

Ethnicization of the Matua Community in West Bengal, India

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of social boundaries in order to protect claimed ethnic and cultural heritages is referred to as ethnicization, while removal of such boundaries is called de-ethnicization. (Milikowski, 2000) Communities are ethnicized when religious or cultural identities are transformed into exclusive ethnic identities, often due to social and political forces. South Asia's ethnicization has become a central regional political issue because of the advent of sectarian parties and external pressures. In South Asia, the connection between nationalism and ethnicity has been hard to square, with attempts at creating self-determination, legitimacy, and symbolic cohabitation short of creating an integrated whole. (Sabhlok, 2002)

The ethnicization of India is multifaceted and involves politicizing religious and ethnic identities. Hindutva groups are building an exclusivist Hindu identity by ethnicising Dalits and racializing Muslims as aliens. Polarisation and undermining of democracy follow when radical Islamic organizations counter-ethnicize against this process. (Santhosh & Paleri, 2020) Regional movements such as the Bodos of Assam, too, show how politicisation of ethnicity may create a transformation of India from its caste to an ethnic hierarchy. (Kopparam, 2021) However, unlike South and West India, where pre-Aryanist or Buddhist outlook provided the lower castes' mobilisation base, North India was largely driven by state governmental quota regulations. (India's social cohesion and democratic values are substantially shaped by these processes (Jaffrelot, 2000). Against this wider context of ethnicization and the remaking of caste and religious identities, the mobilization of subaltern groups in Eastern India reveals a correlative trajectory. In Bengal, religious movements based on caste have used cultural and spiritual idioms to upset hierarchical formations and stake political claims. One exemplary case of strategic identity-making can be seen in the Matua community. Matua society, a low-caste religious movement that originated in 19th century Bengal, is now a strong political force in West Bengal and across the world. (Lorea, 2020) The Matuas, with an estimated 50 million followers, have been a major force in ending discrimination based on caste and untouchability. (The Matuas have been able to unite their political power by glorifying their leaders, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, using print literature, festivals in their communities, and acts of remembrance (Lorea 2020).

Abstract: This paper examines the ethnicization of the Matua community in West Bengal, India, through a historical lens, focusing on people who influenced the formation of their identity and sociopolitical consolidation. It first traces Harichand Thakur's religious movement around kirtan, and then presents Guruchand Thakur's educational reforms as a turning point for social liberation. Next, it examines the works of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and Binapani Devi in bringing the low-caste Matua refugees together under a common socio-religious and political fold. Through a literature survey and discourse analysis, this research provides a critical account of the changing Matua identity and the resulting caste dynamics and political mobilization in Bengal.

Keywords: Caste Politics, Ethnicization, Hindu Nationalism, Kirtan, Matua, West Bengal

Background of the Study

The 19th-century Namasudra reformist sect Matua Dharma was established by Harichand Thakur and institutionalized by his son Guruchand Thakur (**Banerjee-Dube, 2008**). Originating from the lower-caste Hindu culture, the Matuas have endured historical socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion. They organized for social justice, religious reform, and political representation over time, eventually emerging as an influential political force in West Bengal. The tumult of the Partition shattered the Namasudra movement and put the organizational continuity of the Matua community at risk. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (P.R. Thakur), Guruchand Thakur's grandson, attempted to revive the organization after 1949, but this endeavor encountered many setbacks. In 1983, led by Baroma Binapani Devi, the organization was renamed the Matua Mahasangha, and this was formally accepted in 1986. In 1994, the Mahasangha organized a public assembly at Shahid Minar, Kolkata, to unify Namashudra adherents under the Matua Dharma creed. Thereafter, the Mahasangha became involved in social service activities, such as providing relief during floods and education, proving to be socially and politically significant (**Chandra et al., 2015**). By 2009, the Mahasangha had become a significant electoral mobilizer within Matua-controlled territories, shaping local politics and disrupting elite, traditional structures (**Chandra et al., 2015**).

This study investigates the ethnicization of West Bengal's Matua community through its historical growth, socio-political changes, and present-day political relevance. Its key goals are:

1. This study aims to examine the origins and religious genesis of the Matua movement, with an emphasis on Harichand and Guruchand Thakur's roles in shaping community identity through spiritual and educational restructuring.
2. To analyze the influence of the Partition and refugee displacement on the Matua community, with special reference to how P.R. Thakur's resettlement efforts unified the socio-political identity.
3. To evaluate the contribution of political leadership and organizational machinery, including the All-India Matua Mahasangha, to institutionalizing Matua political participation and shaping policies on caste, refugee rights, and citizenship.

