

Understanding the Status of Matua Women in 20th and 21st Centuries in Bengal

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Abstract

The Matua community primarily comprised of lower caste individuals from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) were united under the leadership of Sri Sri Hari Chand Thakur as part of an anti-caste religious movement. His son Guru Chand Thakur, later strengthened this movement, focusing on truth, purity of character, and gender equality. He emphasized on education, self-reliance, and societal respect for the community, who historically suffered from caste-based untouchability and forced migration due to communal conflicts. This present paper will analyse the contemporary socio-cultural and economic conditions of Matua women in Bengal. It highlights the significant role of 'Matri Sena', an independent women's organization within the Matua fold, which underscores the commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Despite progress in education and reduced discrimination, Matua women still face economic challenges and societal stereotypes. This study explores their ongoing struggles and efforts to improve their status, reflecting on the broader implications for social justice and gender equality within marginalized communities.

Keywords: - Matua, Women, Society, Cultural, Economy, Politics, Bengal

Introduction:

Sri Sri Harichand Thakur founded the Matua faith, uniting people from the Namasudra community and other lower caste people of the undivided Bengal. The Matua faith was established to safeguard the rights of the lower caste community, who were exploited by upper caste Hindu merchants and landlords in East Bengal. His great son Guru Chand Thakur further strengthened this movement in the field of education with the help of the British government. The primary objective of the Matua faith was to reintegrate the marginalized

communities into the mainstream society, promoting social equality and rejecting the caste system. Although the Matua ideology advocated for women empowerment and independence, the reality is that women within the Matua community faced limitation due to their historically under developed social status and lack of education.

In 1947, India gained independence from the long and oppressive British rule. However, this liberation came at the cost of the country's partition, resulting in the creation of a separate nation, Pakistan. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the Chairman of the Boundary Commission, rapidly partitioned Bengal, delineating the borders between East Bengal and West Bengal. The hasty demarcation of borders led to numerous complications and challenges in both East and West Bengal. As the partition was based on religious lines, Sir Radcliffe similarly divided Bengal along the religious boundaries, based solely on the religious majority in each police station, categorizing them as either Hindus or Muslims dominated.¹⁴The post-partition violence triggered a massive forced migration, dispersing community members into diasporic groups across the Indian mainland, Andaman Islands, and other distant regions. Historian Udit Sen summarised into following words, "Official estimates of East Bengali migrants who sought refuge in India between 1947 and 1970 vary between 5.8 million and 4.1 million. West Bengal alone took in over 3.9 million refugees."¹⁵The flow of refugees to West Bengal began after the Noakhali communal riot. During 1950's, 1960's the number of refugee arrivals from East Bengal increased further. The lower caste refugees faced significant challenges than their higher counterparts. Most of these lower caste refugees belonged to the Matua community. Since, a majority of the Matua community consisted of the Namasudras, their situations and conditions was not very different from that of the pre-colonial period. According to Jyotirmoyee Devi, "women were the worst victims of the partition history of the Indian subcontinent". The Namasudra writer Manorajan Byapari described in his writings about the poverty and disease-strike condition of lower caste refugees

¹⁴Ahmed Md. Nasir, A review study of the refugee problem in Bengal, Shikhan Sanshodhan: Journal of Art, Humanities and social science. P-1

¹⁵ Sen Udit (2018), Citizen Refugee : Forging the Indian Nation after Partition, Cambridge University Press, p-7

in government camps in India. The social position of these Matua women changed dramatically ever since they became refugees in India.

Socio-cultural and economic status of Matua Women:

Though Matua ideology and religious philosophy grant men and women equal rights, Matua women's social situations were far more difficult due to variety of important factors such as ethnic discrimination, refugee status, lack of education, economic vulnerability, child marriage, the dowry system, illiteracy of previous generation and psychology of inferiority. In the first stage, as refugees, they did not have any permanent place to stay, they frequently roamed from one place to another and as result, the women's education was not prioritized. As refugees from a lower caste background, they faced racial discrimination. Caste-based discrimination which was prevalent in Bengal during that time witnessed the daily struggles and violence faced by the Dalits in that often went unnoticed and remained invisible. Shockingly, even today, Dalits are still served leftovers at ceremonial feasts, highlighting the persistence of caste-based discrimination. Although the upper-caste individuals acknowledge the persistence of untouchability, they rationalized the segregation by attributing it to perceived uncleanness and disease –carrying potential of lower-caste communities, and the need to maintain public health and hygiene.¹⁶Sometimes the upper caste people, used disrespectful words to the Matua community such as '*Tarkata*', '*Dhur*', '*Bangladeshi*'.

