

Matua Community in Bengal after 1990; Internal Social Structure and the Place of Them in West Bengal Politics.

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Following the partition, the people in East Pakistan who believed in Matua ideology left their homeland and migrated to India and settled in West Bengal. Matua's did not migrate to India together, the mass of them separated in parts, and at arrival, they started settling in different places and Government refugee camps in India.ⁱ In the next three decades of independence, they united themselves in the heart of Bengal and gradually started influencing the Social, Economic, and especially the Political sphere of Bengal Under the leadership of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. The emergence of the *Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha* (1986)ⁱⁱ added a new dimension to the movements of Lower Castes in West Bengal. Since then a major change has taken place in the matua movement in India. That is, power passes from the hands of individuals to the hands of organizations. It is safe to say that matuas emerged as the biggest representative of the Lower Caste Movements in Bengal.

Although there is no class division within the Matuas, after the formation of MM intellectuals are played a major role. and one can certainly observe a subtle tripartite division among them based on their work efficiency in Matua Philosophy. This article attempts to analyze the political consciousness of the Matuas, including Matua Women in all the stages of this division and to determine their position in Electoral Politics.

Participation in politics indicates the direction of human empowerment and certainly, it is an important issue. "Research in participation and empowerment links them bi-directionally, empowered individuals may be more likely to participate in organizations, and participation promotes empowerment".ⁱⁱⁱ First of all, let's focus on the issue of Political Participation. Different Sociologists have interpreted the issue of people's involvement in politics in different ways. According to McCloskey, the political participation of an individual is indicated by the people who, individually enters the administration and actively or passively participates in the process of electing the Government and in the formulation of general policies.^{iv} Verba and Nie, on the other hand, defined Political participation as – "Those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take".^v Thus, political participation is determined by the voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence the government and its policies, directly or indirectly. The people of the modern and powerful state become more aware of political policies and ideals and the majority of the entire population becomes aware of empowerment.

The socio-economic environment will have a direct impact on political participation, socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, caste, religion, sex, family background residence, etc.^{vi}

Schonfeld mentioned ten types of activities in the field of political participation given the idea and method of it. Those are – 1) running for or holding public or party office, 2) belonging to a party or political organization, 3) working in an election, 4) attending political meetings and rallies, 5) making a financial contribution to a party or a political organization, 6) contacting public officials, 7) publicly expressing a

political opinion to convince others, 8) engaging in political discussion, 9) voting and 10) exposing oneself to political stimuli.^{vii}

M Srinivas argues that the political process tends to strengthen the loyalties of caste, at least in the short run; 'one of the short-term effects of the universal adult franchise is to strengthen caste'^{viii} others like K. Gough believe that politics in the modern sense tends to be disruptive of caste.^{ix} Politics is a competitive enterprise, its purpose is the acquisition of power for the realization of certain goals, and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiance to mobilize and consolidate the position^x

Thus, Political participation is a complex phenomenon that involves psychological, social, economic, or political issues, and depending on a citizen has a positive or negative impact on them.

Social divisions and political consciousness within the Matuas

If we look at the Matua society of Bengal in the late nineties, we can see a fine dividing line within it. Analyzing the social position of these people at each level of division and their role in propagating the Matua ideology will make it easier to determine the political characteristics of the Matua society. Before the nineties, the Matuas in Bengal was a group centered around *Sadhus*, *Gosains*, and *Pagals* (communities of religious mendicants); but later, a group of writers, intellectuals, and political thinkers emerged within the Matuas.^{xi} Overall, Matua society began to be divided into three main parts.

The Matuas of the first part of the division is connected through spirituality. Their main goal is the pursuit of God. The second part is more interested in social and worldly progress rather than spirituality. They are businessmen, government employees, political leaders, thinkers, and intellectuals. The third part consists of commoners, socially, and economically challenged, poor, hard-working people who believe in Matua principles and ideologies. They participate in all reformatory service and religious, spiritual works inside the Matua community with sincerity and enthusiasm and seek the path of social and economic liberation. All the festivities of the Matua community are arranged by socially and economically privileged people among them where the *Sadhus*, *Gosains*, *Pagals*, and common people participate and engage.