This study utilized a qualitative method, combining historical examination and literature review. Primary materials, such as government records, newspaper archives, and documents from that time, allow for the reconstruction of the socio-political history of the Matua community. Secondary materials—academic papers, ethnographic research, and policy briefs—contextualize this development within the larger theoretical narratives of caste, ethnicity, and social mobilization. In combination, these techniques provide critical insights into ethnicization and political action among historically excluded groups.

Harichand Thakur and Kirtan (1830–1878)

The socio-religious scenario of 19th-century Bengal was a period of turmoil, social unrest, and

exploitation of religious practices to justify undesirable behavior. Brahmanical dominance has strengthened social stratification, reinforcing caste differentiation, superstition, and moral repression. Women experienced heightened crises under 'Kaulinya,' while untouchability eroded social solidarity. Even Vaishnavism, originally anti-casteist, has fallen prey to hierarchical tendencies. Here, Harichand Thakur became a revolutionary, establishing the Matua sect in the 1830s for social equality and religious reformation by means of 'Kirtan' or 'Namgaan' (**Thakur, 2016**)

Identifying religion as a powerful social tool, Harichand strategically utilized it to fight inequality, denying Brahmanical domination, casteism and exploitative guru-oriented practices. By focusing on egalitarianism and avoiding orthodoxy, the Matua movement gave subjugated groups dignity and self-respect. Kirtan, at the center of this mobilization, was both a religious practice and a social protest. Its simplicity made it stand out from decorative Vaishnavite songs, using forceful but straightforward language to empower Namasudras and other oppressed castes (**Thakur, 2016**). Harichand's teachings promoted unity through group solidarity, as seen in the following song:

"Jar dal nei, tar bal nei?" (T. C. Sarkar, 1916)

(One who doesn't belong to a group doesn't possess any power)

Kirtan congregations brought together devotees from Faridpur, Dacca, Bakarganj, Khulna, and Jessore to a common spiritual and social identity (**Thakur, 2016**), enabling the ethnicization of the Matua movement. In repudiating Brahmanical scriptures such as the Vedas and Purâgas, Matua philosophy directly challenged Hindu orthodoxy to attract marginalized communities in search of spiritual and social emancipation:

*"Bed bidbinahi jane na mane brahman Nischoikoritehabe e dole
sason Kothai brahman lagekiser Vaishnav Sarbo
boseartholobhijatobhondo sob
Kiba Shudra, kibanyasi, kiba yogi hoi Jei jane attatattva sei srestho
hoi." (T. C. Sarkar, 1916)*

(Dismiss all Hindu scriptures such as Veda, Purana, Smriti, Shastra that established caste system by Brahmanical domination)

This philosophy eliminated caste hierarchies, interpreting religious practice as an emancipatory and unifying force (**Banerjee-Dube, 2008**). Kirtan generated political awareness, wherein symbols such as the Lal Nishan, Jaydhak, Kansi, and horn represented militant determination, and chanting of 'Haribol' developed the mood for resistance (**Biswas, 2018**)

Through the combination of religious piety and social consciousness, Harichand Thakur's kirtan became a tool for mobilization, ethnicization, and effecting social change. It allowed subaltern groups to establish identity, challenge entrenched caste structures, and create a unique ethno-religious awareness, so that the Matua movement became an exemplary space for socio-religious reformation and resistance.

Guruchand Thakur and His Educational Reforms (1878–1937)

After Harichand Thakur's death in 1878, his son Guruchand Thakur, then 32 years old, took the helm of the Matua movement and built his father's spiritual vision into an institutionalised socio-religious reform movement. (Thakur, 2022) In the face of deep-rooted caste hierarchies, he focused on education, social harmony, empowerment of women, health awareness, and reform of rituals and made education the pivot of his agenda, symbolized by the launch of the 'Shivgiri Yatra' in 1928. Maintaining economic independence as a prerequisite for the freedom of marginalized groups, he resisted Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The late 19th century, marked by broader subaltern resistance, provided fertile ground for Matua activism in Bengal. Incidents such as the 1873 boycott of higher-caste employers by Namashudras in Faridpur and Risley's 1891 observation of Chandals in Barisal claiming elevated status as 'Namas' illustrate the period's sociopolitical ferment. Although direct links to Matua ideology are unconfirmed, Guruchand consistently denounced caste arrogance and promoted social integration through practices such as joint dining.

Although they were the majority in East Bengal, the Namashudras were split into eight sub-castes, which hindered mass mobilization. Guruchand solved this by organizing the Namashudra Mahasammelan in 1881 at Dattadanga, Khulna, with 5,000 delegates. (Thakur, 2022) At the age of 35, he was elected president unanimously, stressing economic development, education, and social concord. Identifying illiteracy as a chief obstacle, he founded the Orakandi Pathshala, which, assisted by reformers such as Raghunath Sarkar and missionary Dr. C. S. Mead, developed into a Middle and later High English School.

