consequences of the dichotomous nature of the Nath identity among the Naths themselves, which has largely been constituted by their past history. This paper will also try to trace the probable reasons that caused degradation of this community in the local caste hierarchy and the social resistance of the Naths against the age-old Hindu caste system. At the end of this paper, the ideological as well as action oriented contentions among the Naths over the OBC reservation will be dealt with.

**Methodology**

The present work is basically qualitative in nature. Historical analysis has been applied to analyse the historical specificity. In addition, ethnographic method has
been applied to understand the nuances and the discursive logic of the Naths. A questionnaire was prepared to collect data from the field. Information has also been collected from the interviews with some respondents and prominent activists of the Nath community. Snowball sampling has been employed as the data collection technique. The interpretations in this paper have been carried out through discourse analysis.

A Brief History of the Bengali Naths

There is no unanimous opinion on the origin of the Nath tradition in Bengal. Sen argues that the Yogic tradition is supposed to have existed in Bengal prior to the Aryan colonization (Sen, 1352 BS, p. 19). Ghosh has shown that Nathism was probably initiated and developed first in Bengal during 9th-13th centuries CE (Ghosh, 1950, p. 522). It is also held that Nathism was developed in Bengal approximately in the 3rd century CE (Nath, 2014) or in the 10th century CE (Dasgupta, 1969; Ghosh, 2011). Chakraborty (2014) argues that the Nath tradition, along with the Buddhist tradition, had a glorious history in Bengal during the Pala dynasty (mid-8th to mid-12th centuries CE). But Ghosh (1950) argues that the Nath tradition in Bengal can be traced back prior to the Pala dynasty and probably during the Gupta dynasty (mid-to-late 3rd to mid-5th centuries CE).

The Nath sampradaya comprises of two groups – ascetics and householders. Nath ascetic order has its first historical initiation made by Guru Matsyendranatha (probably lived in the 8th or 9th century CE) or Minanath, and Guru Goraksanatha (probably lived in the 11th or 12th century CE), a disciple of Matsyendranatha. Other Nathgurus were Cauranginatha, Jalandhari-pa or Hadi-pa, Bhartriharinatha or Bharthar inatha. Yogi means the people who practiced yoga as a part of their daily ceremonials (Mallik, 1946; Dasgupta, 1969; Ghosh, 2011). The path of seeking mokhsa (salvation) in the Nath tradition is kaya sadhana (culture of the body) through the process of hatha-yoga. The ascetic Naths are the followers of Saivism and have several sects like Kanfat, Aoughar, Matysendri, Bhartrhi or Bhartrhari, Kanipa, etc. (Dutta, 1882, pp. 114-141). ‘Householder Naths’, Mallinson argues, ‘greatly outnumber ascetics and consist of a broad variety of mainly endogamous castes’, [but the householder Naths see] ‘themselves as descendants of Nath ascetics who broke their vows of celibacy and settled down as householders’ (Mallinson, 2011, pp. 409-410). They formed a caste known as Yogi or Jogi (Risley, 1892; Sen, 1956; Waligora, 2004), but ‘the origin of the
Caste is extremely obscure’ (Risley, 1892, p. 355), and the origin has still been a mystery and not unveiled properly (Dasgupta, 1969). The Yogis are often called as ‘Jugi’. But Jugi is either a ‘vernacular derivative’ (Gold, 1993, p. 35) of Yogi or Jogi, or ‘a term of contempt’ (Waligora, 2004, p. 158). Besides after deviation from the original Natha cult, which was beyond the caste framework, some of the householder Naths assert to be included in the brahmanical caste framework and claim themselves as Rudraja Brahmana vii (Debnath Bhattacharyya, 1372 BS; Dasgupta, 1969; Nath, 1995). They belong to Siva gotra (Siva lineage) and they are the followers of Saivism (Mallik, 1946; Dasgupta, 1996; Nath Majumder, 2018). According to Vallala-charita viii (Kaviratna, 1889), though it is mythological and hence there is no such concrete historical evidence, but it is widely believed by the Naths that the Yogis originated from Rudra, another form of Lord Siva, so they are rudraja.

