

Matua Movement in Bengal: From Reformation to Politicization: Pre and Post Independence till 2019.

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In the 18th century Bengal so many liberal religious reformation movements took place which had far reaching influence on people basically on untouchables. They formed a lion share proportionate in the society. Basically, these untouchables were Goudio Vaisnava community or Kartabhaja community who denounced the barrier of caste system and preached the principles of equality among all human beings (1). Consequently, the depressed class and low caste people would have been attracted to the principles of such a liberal reformative movement which marked an epoch-making role in the Dalit society under the leadership of Mutua community which reconstructed the society by advocating the spread of education, thinking of liberal ideas and accepting the policy of welfare of the society. It will not be exaggerated to justify the Mutua Sect as the pioneer for seeking the way of salvation of marginalized people. The sect sought salvation from untouchability and poverty by which the marginalized and depressed class were oppressed by the upper-class machinery (2). So, it was the sect of equality and on the other hand it was against Brahmanism by disobeying the upper-class hierarchy. This paper will search how this sect has transformed itself from its reformist identity to political identity.

Matua is a socio-religious reformist sect in Bengal. The marginalized, depressed, exploited people of Namasudra community were the main members of the sect and the founder of the sect Sri Guru Chand Thakur was also from a Namasudra community which before 1911 had been identified as "Chandalas" an agriculturist community who originally claimed the marshy land in Eastern part of Bengal. According to H.H.Riseley "The derivation of name Chandals is uncertain and it is a plausible conjecture that it may have been like "Sudras", the tribal name of the soil (3). Though there is ambiguity to call them Chandals. Again Mr. Beverly is of the opinion that Chandal is merely a generic title. Though undoubtedly a remnant of some aboriginal race has not yet been identified(4). In the census of 1911 Chandalas had been enlisted as Namasudra permanently. As the time passed the other depressed and Dalit people also sought shelter under this sect to seek salvation from the oppression of the higher caste and for the equality in the society in 18th century Bengal. Although it was started with the depressed and marginalized class, for some political gain other upper caste community like Brahmin and Kayastha and Baidya also took 'Diksha' from this sect and became the member of this sect. Present CM of Bengal Mamata Banerjee is an example of present time. In the early decade of the 19th century society was so rigid towards the Namasudra people. They had no right to enter the main building and Temples of the upper caste. They had no access to the inner part of the house of Upper Cast. They were only allowed to have food on separate utensils and denied mainstream worship of upper caste like Durga Puja, Kalipuja and social functions of upper caste and the upper caste people would not touch water and food given by Namasudra folk. The community had no right to make any connubial and commensal relations with the upper caste. The community acted as barber, washer man, fisherman, boatmen, scavengers etc upon whom the upper-class mass depended in their livings of everyday and every moment. In every sphere of life there was restriction imposed by the high caste society to them. They had no proper education, no so-called rich culture and had only submission to high caste communities. Under these circumstances there had been a need for a renaissance in their own community to have originated so that a new liberal religious sect be formed to usher light in this aboriginal community. Gradually as time passed this Matua sect started to plant its seeds in the society.

There had been dire necessity to form an organization with effective social characteristics in nature so that this organization could bind the community together and give self-confidence to fight against the upper caste elite Hindu society. So, a religious sect called Matua was formed by Hari Chand Thakur in Faridpur district of eastern part of Bengal in the 1870s. Hari Chand Thakur was born in 1811 in a village called Safalaldanga in Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur District (5). He himself was from a Namasudra family and had been Vaishnavites for generations. The family abandoned their original title 'Biswas' in the time of Mochanram, the grandfather of Harichand Thakur. 'Orakandi' village was the epicentre of Matua Sect where he settled down after being evicted by the machination of Zamindars. Since then, he thought of forming an organization to assist themselves against the hierarchy of elite Hindu society." The sect gradually grew as it became the rallying point for all the

untouchable and lower caste people in the region" (6). Hari Chand Thakur died in 1878 but the sect expanded further under his son Guruchand Thakur born in 1846 (7).