Those who are known as *Sadhus*, *Gosains*, *Churanmanis* place great importance upon spirituality. They propagate Matua ideology through the use of Matua scriptures, *songs*, *yatra*, *leela kirtaan*, *kavigaan* etc. and apply the Matua philosophy first hand in their practical life. The people from this first part of division have propagated and preached the Matua religiosity the most through their religious activities, folk songs, chants, *sangkirtaans* and *tarjas*.

Located in the second stage of this hierarchy in the social division of Matuas are the intellectuals. By profession, they are businessmen, doctors, lawyers, high-ranking government bureaucrats, politicians. In the spheres of Politics, administration, and socio-economy, they are the most powerful among Matuas and are known as '*bhodrolok*'. They are the people who are trying to improve the standard of life financially, through education, jobs, and business. This desire of improving living standards can be observed in all of the Matuas. However, those who successfully ascended and improved their life are the people that are taken into consideration here. They are the 'face' of Matua community and they lead the other two parts of Matuas. Their job is to determine political relationships, to review the socio-political and economic aspects, and to provide funding. They make these donations with the goal of the betterment of their community and religion.^{xii} They usually settle the matters of policy and economy within the community, give speeches, expresses the beliefs and needs of Matuas in written form. The presence of these intellectuals in all Matua administrative committees are pretty high. In comparison to other people of the Matua community, these Intellectuals enjoy more benefits everywhere, whether in Matua society or outside. They usually exercise most of the government

facilities as well which the people of the third part of the community do not get. This causes inherent economic equality inside the community.^{xiii}

Matua intellectuals are simultaneously theoretical leaders and vanguards of social movements. The conflict within Matuas is essentially an expression of the grievances of these Matua intellectuals. However, the conflict is about opposing ideas. The most important thing, in this case, is - this fight is completely ideological and regarding the differences between political ideology and the ideology of the Matua philosophy, its interpretation, and the method of applying those policies. However, the conflict was not so obvious before and there, indeed, were various reasons behind it. The rate of education was low which resulted in the lack of the rate of development of consciousness. Another important reason is that there were poverty, hunger, and human rights challenges. As a result, there was a general lack of awareness; the inevitable consequence of which was to refrain from thinking about any subject independently or not getting the opportunity of doing so. So the more the lower caste people of the community are coming across those opposing ideologues, the more they are being able to think independently and to grow consciousness about Matua ideologies and policies.

The main objective of the Matua movement is the upliftment of the lower castes. Keeping this objective in mind, various organizations are being formed which are working towards the common goal by their efforts. Each organization is run by these educated intellectuals. Although these small organizations are morally supported by the All India Matua Mahasangha, they are by no means a branch of the Matua Mahasangha. Organizations are managed by individuals or by the efforts of a few. Some of the organizations working for the welfare of Matuas in Bengal are Hariguru Chand Chetna Mancha (1997) Nadia, Namasudra Samaj Sangstha (1986) Kolkata, Hari Chand Seva Sangha (1991) Bardhaman, Matua Seva Ashram (1993) Bangaon, All India Bengali Refugee Coordination Samiti (1993) Nagpur Maharashtra, Matua Research Council (2001) North 24 Parganas, Hari Guru Chand Smaranam (2006) Mazdia, Bagda Hariguru Chand Bhakta Seva Sang (1998) Bagda, Barisal Namashudra Seva Samiti (1999) Thakur Pukur.

Now the question arises that why these small organizations were formed in the first place despite the active presence of All India Matua Mahasangha and their district, block, and region-based organizations? The reasons are – 1) Matter of personal choices with Matua Mahasangha, 2) differences in political ideologies with them, 3) some of the lower caste namasudra people were not a believer of Matua religion, 4) demonstration of personal power, 5) lack of strong Mahasangha branch in that place, 6) to be by the side of people in difficult times in a more convenient way, 7) to raise social and political awareness as well as religious 8) to establish personal ideals. These organizations are formed in a city-centric way and their functions are limited to a handful of people. Although their policies are determined by the demands of common people, they do not have a mass base per se. However, whether that might happen in the future or not can be said for sure. In this case, the driving question is of Ideological Domination.^{xiv} The question of ideological domination is the origin of the growing antagonism within the Matuas, but the effect of that is not always negative on its people. However, an all-encompassing movement from the united Matuas might have influenced the lower caste societies of Bengal to a greater extend.