Some scholars argued that the Nath sampradaya had been in close proximity to Buddhism because of the many similarities between the two traditions (Sensarma, 2015). Ghosh identifies Nathism as a syncretism of the Saiva Tantrism, Buddhism, and the cult of Dharma Thakur (Ghosh, 1950, p. 522). Mallik, however, opined that despite many similarities between the Buddhist Siddhas and Nath Siddhas, the latter were not the Buddhists as such, rather they were the followers of Saivism (Mallik, as cited in Sensarma, 2015, p. 353).

Degradation of the Naths in Bengal and their Resistance

Popular history says that during the reign of Vallalasena (a king of Bengal, who reigned from 1158 to 1179 CE), the Nath sampradaya was degraded and marginalised from the mainstream (Kaviratna, 1889; Nath, 2014; Nath Majumder, 2018). According to the popular oral history ix, the Naths were confronted by the kanyakubja brahmana (Brahmin of Kanouj) migrated from North India with the patronage of Adisura x. Later they secured the favour of Vallalasena. Though the then rajgurus of Vallalasena were the Naths (Nath, 2014; Nath Majumder, 2018), the position of the Naths were downgraded due to the kaulinya-pratha (Kulinism) or the caste rules introduced by Vallalasena xii. Description of castaway of the Naths has been narrated in Vallala-charita (Kaviratna, 1889). Vallala-charita shows us how the state power was exercised for pushing a community down to the caste hierarchy. Though there has been a dubiety in the authenticity of Vallala-charita’s assertion that the degradation of the Yogi caste has been annexed to it later or not, but nearly similar incident might be traced out in the
statement of the archaeologist Hamilton-Buchanan. He wrote ‘...degradation [of the Yogi] may also have been due to the anathema of the ruling prince. Whose displeasure the leaders of the caste incurred; that is quite probable’ (as cited in Ghosh, 2011, p. 30). In the above-mentioned quote, the phrase ‘anathema of the ruling prince’ indicates that the exclusion of the Naths occurred due to the displeasure of the then ruling prince. It is also possible that Vallalasena put effort to the resurgence of the smarta (according to Smriti literatures) tradition of Bengal that had been facing some difficulties since the Pala dynasty (Sensarma, 2015). Initiation of kaulinya-pratha, rejection of various Puranas that were supposed to have been affected by the Tantric rituals, and degradation of the Naths were part of that effort taken by Vallalasena. Waligora indicates that the Naths are followers of non-brahmanical cult and they have no Brahmanas to minister their priestly works (Waligora, 2004, p. 158). For that reason, ‘this social group is generally looked down upon by brahmins’. Ray (2013) also acknowledges that the Natha cult and its community were marginalised by the brahmanical Tantric Saktaism. There were several socio-political reasons which placed this community in a comparatively lower stratum of the brahmanical society.

After such marginalisation, the Naths had undergone several socio-economic crises as a corollary. Some of them had to engage themselves in weaving and cultivation. But during the colonial period, the Naths, who previously took the occupation of weaving particularly in Eastern Bengal, had undergone hardships caused by de-industrialisation of indigenous handloom sector. This sector faced further challenges from the competition of English piece-goods. Later the Naths engaged themselves in agriculture, goldsmith’s work, lime-burning, and some low grade of government services (Wise, 1883, p. 290; Risley, 1892, p. 355).

Available records indicate that since the mid-19th century CE, they started resistance against the caste hierarchy and it was contemporary to the Namasudra movement in Bengal. Mukerji (1910) has shown that the Yogis did not acknowledge the superiority of the Brahmanas, and a section of the Namasudras followed the example of the Yogis. Krishna Chandra Nath Dalal of Howrah took the first initiative to earn a respectful position for the Naths in Bengal society in 1873 CE. At the same time Manimohan Nath of Calcutta (now Kolkata) also started elevating the community’s status (Nath, 2017). Later Bharat Chandra Nath of Noakhali (now in Bangladesh), Radhagobinda Nath of Comilla (now in Bangladesh), Suresh Chandra Nath Majumder, and Rajmohan Nath of Lala
(Assam) tried to consolidate the resistance against the existing hierarchy by unifying the hitherto scattered Naths. The resistance had two strategies, first, at the intellectual level such as publication of books and journals for propagating and promoting 'caste consciousness'; second, at practical level such as inculcating brahmana samaskara (rituals) among the Naths, particularly by initiation of upavita (sacred threads), and making of purahita (priests) within the community through proper training. The first upanayana samaskara (sacred threads initiation ceremony) took place in 1284 BS or 1878 CE (Nath & Nath, 1985, pp. 24-27).