Manju Bala, a Dalit writer stated that "Dalit women's writings represented their double oppression as women and as dalit." In her autobiography, Kalyani Thakur, a prominent Matua women leader from West Bengal, recounted her experience of casteism and poverty since her childhood. Kalyani Thakur's poetry served as a critique of both Marxist and Brahminical forces of Manuvad. Kalyani Thakur explained her life experiences through some of her poems. She was born in a Dalit family and had seen oppression and cruelty of poverty. She completed the first part of her autobiography but unfortunately, she struggled to find publishers. Despite investing her own fund the publishers refused to take on her book. In her words this was a new kind of untouchability and she recounts how

¹⁶ Deb Debasmita (4 April, 2023) Reading Bengali Dalit Women's Life Narrative, p-5

her less-educated boss frequently obstructed her work. She criticised *Bhadralok*, a Bengali liberal progressive who really reaffirmed caste in new ways. There were numerous instances in which upper caste *Bhadralok* fiercely opposed the reservation laws.¹⁷

The economic condition of these Matua women were miserable. Primarily the main responsibility of the Matua women is to take care of their family at home. Many women work outside the home to increase their financial security. In village areas these women worked along with their husbands in the agricultural lands. Kalyani Thakur provided a sharp analysis of the differences between rural and urban poverty, highlighting that urban women were more proactive in seeking income opportunities compared to their rural counterparts.¹⁸ The distinguished Dalit author Manoranjan Byapari vividly described the inner lives of these women in his book '*Itibrittey Chandal Jibon*'. He spoke of his mother, who frequently lacked even the most basic clothing due to their financial hardship, stayed inside their darkest corner of the house during the day, and wrapped old mosquito net.

These women frequently worked in agricultural land of their own families. These migrated Matua women who did not have any land worked as landless labourers. Majority of them worked as housemaids. Few of them worked in factories even. Although the financial situation of these women have improved but the process is still very slow. However, the majority of married women today have involved themselves in some kinds of works for earning money. Sewing, knitting, making garlands, home tutoring, or working in cottage industry or home crafts are some examples for these jobs. Sewing has been found to be most popular job among these women thus far.¹⁹

Kanu Halder, in his survey of Matua women had chosen five villages for his research paper. The villages are Ambedkar Nagar Post office, Gabardanga, Thana-Habra, District North 24 Pargana. Mavaladanga, Panchayat Dharampur 2, North 24 Parganas, Pin 843249. Chikan Para, Thana Gaighata, Mahakuma-

¹⁷Ibid Deb Debasmita, p-6

¹⁸ Ibid Deb Debasmita , p- 7

¹⁹HaldarKanu, "Matua Women: Understanding their position in Bengal (1990-2011), Journal for creative Research Thought, 2019, www.ijcrt.org p-6

Bangaon, North 24 Parganas, Pin-84326. Village –Shutri Panchayat, Panchayat-Ichapur 2, Thana Gaighata, North 24 Parganas, Pin-643241. Narayanpur, Block-Karimpur Thana-Thandarpara, Sub- Division- Tehatta, Pin-741152. The survey which involved 309 women, considered the opinions of the women in the 18-85 age range. Between the age of 18 and 30, 10.68 percent were unmarried, while 6.79 percent were female graduates. 2.26 percent of women were pursuing a master's degree. Twenty-six percent of women work in agriculture. The percentage of women, who work at home is 59.54 percent. 1.24 percent women were involved in government work. 12.29 percent women participated in the business. 6.67percent women participated in some sort of production. 91percent of women over the age of 50 were illiterate, and the majority of them - approximately 85 percent had child marriages. 30 percent of illiterate Matua women participated in the government of India's literacy campaign.²⁰

