

Anukul Chandra Das Naskar in Caste Movement and Caste Politics of Bengal (1894-1947)

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Abstract

The Scheduled Caste occupies an important role in the study of history in India and Bengal. Recently, the Poundras are the fourth largest caste amongst the sixty Scheduled Castes in West Bengal. They mainly live in the riverine areas of South Bengal. In the early nineteenth century, some accomplished young people from this society, being educated in western education, started a social movement to gain Kshatriya status. Many of them moved towards parliamentary politics, for the sake of social welfare. Anukul Chandra Das Naskar (1894-1947) was one of them who took the Poundra society forward on the path of parliamentary politics. In this article, the steps taken by Shri Anukul Chandra Das for the welfare of the Poundra caste are discussed from a historical point of view. Here, the aspect of his political thinking in the-then political situation has also been discussed with a modern and fundamental point of view. This article is based on various autobiographies, journals, Assembly Proceedings of 1937 and 1938 and the Council Reports.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Poundra, Kshatriya, Caste Movement, Political Consciousness, etc.

During the colonial era, the social status of the Poundra caste was tainted by Brahmanism and caste prejudice. Then the well educated people of this caste started a movement for their establishment as 'Kshatriya' in society (1891). At such a time, Shri Anukul Chandra Das was born in 1894 in the village of Tentulberia in Garia area of South 24 Parganas district in an aristocratic Naskar family.¹ His father Shri Harish Chandra was a devout, philanthropist. The motivation of his generous father had a vast effect on Anukul Chandra's life. Shri Anukul Chandra was brilliant since his childhood. He passed the entrance examination from Ripon School in Calcutta in 1911. Then he obtained his B. A. and B. L. degree from this college, then M.A. in History from Calcutta University (1922).² Shri Anukul Chandra's career was very extensive. After completing his university education, he became a member of the Union Board and engaged himself in public welfare works. During that time the anti-British movement intensified in subjugated India. So Shri Anukul Chandra joined the Swadeshi movement for the sake of motherland.³ He was initiated into the 'Swadeshi Mantra' by 'Desh Bandhu' Chittaranjan Das (1870-1925). At the same time, he devoted himself to the eradication of illiteracy and poverty of the lower castes in Bengal. He realized that India would not be truly

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liberated without eradicating illiteracy and poverty from the majority of the lower castes.

Anukul Chandra in Poundra Kshatriya Movement

During the colonial rule, everyone in our country, irrespective of race, caste and religion, got the opportunity of being educated in general education. Despite the social and economic oppression, the Poundras overcame many obstacles in this phase and began to sign. This education started the renaissance, albeit briefly, in the Poundra society. This was followed by a movement for social upliftment, which could be termed as 'Self-Respect Movement'.⁴ The main leaders of this movement were Shri Benimadhab Haldar (1858-1923),⁵ Shrimanta Naskar Vidya Bhushan (1863-1907)⁶ Raicharan Sardar (1875-1942),⁷ Mahendranath Karan (1886-1928)⁸ etc. Young Anukul Chandra also jumped into this movement to establish the self-esteem of the Poundras. Meanwhile, a meeting of the 'Bratya Kshatriya Samiti' (1909), initiated by Benimadhab, Raicharan, which was established for the welfare of the society, was held at Zamindar Jay Krishna Mandal's (zamindar of Kotalpur- Kundarali village) residence (2 December 1917) under the chairmanship of the same. The meeting was attended by eminent persons of Poundra Society of Medinipur, 24 Parganas, and Khulna Districts. In this meeting the name of 'Bratya Kshatriya Samiti' was unanimously changed to 'Sarva Banga Poundra Kshatriya Samiti' (All Bengal Poundra Kshatriya Samiti).⁹ Young Anukul Chandra was anointed as the secretary from the list of active members of the new association.

Through this 'Sarva Banga Poundra Kshatriya Samiti' the leaders of the Poundra caste jumped into the social movements. Meetings on social rights were organized in different regions. Poundra population were informed about the importance of this social movement. Shri Anukul Chandra Naskar, the secretary of the Sarva Banga Poundra Kshatriya Samiti, accompanied by some other members, (such as Benimadhab Haldar, Raicharan Sardar, Bhavasindhu Naskar, Hem Chandra Naskar, Rakhai Chandra Mandal, etc.) sent a letter to the Superintendent of Censuses. (17.01.1921). In this deputation, there was a demand to change the word 'Pod' to 'Poundra Kshatriya'. But on the same day, W. H. Thomson made it clear in a letter to Anukul Chandra that "I have no objection to use the term 'Poundra' in place of 'Pod' by members of your community in the census schedules." I have, however, a practical objection to the addition of the word 'Kshatriya' in the schedules as it would undoubtedly result in confusion. "He further added that, "I have no objection to using the term 'Poundra Kshatriya' in setting forth

the results of the census; but prefer that the term should not be used in the census schedules.”¹⁰ That is to say, the establishment as Kshatriya was a kind of stagnation. In 1926, Mahendranath Karan, the joint editor of the Sarva Banga Poudra Kshatriya Samiti, also made an effort, but he did not succeed. However, those failed attempts did not deter the Poudra leaders. The idea or the innovative program they undertook in 1926 was revolutionary indeed.