Within the social divisions, maintaining good relations between all the parts of the society is an important issue of Matua community. The first part of them, the religious preachers work with others to not only discuss spiritual matters, but also works for the worldly development of the lower castes. I have observed in my research that *Gosains* and *Pagals* are discussing their preaching with their disciples and devotees as well as explaining where the liberation of the lower castes lies in worldly progress using the religious ceremonies of Matua's like '*Jagaraani Sangeet*' or regular evening meet-ups.^{xv} The issues of education, jobs, economic development and social welfare are being discussed there at great length. This is the specialty of the Matua's in the lower-class social movement which has been present since the birth of the Matua movement.

Although spiritual progress is a matter of great importance, Matua's believe that it is never possible to deny worldly progress. In this case, they have been carrying out various reformatory works of setting up schools through their own efforts and taking all the responsibility of educating the poor meritorious students.^{xvi}

Now I would like to discuss the third part of the Matua community who are socially politically and economically backward. They are the highest stakeholder of the community and also the poorest of them all. By profession, they are factory workers, day laborers and workers of small cottage industries. Their lives are extremely difficult due to the lack of money, lack of education and lack of citizenship and lack of government opportunities. 80 to 85% of the Matua population consists of these people.^{xvii} They are mostly the workers in the surrounding urban areas. A group of these people recently migrated to India from Bangladesh. Some of them were able to bring money with them, while others were forced to leave Bangladesh because of their religious identity. The biggest problem of these people is the lack of citizenship. They do not get minimal government opportunities and even become destitute in their attempt to send their children to school.^{xviii} They are often subjected to various social oppression and mocked by the upper caste people with derogatory terms. Like in Bengali terms- *dhur, tarkata, Bangladeshi, pith kata, blood*.^{xix}

The Matua people of the third part have used their experience to spread the Matua movement among the people to a great extent. Through acquaintances, they have been spreading the Matua ideology among the Namasudras and other lower castes. In an interview, Manaranjan Bepari, an eminent writer from subaltern society, said that the reason for the current spread of the Matua society is the personal identity of the common Matua people and also since the lower caste people who are migrating to India are trying to find a powerful community and being comfortable within the Matua identity. He also admitted that most of the lower castes who are still present in Bangladesh believe in the Matua ideology and they are merging with the Matuas here upon their arrival.^{xx}

Three social divisions of Matuas : A comparative study

In Bengal's Political dynamics, the first part of Matuas determines whom they are going to support during election based on mainly three things. First, according to the instructions of Matua Mahasangha or on whichever party the Mahasangha or Thakur Bari rely upon. Second, taking consideration of their surroundings and the political scenarios over there or whichever party offers their families the most benefits. Third, based on the political climate of the state or of the country as a whole. They also consider the attitude of the political parties towards the Matuas.

The second part, the intellectuals, possess a strong political awareness. They do not believe in any particular political ideologies and cast their votes based on the opportunities and facilities that they are promised and by reading into the current political situation. They somewhat influence people from other divisions by the use of political discussion and propaganda. Their choice of candidate is determined by – First, political ideology. Second, personal wish or reluctance, Third, depending on the political ideologies of the parties, Fourth, keeping in mind the issue of trust in the political party who prioritizes the Matua society as a whole. Fifth, keeping in mind the offers of personal benefits.

Now, being the largest in number, the third part of the population is the one that shapes the reality for Matuas. They cast their vote by -1) relying upon Mahasangha, 2) keeping faith in regional politics, 3) being influenced by the intellectuals of their community, 4) considering the political situation of the state, and 5) keeping the matter of personal choice in mind.