Status of Matua Women in Bengal Politics: -

Although the Matua religion advocated for equal rights for men and women, Matua men generally dominated in the religious and political spheres. The foundation of *Matri Sena* or 'The Army of Holy Women' lay in the religious texts and teachings of Hari Chand and Guru Chand Thakur. During their gatherings and public meetings, Matua women *Gurus* regularly read aloud from their sacred texts and sang '*Hari Sangeet*' which emphasized gender-egalitarian accounts. Additionally, they promoted and supported women devotees in practicing these readings and songs at their own homes. They strongly emphasised on gender equality. The teachings of the Matua founding *Gurus* have inspired women to take leadership roles and pursue political position, driving a new wave of women's empowerment within the community.²¹ In 19th century when most of these women were preferred to be kept them behind the veil, Harichand Thakur socially placed women in the seat of judgement. The zamindar's *Nayib* imposed fine and beating for the crime of chanting *Harinam*, men and women together went to Dasarath Biswas's house in the Faridpur

²⁰Haldar Kanu (April, 2019) Matua Women: Understating their position in Bengal (1990-2011) p- 474

²¹Sarbadhikari Sukanya and Roy Dishani (2023) 'Gender, education and citizenships Ideological weapons of an Army of Holly women in Bengal 'p-5

district of undivided Bengal. Harichand Thakur personally paid the fine imposed on Dasharatha Biswas and won the right for men and women to chant the *Harinam* together. He built a women's court with the Matua women for the punishment of *Nayib*. Matua women were the judge, and lawyers of this court. This showed that he wanted to empower and put them at par with men.

Pravu bole Eytora joto sob nari

Milayibo high court mahila Kachhari

Ukil, moktar saje meyera sobai

*Hujur selam bolis ommukhe daraw.*²²

(Hari Chand Thakur told women to form women's court where all the judge and lawyers were women).

Hari Chand Thakur instructed Matua men to perform all religious practices along with their wives and asked the men to address women as '*Matua Mata*'. There is a reference in Hari Lila Mrita, the sacred book of Matua community that -

"Meye purus e bosu ek pate khay

Meye der eto khay padadhulaloy

Purush dholiya pore meyeder paye"²³

(Men and women eat and seat together, men bow down to women and eat their food, men lie down at women's feet in respect).

In post partition India, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, the grandson of Guru Chand Thakur took the leadership of Matua faith. Binapani Thakur took over the leadership of Matuas after the demise of her husband, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. Initially, the Matua community was patriarchal between 1947 to 1990, but has transitioned to a matriarchal society from 1990.²⁴ The Matua community has solidified their position as a major force in Bengal's politics. The first women organization of Matuas, '*The Santi Satyabhama Nirvana Committee*' was

²²Sarkar Tarak (1917) Sri Hari lilamrita, p -112

²³Sarkar Tarak Chandra (1917) Sri Sri Hari Lilamrita, p-107

²⁴Haldar Kanu(April, 2019), Matua women: Understating their position in bengal, p-475

established on December 5, 1990, at Thakur Bari in Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas. The '*Santi Satybhama Nirvana Committee*' has grown to become the largest and most prominent organisation within the Matua community. Initially, the Committee's primary focus was encouraging these women to participate in festivals and ceremonies at the Matua shrine. At the present, the Committee continues to operate as a religious organisation focused on promoting women's involvement in Matua social and spiritual activities. Binapani Thakur undertook nationwide tours, traversing various provinces of India to disseminate and promote the Matua philosophy. Binapani Devi played a pivotal role in propagating the Matua ideology, while also organizing public rallies in Kolkata to advocate for the rights of the Matua community. She was not a direct member of any political party. Binapani Thakur emerged as the chief advisor of Matua votes from the 20th century onwards. Due to lack of financial stability or independence most of the Matua women were unable to develop their own political thinking. Lack of education also played a significant factor. The Matua women still cast vote based on the opinions of their male family members. The participation of Matua women has significantly increased due to constitutional rights and the reservation in the Panchayat, Zilla Parisad and Assembly election.