The Yogis have probably been the first caste to claim the brahmanic status in Bengal. After formation of several caste associations by the Naths, the resistance had also been shifted from individual level to the collective level. The roles of caste associations and the leaders are crucially important to organise a movement – social or political – in three senses. First, in order to build up an ideological basis of the movement, their roles are of paramount importance. Second, they are pivotal in inculcating caste consciousness. Third, they are crucial in mobilising the common caste members. For the Naths, however, the relations among these associations are hardly cooperative, rather sometimes are antagonistic. The claims for OBC status have been one of the many issues of disagreement.

Radical-Pragmatic Debate over Reservation

Assam-Banga Yogi-Sammilani (ABYS) was constituted to counter the existing brahmanical hegemony in Bengali society through inculcating ‘caste consciousness’ and ‘mobilising’ the Naths (Nath & Nath, 1985), creating a counter hegemony by the elite and intellectual sections of the Nath sampradaya. But ideological conflicts on two grounds led to a split in ABYS in 1979 and a new association, the Rudraja Brahman Sammilani, renamed later on as Nikhil Bharat Rudraja Brahman Sammilani (NBRBS) was formed (Debnath, 2009). The first ideological issue was centered on the question of the identity of the Naths – whether they are close to the Yogis or Brahmans; and another was what should be the stand of the Naths on the question of OBC reservation. Some members, who tended to assert the Brahmana status as against their inclusion in the OBC list, joined Rudraja Brahman Sammilani in 1979. While ABYS officially promotes their ‘Yogi’ identity beyond the caste framework, NBRBS asserts the ‘Brahmana’ status within the caste framework (Debnath, 2009), and the latter regularly holds training camps for the priests. The NBRBS, thus, on principle
does not accept the OBC status\textsuperscript{xvi}. Although at the early phases ABYS claimed that the Yogis fall under brahmana varna (Nath & Nath, 1985, p. 31) and demanded their status at par, or sometimes more prestigious position than that, now it prefers to identify the Naths more as Yogis, than as Brahmanas\textsuperscript{xvii}. This ideological shift of ABYS creates a difficulty in conforming to the authenticity of the brahmanic claim of the Naths.

In Assam some of the Nath associations, other than ABYS and NBRBS, have become prominent. ABYS, and, until recently, NBRBS hardly had any such influence. The pragmatic Naths of Assam, who have been or likely to be benefitted from reservation do not accept the views of NBRBS. Recently the NBRBS, however, has been able to retain some of the Naths in their association by promoting their pro-brahmanic identity. On August 17 and 18, 2019 four persons from this community of Assam, one from Barpeta and three from Cachar, participated in a priest training camp organised by NBRBS at its head quarter in Kolkata. Three out of these four persons have their OBC certificates, but now they speak against the OBC reservation because for them this status is derogatory.

Though Cachar Yogi Sammelani (CYS) does not convey any official stand on the OBC question, some of their members think that there is no conflict between Yogi status and OBC status. Asom Pradeshik Yogi Sammilani (APYS) asserts that the Nath identity is based simultaneously on brahmanic legacy and OBC status. Contrarily, Barak Upotyaka Nath-Yogi Rudraja Brahman Sammilani (BUNYRBS) has been working in Assam in quite similar manner to NBRBS and are putting emphasis on inculcating Brahma and upanayana samaskara, producing Nath priests, etc. They want to rescue the Naths from the OBC ‘trap’ (Barak Upotyaka Nath-Yogi Rudraja Brahman Sammilani, 2016). In Assam, some of the Naths voice their objections against the OBC status and they assert their identity as Rudraja Brahmana\textsuperscript{xviii}. During the field work, one school teacher had taken a stand against the OBC status of the Naths, although all members of his family have been facilitated by OBC certificates\textsuperscript{xix}.

The attitude centred on the OBC status is ‘surprisingly contested’ among the Naths in both the states. Unlike a section of the Naths in West Bengal and Assam who do not support the OBC status for the Naths, most of the Naths of both the states support OBC reservation for getting special privileges in education and government services. Simultaneously the supporters of reservation wear sacred threads as a symbol of upper caste identity. They believe that OBC is merely
related to one’s economic status and has nothing to do with caste position. The OBC status is likely to be changed as one reaches what is known as ‘the creamy layer’. ABYS holds the similar opinion on this issue\textsuperscript{xx}. While sacred threads are the signs of their high social caste status and past pride, the OBC status is indicative of their economic and educational backwardness\textsuperscript{xxi}. They appeared to be pragmatic in terms of their caste and class identity. They do not consider OBC as derogatory in existing caste framework, but it is, rather, a means of escalating in higher class stratum through upward mobility.