Anukul Chandra has made a special contribution not only to the establishment of “Kshatriyatwa” but also to the spread of education in the lower castes of South Bengal, especially in the Poudra Kshatriyas. In March 1919, Raicharan Sardar, one of the leaders of the Kshatriya movement, set up a dormitory in Calcutta called ‘Arya Poudrak Brahmacharya Ashram’ for the purpose of education of Poudra Kshatriya youth. During this period of time he began to communicate with educated rich and hardworking people in various places. Anukul Chandra Naskar was Raicharan’s collaborator in such social reforms. Anukul Chandra was always engaged in spreading education, eradicating superstitions and trying to inspire the society in various progressive activities. In 1938, on his own initiative, he set up a charity clinic on a piece of land owned by his family. It was named after his father, ‘Harishchandra Charitable Hospital’.¹¹ Later, the West Bengal government acquired it, built a three-storey house and renamed it ‘Fartabad Subsidiary Health Centre’.

Anukul Chandra in Caste Politics of Bengal (1922-47)

Anukul Chandra’s contribution in raising political awareness and the education of the lower castes are vivid. Anukul Chandra’s contribution to the political consciousness along with the social movements of Benimadhab Dev Haldar, Shrimanta Vidyabhushan, Raicharan Sardar and Mahendranath Karan is particularly significant. In fact, Anukul Chandra made his political debut in the 1920s. At this time the people of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes started forming meetings and committees in different places to establish their socio-cultural and political rights. There was a tendency among the people of Poudra, Rajbanshi, Namashudra, Bagdi etc. to unite in the political arena. As a result, in 1922, Panchanan Barma (1865-1935), Guruchand Thakur, Mukundabihari Mallick, Manindranath Mandal, Hemchandra Naskar, and other social welfare leaders tried to form a political party of the backward castes in Bengal. Young Anukul Chandra also came forward to help in this endeavour. On February 5 this year, Poudra leader Manindranath Mandal visited Kolkata’s ‘C. T. College Hall’. He organized a

conference there.¹² The conference was convened to unite all the exploited backward classes of Bengal. The conference was presided over by Bhishmadev Das. Here a proposal was made to form a political organization of the backward class in imitation of the Muslim League and the organization was inaugurated under the name 'Bangiya Jana Sangha'.¹³ The objectives of the Bangiya Jana Sangha were to achieve social and political rights for the backward classes. However, at last, the 'Bangiya Jana Sangha' was not able to achieve its goals. However, genius Anukul Chandra was able to do a lot in this regard.

He was the chairman of the 24 Parganas District Board from 1927 to 1947.¹⁴ A round table meeting was held in London in 1932, paving the way for communal division. In 1935, the Government of India Act recognized the issue of provincial autonomy in India. At the same time, special constitutional measures were taken for the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes. There was a dispute among the Poudra leaders as to whether the Poudra caste will be included in the schedule. Raicharan Sardar did not want to include the Poudras in the schedule caste format to establish their 'Kshatriyatwa'. Hemchandra Naskar stood by his side. But Rajendranath Sarkar, the Poudra leader of Khulna, strongly objected to this and voted for the Poudras to be included in the schedule castes. But, prudent Anukul Chandra observed silence at that time. In fact, he sincerely wanted the Poudras to be included in the schedule castes, but he could not directly oppose Hemchandra Naskar and Raicharan Sardar. At the end, by the efforts of Rajendranath Sarkar and his followers, the Poudras was recognized as a Scheduled Caste.¹⁵ Since then, the Poudras has been benefiting from conservation.

In the 1937 elections, the Scheduled Castes in Bengal politics got the opportunity to participate in the elections together with other castes. Looking at the elections in this phase, it can be seen that neither the Congress, the Muslim League nor the Krishak Praja Party was able to form a government in Bengal alone. Although Fazlul Haque was interested in forming a coalition government with the Congress party, he had to form a coalition government with the Muslim League due to the instability of the political decision within the Congress party. That is to say, directly or indirectly, the system of governance of the Muslims, that is, the Muslim League, began in Bengal, which was intact till the partition and independence. It is important to mention here that in the election of 1937, Shri Anukul Chandra won as a leader of the Scheduled Caste community and got a seat in the Legislative Assembly (Bengal Executive Council). He won from Diamond Harbour, Barasat and Barrackpore constituency by a huge

margin.¹⁶ Most of the members of this legislature were from upper classes. Nevertheless, he tried to protect the interests of his community by arguing with them. In this connection we can talk about another event. The Bengal Service Recruitment Rules were enacted in 1940. The presence of a Scheduled Caste member in the Service Commission was not mandatory. Namashudra leader Mukunda Bihari Mallick raised a question whether there were any scheduled caste member in the service commission as the answer was a 'no', Shri Anukul Chandra made an amendment in the Service Rule of 1940 on March 23, 1942. From then on, the inclusion of Scheduled Caste members in the Service Commission became mandatory. He was even promoted to the post of Parliamentary Secretary in the Executive Council for his Higher Education, Competence and Personality.¹⁷