At the late decade of 19th century, the Society of Hindu Bengal was divided by caste. The Mutua sect originated from the womb of social division of Dalits and bhadralok was a socio religious movement which prevailed to some extent in Shohojia or Karta Bhaja vaishnavites religion. In 19 century, Bengal there had been a lot of social reformation movements and Renaissance centring on superstitions and un-education deeply rooted in the society. But the Matua reformation movement was to some extent different in the context of nature as the forerunner of the movement belonged to a different social status, the bhadralok and depressed class. So, the motive of the movement was to get rid of the caste-based society and wanted to organize a new social life based on equality and universal humanism. The goal of the religious philosophy of Matua was casteless society and work centric dutiful living. That's why the other depressed classes adhered to this religious social movement.

The Matua sect was strongly against idolatry and rituals. The devotees did not have any worship in their life. Self-respect and the 'mantra' which was to have from Guru like Hari Chand and Guruchand and they were their deity. Naturally with their sect identical symbol 'Donka' (drum, the symbol of power) playing and possession with hoisting flag in red coloured was only the ostensible rituals. Another essential feature of their religious life was 'Kirtan' which had a large impact on the life of Mutua. The 'Kirton' in Bengali scripture could have convey masses of social influence and significance. Main advice of the sect to the devotees was 'earn money, be educated and became respectable'. The main slogan was 'hate kam, mukhe nam' (doing everyday's duty and chanting holy sacred name raised by Harichand Thakur (8). This slogan defined by Harichand Thakur was the ideal path to combine Bhakti with Karma or spiritual devotion with material action (9). Thus, the Matua sect developed to suit a self-assertive peasant community and for this reason its ideology was also deliberately given an oppositional form (10). After Guruchand the baton was in the hands of Promotho Nath Thakur, the grandson of Guruchand Thakur.

The front organization of Matua was "Matua Mahasangha" founded by P. R. Thakur in 1925 who continued to organize the movement after Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. He also tried to spread the philosophy and message of the Matua sect setup by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. Since the beginning of setting up Matua Mahashangha has abstained itself from any politics and political movement. They remained aloof participating in the Swadeshi movement and Gandhian Congress led nationalistic movement as they considered the movement led by upper caste Hindus (11). They only continued the social movement that was self-respect movement which consisted of opposition of Brahmanism, spread of education among Matuas, worldly duties and being suitable for future movement to attract the government attention for self-upliftment. To achieve this goal of upliftment Matua leadership thought of having power. In this respect to substantiate this motive they had the slogan in Bengali 'jar dol nai, tar bol nai' (the person who has no political party has no power). So, this self-realization led them to be politically conscious and empowered,

Matua movement can be discussed in two parts, one is in pre partition era, and another is post-partition decades till 2019. Before partition the nature of the movement was self-respect movement. Basically, it was against inequality, and it was to develop themselves into an integrated identical community. As time passed their self-realization of having power prompted them to be part of provincial politics as well as national constitutional politics.

In August, 1935 Government of India Act was passed by the British Parliament as administrative reforms. According to the Act the reservation policy was initiated in the Assembly. The provincial assembly election was held in 1937. Many of the Matua members fought the election as independent candidates. The main protagonist among them was P.R. Thakur. Consequently, many of them won the election and P.R. Thakur was elected as assembly member with other Matua independent candidates. In this election though the Congress party emerged as the single largest party having 54 seats could not form the government as the independent Matua representatives supported the Krishak Praja Party and Muslim League coalition having 36 and 43 seats respectively. Basically, the independence Matua members became the main obstacle to have acquired power by upper caste bhadralok.

During the last decade of colonial rule, a section of Matua leadership wanted to align with mainstream nationalistic politics. They supported the partition of Bengal. On this issue Motua members, basically Namasudra community was divided. A section under the leadership of J. N. Mandal joined the All India Scheduled Caste Federation founded by Ambedkar in 1942 who were against partition. Another one section under the leadership of P.R. Thakur supported the demand for partition of Bengal propounded by Hindu Mahasabha and Congress. Their sole demand was to divide Bengal and form the Hindu province of India and bring the Hindu habitat region of East part of Bengal under its purview. Meanwhile In 1946 a connection was made between communists and Namasudra farmers which resulted in Namasudra farmers involving in Tebhaga movement. The Namasudra peasants participated in the communist led Tebhaga movement alongside the Muslim peasants for a more class based demand for two thirds share of the produce for the sharecroppers(12).