The Yogi-Rudraja dichotomy is very prominent here. Thus, contemporary situation opens a cleavage between the ‘radical’ Naths who want to forsake the OBC status, and the ‘pragmatic’ Naths who want to retain the OBC status. It can be looked at as a ‘radical-pragmatic debate’. In this debate, the NBRBS and BUNYRBS play the role of the ‘radicals’, whereas the ABYS, APYS and CYS appear as ‘pragmatic’ who accept the OBC status as a means of well-being of the community. NBRBS and BUNYRBS believe that their OBC status is derogatory and it is a conspiracy of the upper caste elites and also the government to pull down the Naths from higher strata to lower, from Brahmana to OBC\textsuperscript{xxii}. NBRBS and BUNYRBS are radicals in two senses. First, they are against any kind of reservation for the Naths that challenges their Brahmanic claims. Second, they always intend to alter their social position from lower to the highest stratum through internal reformations like accepting the brahmana samaskara (brahmin rituals). Giving up the OBC status is their primary agenda, despite knowing that the OBC reservation can bring well-being for the community, and, at the same time, this stand may diminish their popularity relating to the inter-associational politics. On the other hand, the ABYS, APYS and CYS are pragmatics because they know that OBC reservation can help them to realise upward mobility. It is quite true that most of the aspirant Naths are not keen to give up their OBC reservation due to various government facilities. The pragmatics know that it would be productive for their associations if their ideology has been fitted to be acceptable to the common Naths, since there is an inter-associational politics concerning which one among these associations is the real representative of the Naths.

**Conclusion**

Thus, the Naths bear an ambiguous identity. They are supposed to be considered as ‘high caste but are placed in the Sudra varna by others’ (Chowdhury, 2008, p.
Nevertheless, the OBC status of this community provides an opportunity from economic and educational points of view. It is also an opportunity to be empowered politically using reservation in the local bodies. The ‘pragmatic’ Naths opine that OBC reservation can ensure the well-being of the Naths, but the social status of the Naths is to be restored in society. The ‘radicals’ always highlight how the Nath priests have been recognised by some other castes including the Brahmanas and change in this regard is only possible by taking a pro-brahmanic stance.

Notes:

i Here I used Assam not in its entirety, but my study is geographically limited to its three southern districts of Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj, commonly known as the Barak Valley, that are culturally and linguistically dominated by the Bengalis.

ii In this paper, I have used the word Nath, Yogi, and Jogi interchangeably.

iii Reservation of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) was introduced by the V. P. Singh government in 1990 as per recommendation of the Mandal Commission, named after its Chairman B. P. Mandal, which was constituted in 1978 and report submitted in 1979. Reservation of OBCs includes new beneficiaries from different religious communities other than Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Three criteria, such as social, economic, and educational backwardness, were taken into consideration for awarding OBC reservation. Many economically well-off castes were included, as the indicators of social backwardness had been given three times more weightage than those of economic and education backwardness. Many scholars argue that the reservation of OBCs was a politically driven state policy to ‘consolidate their votes’. See Jodhka (2011); Mahajan (2013).

iv For the legend of King Gopicandra, see Grierson (1878). This legend is also popular in Rajasthan, see Gold (1993).

v It is held that Matsyendranatha, Minanatha and Lui-pa were the same person, see Mallik (1946); Ray (2013, p. 492).

vi For a detail research on Goraksanatha, see Briggs (1938).

vii During the field study, I found that a large section of the Naths call themselves as rudraja brahmana both in West Bengal and Assam. A few Naths were also found who like to identify themselves as Yogi, not as brahmana, but who held that the Yogis are supposed to be placed above the brahmanas.