Shri Anukul Chandra was an honorary member of the commission headed by the then Revenue Commissioner Sir Francis Foulwood (1875-1965) to review the Land Reform Act in 1938.¹⁸ As a member, Shri Anukul Chandra toured almost all over India and suggested to remove the zamindari system to improve the condition of farmers and recommended to hand over the lands to the farmers. Actually, his aim was to strengthen the ryotwari system by ending the exploitative zamindari system. In the case of sharecropping, the Flood Commission recommended to pay one-third of the production to the zamindar or owner, after which the 'Tebhaga' movement began later on.

Shri Anukul Chandra was elected President of the District School Board in 1945 and held the post till 1947. In 1930, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, the movement for breaking the salt law started, he especially helped the agitators of South 24 Parganas in this movement. Anukul Chandra contested in the 1946 election from The All India Scheduled Caste Federation, (an all-India party of the Scheduled Caste community) founded by B. R. Ambedkar, and lost the election at the Magrahat Centre (24 Parganas North West SC). He got 4922 votes.¹⁹ He was invited by the Congress party to join the Congress, but he was so idealistic that he flatly rejected that call.

There were many complications in the politics of this episode on the issue of partition of Bengal. The Scheduled Caste Party or Scheduled Caste Federation was opposed to the partition of Bengal on the basis of biracial theory. The Congress, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha were in favour of partition. The exceptional name that was not in favour of the

partition of Bengal was Sarat Chandra Bose of the Congress and as a party there was Forward Block and the Scheduled Caste Party. Going against the partition of Bengal, Jogendra Nath Mandal (the then law minister) declared that the partition of Bengal could not be supported in any way and he began to form public opinion against the partition of Bengal. The Poudra leader Anukul Chandra Naskar came forward to cooperate in this situation. That is, when the Congress and the Muslim League decided to divide India, Shri Anukul Chandra vehemently opposed it.²⁰ Some successful meetings were held under the chairmanship of Shri Anukul Chandra on 9th May, 1947 at Sola-Pota village near Basirhat, on 16th May, 1947 at the British Indian Association Hall, Baubazar Street, Calcutta. Although the supporters of the partition of Bengal attacked him fatally, he did not budge at all and spoke as the President. However, he could not stop the partition. About 6 months after this incident, he passed away on 4th November 1947.²¹

Observations

Though Anukul Chandra is not alive, his benevolent works are present among the depressed sections especially in Poudra society. Tentulberia Anukul Chandra High School was established in 1953 in Garia with the help of his relatives to remember the versatility of Anukul Chandra. Through which the memory of this social worker is still immortal. In 1956 another initiative was taken to protect his memory under the auspices of Justice Bankim Chandra Roy. He proposed to rename the road from Garia station to Kulpi Road as 'Anukul Chandra Das Road'. But it ended in failure. The road is now known as 'Garia Station Road'. 1970 was an important period for the Poudra Kshatriya castes. It can be said that the second phase of Kshatriya movement started from this time. At this time 'Poudra Kshatriya Unnayan Parishad' was established in Garia. It was built in the old meeting room of Shri Anukul Chandra's family, and later on the land donated by their family, the office and three-storey dormitory of the Poudra Kshatriya Unnayan Parishad were built. Here meritorious students from marginal areas can engage themselves in higher education with the opportunity to live at low cost. At present, with the financial support of many people and the government of West Bengal, the dormitory continues to grow in size. Therefore, there is no doubt that this institution has been playing an immense role in the spread of education. Every year on 15th August, the celebration of Independence Day is held here and the glory of self-sacrifice and glorification of Poudra warriors in the development of the society is promoted.

From the above discussion it can be said that the motivation of Anukul Chandra's life, the motto was to serve to the society. Although he was annoyed by the tendency to push the representatives of the lower castes away from the centre of political power, he never became a 'political slave'. The example of social and political movement that he has left among the oppressed India and the lower castes is instructive. He has worked hard for the betterment of his society. He never deviated from the norm. He did not accept the opportunity to join the then influential party Congress. He had lived a devoted political life excluding personal interests. From the time he was entrusted with the responsibility of 'Sarva Banga Poundra Kshatriya Samiti' till his death (November 4, 1947), he was involved in the development of his community for thirty years, as a public representative in progress. That is why he is dear to all, and remembered as a respected 'Jana Sevak' and popular mass leader.



Image: Anukul Chandra Das Naskar

Source: Collected by the author from "Poundra Maha Sangha"

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