Now the question arises how a non-political anti Brahmin movement inclined to be a part of national politics. The Matua movement was started as an alienated caste movement. Gradually the leadership began to feel the necessity of having power. As a result, despite being the strong opposition of Brahmanical hierarchy they supported the upper caste Hindu led movement. Basically, they tried to shift themselves from alienated and identical caste character to integrated class character. With the desire of having political power, they did not want to remain abstain from the national and constitutional politics. They wanted to build up their self-political consciousness and keep a mark of their own identity sharing with upper caste bhadralok. That's why they wanted to be with mainstream national parties. Similarly, being pressured by the ongoing situation they had seemingly integrated into the post-colonial nation.

On the other hand, after partition of Bengal, the once vibrant Matua movement for social justice and equality completely disappeared from the scenario of post partition West Bengal. All the Motha members in West Bengal were refugees who migrated from East Bengal. As times passed the partition of India ruined many people and harmed the maximum to the Matua members, Namasudra. So, by the effect of partition politics and refugee influx from East Bengal to West Bengal the movement took a new turn from social identity to political identity. In this respect Matua leaders sided with the Congress to seek the government endeavours for the sake of settlement and rehabilitation of refugees and citizenship. Naturally during this time refugee rehabilitation movement captured the cast movement. Consequently P.R.Thakur participated in constitutional politics.

In 1946 he was elected in the Bengal Assembly and then became a member of the constituent assembly with Congress support. After the partition he migrated to West Bengal. In 1948, he settled down in Thakurnagar Which is claimed to be the cultural and spiritual epicentre of the Matuas near Indo-Pakistan border. In the 1950s and 1960s P.R. Thakur was building up his political career in and around Thakurnagar. He was elected from Congress ticket to West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1957 from Haringhata constituency and in 1962 from Hanskhali. In later years he became the Minister of State for Tribal development. This time he supported the Congress government rehabilitation policy (13). He along with other Matua leaders seemed to have accepted the Nehruvian policy of legalistic solution to the problems of social justice. (14) At the initial stage of Congress government in 1948 a law was passed removing Hindu social disabilities including untouchability. A law was also passed in 1950 reserving 12.5% reservation of central job for the members of SC's. All those things were going well done by Congress government and Matuas were very pleased at those social justice and measures for which Matuas were fighting for years. But the alliance did not last for a long time P.R. Thakur and other Matua members agitated against the Congress government on some issues. The Indian State unleashed measures on the refugee colonies that comprised the Namasudra people, the members of the Matua sect. The Congress was inactive against the attack on the refugees in Bongao in 1964. He resigned in 1964 from the Assembly as a protest against the Congress in-action towards the incident and refugee rehabilitation. Then he sided with the opposition leaders demanding refugee rehabilitation. For some period, he kept engaged himself to rejuvenate the Matua Mahasangha and spread the Matua Policy of social justice to the grassroots level. In 1967 he fought parliamentary election from Nabadwip constituency as breakaway Bengal Congress and won by 89,000 votes against the Congress rivals (15). This disillusionment with the Congress over the refugee settlement policy he drifted towards left. He died in 1990 succeeding the duties over his eldest son Kapil Krishna Thakur.

After the disillusionment with Congress in respect of refugee settlement of the Matua members as well as other non-Matua members Matuas sought left attraction to their settlement problem and on this issue, they supported left parties and left government. In 1977 the left coalition parties came to power and formed the left government. In 1978 the left government launched an epoch-making land reformation Act and claimed to be characterized as Operation Barga which was given legal backing in 1979. The Act bestowed legal protection to the Borgadar (share Coppers) against the eviction by the landlords (joardar). The ultimate aim of the land reforms was to facilitate the conversion of the state's Bargadar into landowner in line with the directive principle of state policy of the Indian Constitution (16).