Guruchand's efforts encouraged wider educational expansion despite resistance from upper castes, as seen in the case of philanthropist Girish Chandra Bose's fight to establish a high school. He instigated people's efforts to open schools, sending his son Shashibhushan and Bhishmadev Das to approach Dr. Mead for support, which led to the opening of Orakandi High School. Knowing that education alone was not enough without jobs, Guruchand approached the Governor of Bengal, Lord Lansdowne, in 1907, fighting for job reservations, which allowed Namashudras, such as Shashibhushan Tagore and Mohanlal Biswas, to reach the administrative level. A supporter of women's education, Guruchand established a girl's school in Orakandi in 1908 with the patronage of Brahmo Samaj, providing vocational instruction and enabling widows' schooling. He conducted priestless marriages, promoted widow remarriage, and campaigned for an end to forced prison labor, resulting in policy reforms in these areas. Despite opposition from the elite, he prioritized social reform over political reform and refrained from endorsing the Swadeshi Movement until the end of untouchability. His struggles opened the door to the Bengal Depressed Classes Association and leaders such as Yogendranath Mandal, who were integral to Dr. Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly. Guruchand Thakur's lasting legacy includes education, employment, interfaith

appreciation, gender equality, and human rights, which were admired by leaders such as Subhash Chandra Bose and Mahatma Gandhi. (Thakur, 2022)

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and the Matua Community: Resettlement and Political Struggles (1947–1990)

The 1947 partition of Bengal created profound fears in the Matua community, especially for Namashudras, which led to political polarization. Yogendranath Mandal was against partition due to fear of socio-political losses, while Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (P.R. Thakur), grandson of Guruchand Thakur, favored it following the Noakhali riots to secure Hindu interests in the region. To Hemanta Sarkar (21 January 1947), Thakur recommended the incorporation of Hindu-majority districts such as Khulna and Barisal within India, and by May 1947 he publicly accepted partition as inevitable, calling upon Namashudras to remain in East Pakistan. (Bandyopadhyay & Chaudhury, 2017) Leaders' assurances such as Gandhi (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 31 May 1947) did not dispel communal tensions. (Halder, 2022)

During the growing riots, Thakur escaped to West Bengal in August 1947, first residing in Calcutta before establishing himself in Bagula, Nadia district. Working together with Chandra Nath Bose and indigenous Namashudra leaders, he planned refugee resettlement, denouncing Government inefficiency. Thakur and his associates acquired land in Chikanpara Mauza to develop a private colony for refugees, 'Thakur Nagar', registered on 9 January 1948 (C-2828/1948). (Bandyopadhyay, 2001) Dedicated to equality, he housed refugees regardless of caste and focused on infrastructure—hospitals, roads, and postal services—while reconstituting the Matua Mahasangha. (Bandyopadhyay, 2001) Living among refugees in a hut named 'Nirbason' (Exile), Thakur promoted social harmony.

East Pakistan communal violence intensified in 1948–1949, and state indifference worsened the refugee crisis. Yogendranath Mandal resigned from Pakistan's Cabinet (October 1950) and relocated to West Bengal. The Nehru-Liaquat Pact (1950) was supposed to guarantee minority rights, but 8,000 communal incidents took place between 1950 and 1956, most against Namashudras. Thakur encouraged wider resettlement, promoting migration to the Andamans and Dandakaranya, proclaiming, "Our ancestors broke the forest swamps of the Sundarbans..." In the Andamans, the government will give you land, cattle, and houses. Go there and build a 'new Bengal.' (Bandyopadhyay, 2001)

By 1949, Thakur was powerful, organizing hunger strikes in the interests of the refugees, attending the 'Nikhil Banga Vastuhara Conference' (January 2, 1949), and addressing 15,000 Matuas at Gaighata (November 21, 1950). He initiated Baruni Mela (1951) to unite the dispersed community and built the infrastructure of Thakurnagar, a railway station (1957), and Harichand and Guruchand Thakur temples, making it a hub of Matua religious and socio-political mobilization. (Bandyopadhyay, 2001) Political tensions escalated in the 1960s when Thakur stuck with Congress while refugees grew disillusioned. He stepped down from the Bengal Assembly (March 6, 1964), blaming Congress for negligence following the Khulna riots, and was arrested under the Defence of India Rules (April 19, 1964),

claiming leadership of the Matua Mahasangha. (**Bandyopadhyay & Chaudhury, 2017**) After being released, he ran in the 1972 election on Congress tickets but lost narrowly by 2% of 10,600 votes. Later, he focused on unifying Matua identity nationally by touring refugee colonies across India. (**Halder, 2022**)

