

Mapping the Vote: A Spatial-Electoral Analysis of Matua Community's Influence in West Bengal Assembly Elections

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Abstract: *This study examines the spatial patterns of ethnic voting in Matua-influenced constituencies of West Bengal, drawing on electoral data from the Assembly Elections of 2011, 2016, and 2021. Using official datasets from the Chief Electoral Officer, West Bengal, and the Election Commission of India, this study analyses variations in vote share and electoral outcomes across regions with a high Matua concentration. This study draws on insights from field surveys and secondary literature to explore the underlying causes of vote shifting and changing party allegiance: historical displacement, economic marginalisation, developmental aspirations, and evolving socio-cultural identities. The research further explores the strategies adopted by political parties to consolidate Matua support through religious symbolism, welfare schemes, candidate selection, and rhetorical appeals to community identity, as reflected in party manifestos and media discourse. The findings show that Matua's voting behaviour embodies a dynamic interplay between ethnic identity and the development policy. Linking spatial data to sociopolitical analysis allows for a deeper understanding of how ethnicity shapes electoral outcomes and political mobilisation in contemporary West Bengal.*

Keywords: Ethnic Voting, Matua community, Spatial Analysis, Electoral Politics, Assembly Elections

INTRODUCTION

In multi-ethnic democracies, patterns of voter behaviour are often mediated by ethnic identity. However, the extent to which ethnicity influences electoral outcomes varies considerably across contexts. In some democracies, political parties with well-defined ethnic constituencies dominate the political arena, whereas in others, ethnic affiliation remains a latent but persistent undercurrent (Horowitz et al., 1985). Political organisations strategically deploy ethnic appeals to form electorally viable coalitions, while voters mobilise identities that maximise their chances of inclusion and representation. These dynamics have important implications: control over state power allows the dominant coalition to direct public resources and benefits to co-ethnic groups, thereby reinforcing both political loyalties and ethnic divisions.

In the Indian context, ethnicity is deeply intertwined with caste, religion, and neighbourhood identity, creating a complex web of social and political affiliations. Collective mobilisation alongside ethnic traces has frequently been a car for securing illustrations, influencing coverage, and gaining access to developmental assets. Consequently, ethnicity capabilities are not simply a cultural class but a critical political aid that can shape electoral outcomes and public coverage. Within this framework, the Matua network of West Bengal provides a compelling case through which the interface between ethnicity and electoral politics can be examined. Originating as a religious reform movement under Harichand Thakur and later expanded by Guruchand Thakur, the Matuas transformed a spiritual revivalist initiative into a broad social and political movement that contested Brahminical domination and hierarchies of purity. (Bandyopadhyay, 2005) However, the upheaval of Partition fragmented Dalit activism, marginalising caste issues within Bengal's mainstream politics. The contemporary reassertion of the Matuas thus marks not only a revival of community consciousness, but also a reconfiguration of Dalit political identity in postcolonial Bengal. (Bandyopadhyay, 1997)

The political crisis of the Left Front regime after 2006–07 forms the crucial backdrop to this resurgence. Forced land acquisitions in Singur, Nandigram, and other regions severely eroded the Left's pro-poor reputation. The regime that emerged from class-based struggles against Congress increasingly aligned itself with corporate capital and rapid industrialisation (Chatterjee, 1997). Earlier, through land redistribution and decentralised governance, the Left Front constructed a "party society," wherein access to benefits and state institutions was mediated by party

affiliation rather than by traditional caste or community networks. However, this structure also facilitated the expansion of Kolkata-centric upper-caste dominance into the rural social order. When this system exhausted its redistributive capacity, the Left's ideological and organisational foundations weakened, opening space for new forms of mobilisation based on caste, ethnicity, and religious identity.

As the Left's political monopoly waned after 2009, community-based organisations capable of mobilising distinct vote banks gained an unprecedented influence. The Trinamool Congress (TMC), which ascended to strength with the aid of capitalising on mass agitations in Singur, Nandigram, and Lalgarth, first of all lacked the localised networks that sustained Left dominance. Consequently, it depended on community-based institutions for electoral consolidation. Among these, the Matua Mahasangha emerged as a decisive political actor, demonstrating its organisational and electoral strength in the 2007 Bongaon by-election. Over time, the Mahasangha positioned itself as the principal representative of Dalit refugees and Namasudras, negotiating with the state over citizenship rights and refugee rehabilitation while demanding the repeal of the 2003 Citizenship Amendment Act. Simultaneously, the organisation sought to revive and institutionalise the counter-historical legacy of Harichand-Guruchand's egalitarian ethos, uniting Namasudras under a shared religious and cultural identity that could resist bhadralok hegemony.

In this context, the existing literature posits that ethnic identification constitutes a pivotal determinant of electoral behaviour and political alignment for most of the Matua community in West Bengal. By inspecting the strategic use of ethnic mobilisation through political events, it demonstrates that Matua balloting styles are grounded not simply in material or financial concerns, but in deeply embedded cultural and spiritual focus. Therefore, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how identity politics reconfigures governance and illustrations in divided democratic politics. It also underscores that the Matua experience encapsulates a larger transformation in West Bengal's political landscape, in which ethnicity has re-emerged as both a symbolic and instrumental pressure in shaping collective political action and redefining the contours of the subaltern.