The Matuas, after coming to India being victimized by partition of Bengal began to take different occupations. As most of the Matuas were farmers by profession, they took shelter under agricultural activities. They began to work the agricultural land owned by landlords (joardar) and gradually they became landless Borgaders (landless farmers). So, they had the tremendous opportunity to take the benefits of Operation Barga. So with the hope to own their right on land they sided with the left parties. The regions inhabited by the Matuas had been a strong threshold of left vote bank. After 1977 consecutive three decades they continued to side with left parties and government, fixing the fate of the left government on some legislative assembly seats. The Namasudra members of Matua Mahasangha and other refugees organized themselves under the impetus effort of left leadership and established some organization with the hope to uplift refugees like UCRC (United Central Refugee Council) in 1950 and Sara Bangla Bastu Hara Samity (SBBS) in 1952 the slogan of which was amra kara, bastu hara (who are we, Refugee) (17)

The situation began to change in the last regime of the left government in power. Now the persistent question arises why did the Matuas or Matua Mahasangh resurfaced again in the last years of the left-led government (18). After the disillusionment with Congress till 2011 Namasudras, the members of the Matua Mahasangha drifted to identical politics in such a way that their strategies of survival had to be scripted in a different language in the different part of India, (19) The Matuas this time represented dual identity, one was Namasudra identity and other was Dalit Identity. Obviously to establish this identity they needed to take shelter under organized political parties.

It was from 1998 that the Matua votes had been drifting from the left front to Trinamool Congress (TMC) and BJP. The left front was facing debacle in the consecutive elections like Panchayat Election in 2008, Assembly election in 2011 and Parliamentary election in 2014. Sensing this transcend the left government tried to win over the Namasudra votes when in 2007 in the parliament the left parties supported their demand for Namasudras as SC status in the Northern and Central Indian provinces. Moreover, to woo the Matua votes the leaders of the left began to attend the functions of Matua and sought blessings from Baroma Binapani Debi, wife of P.R. Thakur and then Shanghadipoti of Matua Mahasangha and sanctioned funds for developmental projects. The Ministry of Backward Class Welfare Department was conferred to Kapil Krishna Thakur and introduced "Sri Harichand Guruchand Prize", resembled the role of Harichand Guruchand with Ram Mohan Roy and Vidya Sagar. Then CM laid the foundation stone of a Govt Degree college in Gaighata, to be named after Harichand Guruchand and sanctioned land for Harichand Guruchand Research Foundation in Rajarhat. Basically, the left front was realizing the importance of losing Matua votes without which coming to power in the next election could be impossible. The incident of Shingur and Nandigram in which 14 farmers died and was supposed to be an attack on farmers led to the increase of probability of drifting Matua votes against left govt and towards opposition like TMC and BJP

TMC had also been drawing closer to Matua voters and Matua Movement for some time. To win the heart of the Matua and Matua Mahasangha then the opposition supremo and the Indian Railway Minister Miss Mamata Banerjee paid visit to Baroma Binapani Devi (Head of the Matua Sect) to seek blessings from her and gave some promises if they could come to power. Even to show their proximity or intimacy with Matua and Matua Mahasangha she took "diksha" from Baroma and declared herself as a Matua member. Consequently, she was appointed chief Patron of Matua Mahasangha in return in 1910. As a result, TMC came to power in 2011 and Miss Mamata Banerjee became Chief Minister of West Bengal overthrowing the left from power which ruled for 34 years.

Now the question arises why had the Matuas drifted towards TMC. In 2003 paved the way when the BJP led government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). By a stroke of a pen the government passed the act to give citizenship to all those who arrived in India after 25th March 1971 to stop illegal Muslim immigration. By this new citizenship Act (CAA) passed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee Govt it was declared that to have citizenship of India migration before 25th March 1971 was compulsory. A speculation was in the air that those who migrated

before the said time were basically Muslims. So, it had become essential to produce any evidence in support of migration before 1971. But unfortunately most of the Matua members either had lost the valid papers of evidence or they had not kept the papers intact sensing the importance of the paper. Now they had raised the question in spite of living for years here whether they would be evicted or would go to detention camp like Assam. They began to agitate against the CAA. So, the Matua members feel scared of eviction as after 1971 large number of Matua members migrated to India from Bangladesh. They were scared of their citizen status. So, to fight against this ruthless Act they wanted to catch such a political hand who could advocate in and outside the parliament for their cause. So, they believed TMC and began to take shelter under the political banner of TMC. Their allegiance to TMC continued till the next parliamentary election in 2019. In the Assembly election of 2011 TMC got the result hand to hand. TMC won all the seats in North 24 Parganas and three in Nodia district where Matua brethren existed within the purview of those two districts of Bengal. In this way in the Assembly election of 2011 Matuas marked a strong voice of organized and solidarized Dalit identity. It was a remarkable change since 1946. The election result showed that Matua could now negotiate with the political parties from a position of considerable power in sharp contrast to their situation in 1946-47.