In 1986, Thakur legally established the 'Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha' under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act (1961). (**Halder, 2022**) Highlighting education, he strengthened Guruchand Thakur's appeal: "Bare Bare Ami Sva Jatir Gan, Sekho Bidya Rakho Bidya Kore Pran Pan," (I urge my people to pursue education) (**Bandyopadhyay, 2001**) and set up Thakurnagar PramathaRanjanVidyalaya, High School, and Girls School (1949). (**Bandyopadhyay, 2001**) By encouraging Western education and cultural openness, he allowed Christian missionary work to ensure social growth. (**Halder, 2022**)

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 precipitated another Matua migration, reaffirming their socio-political identities. Although the Mahasangha remained under Thakur's leadership until his death in 1990, leadership soon turned towards establishing a separate community identity. P.R. Thakur's efforts in the establishment of Thakurnagar, rehabilitation of refugees, and development of infrastructure solidified his legacy, demonstrating unflinching commitment towards dignity, stability, and socio-political mobilization for the displaced Matua community. (**Bandyopadhyay, 2001**) (**Halder, 2022**)

Binapani Devi and All India Matua Mahasangha (1990-2019)

After the sudden death of P.R. Thakur in 1990, the All-India Matua Mahasangha signified a major administrative change in the community. His wife, Binapani Devi, commonly referred to as 'Barama', became the Matua leader in Bengal. Without any direct political connections like her husband, she led the Matuas on her own. Under her leadership, the Mahasangha became a political organization. The biggest Matua gathering took place at Shaheed Minar in Kolkata in 1994, and it was attended by crucial personalities like Barma Binapani Devi, Kapil Krishna Thakur, and Manju Krishna Thakur, along with Matua Mahasangha President Ganpati Biswas. Another significant event was on January 7, 2004, when Binapani Devi guided Kapil Krishna Thakur in laying the foundation of the 'Sri Sri Hari Guruchand Ashram.' The first building of the ashram was established on February 13, 2004, and was named Binapani Devi.

In 2003, there was an All-India Matua Mahasangha-organized hunger fast at Thakurbari at Thakurnagar protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003 and calling for unconditional citizenship for Bengali refugees. Matua social activist Sukriti Ranjan Biswas led this movement, with 21 Matua followers participating. The Matua Mahasangha and the Thakur family did not directly participate in electoral politics from 1990 to 2009, but grassroots-level Matua participation continued. A turning point came in 2009 when Kapil Krishna Thakur, Pramath Ranjan Thakur's eldest son, entered politics, forging new political alliances for Matuas in Bengal. On December 28, 2010, Binapani Devi called for mass mobilization at Dharmatala in Kolkata, attracting thousands of Matua

supporters. However, the Matua Mahasangha's activism has brought national attention to the matter. During the election campaign, Mamata Banerjee assured Binapani Devi that she would address the refugee concerns if elected. Consequently, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) gained significant support from Matua voters. In the 2011 West Bengal Assembly Elections, nearly all contested seats in Matua-dominated constituencies were won by the TMC owing to the strategic realignment of Bengal's political scenario. This was not merely because of the influence of the Thakur family but was a result of the combined efforts of Matua followers.

Following Binapani Devi in March, 2019 the Matua Community saw further ethnicization and political polarization. The Shantanu Thakur-led faction, supported by the BJP, stressed hereditary leadership and endorsed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act to realize long-standing citizenship aspirations. The TMC-supported group championed wider inclusivity and was against the NRC-CAA scheme. These cleavages illustrate the increasing tensions between spiritual and cultural identity and political mobilization.

CONCLUSION

West Bengal's Matua community has undergone a remarkable transformation from the 19th-century religious reform movement, led by Harichand Thakur, to an organized socio-political movement. Guruchand Thakur's focus on education, caste destruction, and economic development formed the basis for the Matua community's long-term social and political claims. The Partition of India in 1947 hastened the ethnicization of the Matuas, as displacement and communal violence forced new ways of living and political participation for the community. P.R. Thakur's role in organizing resettlement and cementing a Matua political constituency highlights the contribution of displacement to reinforcing ethnic claims. Under Binapani Devi's leadership, the All-India Matua Mahasangha formalized the political ambitions of the community, consolidating its place in West Bengal's electoral politics. The Matua trajectory embodies the more general processes of ethnicization, wherein subaltern groups use religious, historical, and political narratives to build an independent ethnic identity within a contested national landscape. This study adds to the literature on ethnicization in South Asia by showing how subaltern groups contest systemic marginalization through cultural revivalism, political consolidation occasioned by migration, and voter participation. The Matua experience identifies the porosity of caste and ethnic lines in postcolonial India, whereby historical memory, religious symbolism, and political agency interact to continue to affect identity.

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