After 1990, Matuas put their faith in Matua Mahasangha regarding the question of political ascendancy. However, as Pramath Chand Thakur tried to mobilize the Matua Social Movement from inside of a strong political party, their alliance became divided. This divide power struggle can be observed from the time of partition^{xxi}. After Pramatha Chand Thakur, his sons Kapil Krishna Thakur and Manjul Krishna Thakur followed the direction of their father. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur initially relied upon the Indian Nation Congress to resolve the refugee crisis because of the promises made by Gandhi.^{xxii} However, as Congress failed to fulfill those promises, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur stopped supporting Congress.^{xxiii} At the end of the twentieth century, Kapil Krishna Thakur built an alliance with the left front. Later, Mamata Thakur, the wife of Kapil Krishna put her weight behind Trinomool Congress who defeated CPI(M) in 2011.^{xxiv} Another example of such a movement that was built upon the refugee crisis is the Akali Dal from Punjab. However, they built their political organization based on their religious sect and did not rely on existing Political parties.^{xxv} The Matua movement, thus, in a way different from them as they continue to support those existing political powers.

The religious philosophy of the Matuas talks of a movement for the emancipation of the underprivileged people. So the Matuas were never disconnected from Politics.^{xxvi} They were well aware that securing human rights for the untouchables are not possible avoiding political powers. The politics in the case of partition showed them the power that comes with it. So the refugee Matuas were not hostile about politics and they fought relentlessly for acquiring Political power after being migrated from one place to another. Although the situation of the Matuas has changed drastically with time, indeed, the people of a part of the Matuas are still deprived of the means of development.

The Matuas have been educated and economically strong, but not following the rules of the times; those rights had to be acquired in the Indian society. Because of their lower position in the hierarchy of the Hindu social system, they were a group of people deprived of all benefits. Even their profession was pre-determined. Therefore, we can never forget or deny their struggle for their rights. However, it is true that due to the change in the socio-economic condition of some people of Matuas, the struggle for survival and human rights have changed for the struggle of self-determination and power.

Since this is a continuous effort, it is necessary to acknowledge the Matuas' attempt to enter the political sphere and to acknowledge the existence of their political awakening and transition. Now I would like to discuss how the Matuas became the forerunners of the lower-class movement in Bengali society by politicizing themselves and by associating themselves with powerful Political parties.

The reasons for Matuas getting themselves into the realm of Politics are as follows – the personal will of the person who is in the highest place of the organization, accountability towards the sangha or organization, to make the demands of the organization into political agenda, acceptance of the demands of the organization by political parties, to use the same racial sentiment for the benefit of those parties, to bond on the common factor of being refugees, willingness to meet the minimum basic needs of all those involved in the organization, promoting education with the help of the government, to ensure freedom from being exploited, to understand the powers conferred by the Constitution and incorporating their demands into the Constitution, to propagate their own religion nationally and internationally, to ensure equality and social justice, to get the power of formulating laws in their favor without being guided by other parties, to build self-confidence and self-esteem, to put an end to social degradation, to make their own identity, to be able to express their ideologies and philosophies, to stop development of individuals and to work for the development of the community as a whole instead and to keep themselves closer to the power structure. All of these reasons contributed to their decision to continue being involved in politics.

For a long time after 1990, from 1990 to 2009, there was no active participation in the electoral politics in Bengal from Matua Mahasangha and any person of the Thakur family. The Matua population kept in touch

with regional politics. Kapil Krishna Thakur, the eldest son of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, took part in the electoral politics in 2009. An important point, in this case, is that when the Election Commission of India dissolved the Nabadwip Loksava and created a new Bangaon Loksava^{xxvii}, a seat was secured for the Matuas as the center of Matua community, Thakurnagar, was a part of that Loksava. But in the intervening 15 years, there was no direct candidate from the Matuas. During that time Matuas established their associations. The branches of lower caste organizations that are controlled by Matuas were built during this time. I have already mentioned those organizations before.

Constitutional rights and women participation in politics

Although equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the political participation and representation of women in Rajya Sabha, Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assembly, and Panchayat is not sufficient. In 1986, Ashok Mehta in his Committee for the Review of the Panchayat System of India gave priority to the inclusion of women in rural development.^{xxviii} In 1986, the National Perspective Plan for Women highlighted the issue of reservation of women in panchayats. The plan calls for reserving 30% seats for women in panchayats, district councils, and other institutions. In the 1960s and 70s, the leftist women's movement was formed to defend social rights and justice.^{xxix} One particularly significant thing is the participation of upper-caste women and their roles in hereditary leadership. But on the other hand, there is little to no response in this matter from the women from the lower castes of society.