viii Two versions of Vallalla-charita are available, one has been edited by Kaviratna (1889) but was originally written jointly by Gopalbhatta in around 1300 CE and Anandabhatta in around 1500 CE. Another version has been edited by Sastri (1901) but was originally written by Anandabhatta in 1509-10 CE. It is still unsettled which one is the authentic version. The incident of Yogis has been depicted in Kaviratna (1889), but not in Sastri (1901). Sastri (1901, p. v) pronounced the Kaviratna’s edition to be ‘spurious and unreliable’, on the other hand, Sastri’s edition has been described by Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay as a fake. See Ray (2013). Ray (2013, p. 163), however, argues ‘that there is not much cause to regard either work as a fake’.

ix This is a popular oral history of the Naths in Assam, West Bengal, Tripura and Bangladesh.
Adisura was a king of Bengal, whose name is associated with the genealogical texts or kulajis of the brahmanas in Bengal. He brought five Vedic brahmanas from Kanauj to rule Bengal under brahmanical hegemony. However, the legends of Adisura are doubtful as there is no such concrete historical evidence. See Chakrabarti (2018).

Some scholars opine that Vallalasena did not initiate kulinism, rather it existed since prior to the Sena dynasty. See Sensarma (2015). It is also argued that kulinism has been inherently linked with Vallalasena since centuries. So it cannot be said that this popular history has been totally misleading. See Mitra (2000/1914).

A prominent caste of Bengal and often synonymous with the Matuas, now under Scheduled Caste category, which has been showing a strong resistance against brahmanical caste system in Bengal since 1870s. For details, see Bandyopadhyay (1997).

Publication includes Yogi Samaskar-Byabastha (1876) by Krishna Ch. Nath Dalal; Yogi Jatir Sankhipta Itahas (1277-1293 BS) by Padma Chandra Nath; The Yogis of Bengal (1909) by Radhagobinda Nath; Manimohan-Jibane (Autobiography) (written in 1911, and published in 1922) by Manimohan Nath; Rajguru Yogi Bangsha (1923) by Suresh Ch. Nath Majumder; Bangiyo Nath-Yogi Tatwa (1958) by Rajmohan Nath; and Yogisakha (since 1904 to present), later it became the official journal of Assam-BangaYogi-Sammilani in 1918.

Associations are Yogi Hitaishini Sabha (1901), later it became Assam-BangaYogi-Sammilani (1910); Adinath Siksha Bhandar (1908); Asom Pradesik Yogi Sammilani (1919); Cachar Yogi Sammilani (1922); Paschim Banga Rudraja Brahman Sammilani (1949), renamed as Rudraja Brahman Sammilani in 1979, and again renamed as Nikhil Bharat Rudraja Brahman Sammilani in 2000.

I witnessed one such priest training camp organised by NBRBS on 18 August, 2019 at the head quarter of Nikhil Bharat Rudraja Brahman Sammilani, Kolkata.

Interview with Upendra Kumar Debnath was held on 18 August, 2019 at the head quarter of Nikhil Bharat Rudraja Brahman Sammilani, Kolkata.

Interview with Tapas Kumar Nath was held on 10 November, 2019 at Nimta, West Bengal. He says that the Yogis are not brahmana, but they are superior to the brahmana, so they must use sacred threads.

Such as Bijoy Kr. Nath of Hailakandi; Jyotirmoy Nath, Bablu Nath, Ankit Nath and Sudip Nath Sastri of Karimganj; Bijan Debnath, Dibakar Nath and Gitesh Nath of Silchar, Cachar.

Dibyajyoti Nath is a school teacher. Interview was held on 24 June, 2019 at Rangpur Part-I, Katlicherra, Hailakandi, Assam.

Interview with Tapas Kr. Nath was held on 10 November, 2019 at Nimta, West Bengal. ABYS has not been against the OBC status if it brings community’s well-being. Tapas Kr. Nath says that OBC denotes backward classes not the castes.

During field work in West Bengal and Assam, I found that 80 out 120 of the Naths support this statement.

Interview with Barun Nath, Joint Secretary of NBRBS, was held on 29 April, 2018 at Howrah, West Bengal, and with Jyotirmoy Nath, President of BUNYRBS, was held on 22 December, 2019 at Karimganj, Assam.

I have met some Nath priests who are often called for priestly work in the brahmana families such as Dhiren Debnath, Kolkata; Mithun Debnath, Nadia, W.B.; Monomangal Nath Sastri and Dibakar Nath, Silchar, Assam; Bablu Nath and Sudip Nath Sastri, Karimganj, Assam.
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