The question of citizenship remained unsolved till 2019. No constitutional amendment or any reforms or any new Act did not come to existence. BJP was trying to woo the Matua voters by propagating the party's future course of actions to give citizenship to Matua to be implemented soon and mobilized the Matuas under their banner. In spite of this heart and soul effort BJP bagged only two seats in Asansol and Darjeeling constituency. (20) Though no Matua voters had any contribution for bagging those two parliamentary seats by BJP. But at this being inspired they again tried to attain a successful move in the next Assembly election in 2016 and BJP bagged only three seats with 10% votes (21). This time also no Matua voter had contributed for bagging those assembly seats. It showed that no significant shift of the Matua votes had been made. They still remained the supporter of TMC due to their citizenship crisis.

Again, the issue of citizenship appeared in the sky of political atmosphere. A propaganda was in the air that a new citizenship Act was going to be enacted. It was to amend the citizenship act of 1955 by providing an accelerated pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan Bangladesh and Pakistan who are Hindu, Shikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsis or Christians and who arrived in India before the end of December 2014 (22). The Act was not to grant such eligibility to Muslims from these countries. Naturally the Matuas had been hopeful for being citizens of India as they were all Hindus. So being Hindus they realized that their citizenship right would come into force automatically. The problem which Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government created in 2003 was going to be solved by giving a formula by new Govt. So, with the hope of citizenship most of the Matua voters sided with BJP. In the parliamentary election of 2019 BJP got its fruitful result bagging 18 parliamentary seats in Bengal. It was remarkable and noticeable that all the seats where Matua votes parted in large numbers went in favour of BJP. In connection with this P.M. Narendra Modi's visit to Thakur Nagar on 2nd February 2019 and bowing down to the fit of Baroma Binapani Devi had kept remarkable influence on Matua voters and they thought that P.M. Narendra Modi was their liberator from the citizenship crisis (23).

On this issue there was a sharp division among the Matuas. Casting votes in favour of political parties depends on the directives of Sanghadhipati of Matua Mahashanga. This time disobeying the directives of Shanghadhipati most of the Motua voters casted their votes in favour of BJP. On the other hand, TMC raised the voice against CAA. The logic behind this was as they cast vote, they are the citizen, as they have voting rights and as per voting right they cast vote then why they will be judged by CAA for citizenship, In everywhere CM Mamata Banerjee had been vocal against the CAA at the price of blood. Naturally Matuas had been divided on the issue of pro CAA and against CAA.

Now the question arises why an organization of social, cultural and spiritual nature transformed itself into a political identity from reformist identity. Question also arises if they had been dependent on the Hindu based political ideology. Actually, it is a more pertinent question because Matuas were always anti high caste Hindu bhadrak and their ideology and hierarchy. Motua movement started with alienation from hierarchy of high caste Hindu and establishment a separate identity whose motives were to spread education among Matuas, economically solvent and spiritual salvation.

They transformed themselves for the necessity of time step by step. Partition of Bengal and post partition circumstances compelled them for this transformation. Changing of time day by day and complicated post partition situation compelled them to change their political stance. Firstly, to settle the refugee problem and rehabilitation of refugees they supported the Congress and gained some constitutional benefits. Secondly, after disillusionment with the Congress on the issue of atrocities on refugees in Bangao they supported the left front party and Govt for land distribution after the Barga Operation taken up by the left front government in 1978. Thirdly after 1998 they began to support TMC to establish a separate identity as Namasudra and Dalit in the state and country. Finally, they supported BJP to acquire citizenship after 2016 being inspired by BJP propaganda. So, it can be said that in spite of being a social reformist organization Matua Mahasangha and Matuas began to merge themselves into Hindu mainstream movement and politics though once they were strongly against the high caste Hindu and their hierarchy. Although Namasudra mainly Matua members are keeping connection with Panther Literary Movement and formed Dalit Literary Academy to spread their identity. Now future will tell us how far and when citizen issue will be solved or will remain the burning issue to prevail for years to come.

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