Needless to say that the issue of women's presence in the sphere of politics was not holistic. Political parties in India have been discussing women's rights in their manifestos since the 1980s. Based on the National Perspective Plan for Women and the Ashok Mehta Committee Report,^{xxx} the Government of India adopted a policy to protect women's rights in politics in the late 1980s. In the panchayat system, in 1985, the Karnataka government first reserved 20% seats for women.^{xxxi} In 1974, in the 64th Amendment to the Constitution, 30% reserved seat for women was proposed, but the bill was not passed in Parliament.^{xxxii} In 1992, the 62-63rd amendment to the constitution brought about a major change in the panchayat system.^{xxxiii} In 1993, with the support of all the states of the country, the percentage of women in the panchayats and the entire administration concerning that of men was increased to one third. At all three levels of the panchayat system, seats are reserved for women as well as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Since the 1993 panchayat elections, the number of women's seats has in some places exceeded 33 percent.^{xxxiv} In 2005, the first Bihar government reserved 50 percent seats in the panchayat. Later, the UPA government enacted a law reserving 50 percent seats in the panchayat for women. But the issue of reserving 33 percent seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies has been debated. Although the issue of reservation of seats for women was raised in the 71st Amendment to the Constitution in 1986, it was rejected. Later, the issue was again debated in the amendment of the constitution in 1998 and the bill was finally passed on March 7, 2010.^{xxxv}

Now if we focus on the matter of political participation among women, we can see that different issues have always influenced the lower class Matua women when it comes to politics. Due to the constitutional rights, the participation of women from Matua community has certainly increased because of the reservation in Panchayat, Block, Zilla Parishad, Assembly elections, and Lok Sabha elections. However, the overall picture of the situation of Matua women has not changed at all and they have not gained political consciousness or awareness yet. More than 75% of the Matua women still cast their votes depending upon the opinion of the male members of their family.^{xxxvi} Another important issue that was evident in my research was that most of the Matua women who participated in elections and have become public representatives broadly rely on the judgment of their husbands and their husbands are the driving forces behind their political ideologies and opinions.^{xxxvii} The number of such women in the panchayat is much higher. Comparatively, the women who are the representatives in Zilla Parishad, MLAs and MPs are more politically aware. There is a lack of financial

stability or financial independence in the case of Matua women which is why they could not formulate their independent political understanding. Lack of education also works as a catalytic factor here.

There is a unity among the Matuas in case of religious and spiritual matters which distinguishes them from people of other religions. But the Matuas of Bengal is not united in the matter of political ideology. The Matuas of Bengal is ideologically divided into three main groups, the first being the supporters of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. They support all the decisions of the Thakur Bari. The second group follows Jogendra Nath Mandal and the third group is Ambedkarite. The important thing is that these three ideologies have no specific role in the Electoral politics of Bengal. Therefore the Matuas tend to support the conventional parties. The electoral behavior of the Matuas broadly depends on four things. First, viewing region and the activities of the parties where they live impact upon their voting choices. They tend to support the party which have achieved and dealt with a situation and provides with solution. Second, they support the party who promises them personal opportunities and benefits. Third, under the direction of Thakur Bari. This group of people relies blindly on Thakur Bari for all aspects in the interest of their religion and identity. Nothing else really matters for them. The fourth and last reason is the matter of ideals. The Matuas have a presence of ideological and theoretical supporters, who migrated during the fifties to the sixties and most of them believe in the ideology of the Left and the Congress. However, the number of such people is quite low.

Conclusion

“where caste itself becomes a political category it is futile to argue as to whether caste uses politics or politics uses caste”^{xxxviii} Although there are subtle divisions between the three parts of Matuas ,all of them are working unitedly keeping their common Matua identity in focus and they are fighting for their own rights. In this way, they are connecting with all kind of people while promoting spirituality. Naturally there is a growing political awareness within the Matuas. On the other hand, one of their emerging problem is about the individual ideological conflict that is creating division within the general masses. Although women have been given equal power in the Matua philosophy, they are still lagging behind the upper-class women when it comes to politics. The Matuas are gradually uniting and strengthening themselves in Bengal by politicizing themselves and raising political awareness for the sake of overall human rights. As a result, the Matuas have become the mouthpieces for the realization of rights for socially disadvantaged, lower caste, poor, working class people.

Notes

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