The '*Matri Sena*' is deeply inspired by the strong personality of Binapani Thakur who is popularly known as '*Boro Maa*' by the Matua community. One important and recent development within the Bengali Matua sect is the creation of the *Matri Sena*, an army of Holy women. Under Sundari Thakur's guidance, the *Matri Sena* was established in Thakurnagar, West Bengal, in 2019. The women *Gurus* of the '*Matri Sena*, also known as '*Army of Holy Women*' have highlighted three major areas for combating patriarchy, inequality and social injustice. The three pillars from the foundation of their fight against systemic inequalities, includes educational disparities, caste-based discrimination and territorial inequalities.²⁵ Following India's partition in 1947, many Matua devotees moved to West Bengal, but their major pilgrimage centre remained in Bangladesh. Since then, the community has maintained continuous cross-border travel for pilgrims, ideas and annual festivities. A lot of complex factors came together in 2019 when the

²⁵Sarbadhikari Sukanya and Roy Dishani (2003) Gender, Education and Citizenship as Ideological Weapons of an 'Army of Holy women' in Bengal : The Matua matriSena, p -7

Indian government decided to formally record the names of the population of migrants and refugees. These led to protest against the National Register and Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The protesters were from a number of marginalised groups including members of the Matua community who had migrated from Bangladesh over the years but had not yet obtained official rehabilitation. The Matua women's wing was established during a period of political turmoil. Although earlier Matua women were involved in politics but they were primarily on the male members of the *Matua Mahasangha* for their political views. In the *Matua Mahasangha* which is headed by Male *Gurus*, the role of women *Gurus* are not visible. Members of the *Matri Sena* advocated for a gendered perspective to establish national identity among Matua refugees. The women *Gurus* of the *Matri Sena*, an 'Army of Holy Women' aim to empower Matua women and beyond through their unique maternal perspective on political power. Since 2019, women *Gurus* and followers have actively participated in rallies, hunger strike and protests alongside male members of the *Matua Mahasangha* to demand legal citizenship.²⁶ The women of the *Matri Sena* were also thought of as the community's mother since they were the bearers of the family.

The *Matri Sena* also played a significant role in social issues like early marriage of women, domestic violence and women's education. The members of the *Matri Sena* worked to prevent early marriage among women, a widespread practice in rural Bengal. The organization has also been involved in informal legal intervention to address domestic violence cases. The *Matri Sena* reportedly steps in to domestic disputes when women, seeking help from their *Gurus*, report family problems and complaints against their husbands. The *Matri Sena* often resolves disputes using a religious approach, emphasizing that a true follower of Matua is one who treats women with respect. As a result, disrupted families are informally rehabilitated through a framework rooted in the ethical and religious principles of the Matua faith. But the *Matri Sena* lays unique contribution to their battles to get citizenship for the displaced Matua People. The specific kind of gender politics was made to influence by the demands made by Matua women *gurus* for citizenship rights for the refugee Matua population. Since they are the

²⁶Sarbadhikari Sukany and Roy Dishani (2003) *Ibid*, p-6

mothers and guardians of their homes and lands. Therefore, a significant turning point for the Matua religious movement was the creation of '*Matri Sena*' or the 'Army of Holy women'.

Conclusion: -

In contemporary times, Matua women of lower castes gained the constitutional rights and quotas, better educational opportunities and less racial discrimination. However, these advancements are not comprehensive or universal. Economic progress for Matua women remained sluggish, and traditional stereotypes, such as the expectation of being perfect housewife, continue to persist. The challenges are experienced by the lower caste Matua women are distinct from the upper caste women. They continue to suffer from issues, such as starvation, illiteracy, and child marriage. Financial hardship often impedes their ability to provide adequate education for their children, especially for girls. Despite these challenges, some Matua women have succeeded to establish themselves independently and they still faced societal oppression. To the Matua community, the fight for women's rights is complicated and continuous. Although, the Matua doctrine advocates gender equality, with men and women being regarded as equal and women *Gurus* being received the same respect as their male counterparts but these ideals are difficult to put into practice. The community has shifted from a patriarchal to a matriarchal framework, emphasising the importance of women in their social and religious domain. Despite these progressive ideals, Matua women continue to confront significant barriers. Economic vulnerability, the legacy of refugee status, and deep seated ethnic prejudices hinder their progress. The establishments like '*Matri Sena*' highlighted the devotion of the community to address these difficulties and campaigned for Matua women's right and education.

Although, the Matua women have made significant progress in the field of education and social outcomes, the journey towards gender equality and economic stability is continuous. Though various Matua women organisations have been established and some women actively participated in politics, these

are mostly city centric and their functions are limited to handful women. Despite their policies are determined by the needs of the common people, they do not have mass base per say. The acceptance of gender equality by the Matua community in principle provides a strong foundation for further progress, but concerted efforts are needed to formulate these ideals into tangible improvements in the lives of Matua women.

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