BACKGROUND

The Matua Dharma, a reformist sect of the Namasudras, was founded by Harichand Thakur and institutionalised by his son Guruchand Thakur in 1931–32 (Banerjee-Dube, 2010). The Partition disoriented the Namasudra movement, and the early post-independence revival efforts by P. R. Thakur, the first Sanghadhipati, faced setbacks due to a leadership conflict. In 1983, Baroma Binapani Devi, the wife of P. R. Thakur proposed renaming the organisation, which was officially adopted as the Matua Mahasangha in 1986. Since then, the Mahasangha has revitalised its mission of propagating the teachings of Harichand-Guruchand among dispersed Namasudra populations across India. Its primary mobilising space remains the Harimandir, where dals (devotional groups) conduct kirtans and community meetings under local leaders

(Dalapathi/Dalanetri), all affiliated with the Mahasangha. (Sinharay, 2022)

The organisation's activism champions an independent Dalit religious identity that is clearly demarcated from upper-caste Hindu practices. It rejects Brahminical rituals and prescribes different customs through printed booklets, aiming to reclaim Matua Dharma as a non-Hindu egalitarian order. The Matua literature, such as Harililamrito and Guruchandcharit, is a political tool for the articulation of caste oppression and the assertion of Harichand-Guruchand as counter-elite reformers. Contemporary Dalit writers increasingly invoke Matua philosophy within the broader framework of Dalit assertion. In 2009, one issue of Chaturtha Duniya was devoted to "Matua Dharma O Darshan."

The Matua Mahasangha regained political significance in the 1990s and began organising mass meetings, providing community services, and protesting against minority persecution in Bangladesh. Despite limited political success at the formal electoral level, it has continuously influenced the electoral politics of Matua-dominated constituencies in Maharashtra. The mobilising ability of the organisation was reflected in such areas as Bagda, Bongaon, and Gaighata during the 2009 general elections, which forced mainstream parties to adopt a 'politics of compensation' through symbolic recognition and welfare promises. The demand for "Chai nagorikotyo, chai jatipatro" (citizenship and caste certificate) expressed the community's intertwined struggle for recognition, belonging, and representation in 2011 (U.B. Chandra et al., 2015)

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

Presently, the study focuses on the Matua-dominated constituencies of North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts of West Bengal, where the Matua community forms over 40 percent of the population. (Figure 1) The Bongaon sub-division of North 24 Parganas, along with the adjoining areas of Nadia, has traditionally constituted the social, cultural, and political hub of the community. The area includes 19 ACs, namely Bagda, Bongaon North, Bongaon South, Gaighata, Swarupnagar, Habra, and Chakdaha, which together constitute the core of the Matua influence. The electoral results of the two districts were directly or indirectly influenced by approximately three million Matua voters.

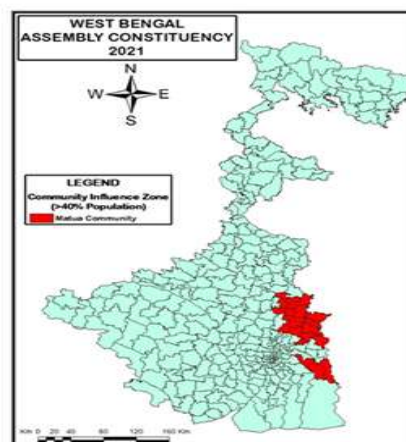


Figure 1

The selection of these constituencies for detailed investigation involves: (i) an extensive literature survey on the socio-political history of the community; (ii) analysis of voter lists and candidate profiles in Assembly Elections from 2006 to 2021; (iii) demographic insights from District Census Handbooks and Scheduled Caste population data in the 1931, 1961, and 2001 censuses, with particular reference to the SC-14 Report on Scheduled Caste populations by religion; (iv) field discussions with local community leaders; and (v) media reports from CNN-IBN, News18 India, and ABP News. The spatial distribution of Hari Mandirs, the pivot of the religious life of the Matua, has also been examined to identify the geographic boundary of the community's influence zone. Therefore, this would be a multi-source approach to identify the Matua-dominated electoral landscape in southern Bengal with precision.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study's primary objective is to analyse the complex relationship between ethnic identity and voting behaviour among the Matua community, a socio-religious minority historically subjected to social marginalisation in West Bengal. This study seeks to understand how the Matua community's ethnic and religious identity influences their electoral choices, political alignment, and patterns of democratic participation. Additionally, it aims to investigate the extent to which political parties instrumentalise Matua identity in their electoral strategies and how such strategies affect vote share, candidate preferences, and long-term political mobilisation within the community.

A mixed-methods research design was employed to achieve these objectives, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component primarily draws on secondary electoral data obtained from the Chief Electoral Officer, West Bengal (<https://ceowestbengal.nic.in>) and the Election Commission of India (<https://www.eci.gov.in>). These data form the empirical foundation for analysing the spatial and temporal patterns of voting behaviour across Matua-dominated constituencies during the 2011, 2016, and 2021 Assembly Elections. Statistical and spatial analysis techniques were employed to trace variations in vote share, party performance, and shifts in electoral dominance over time.

The qualitative dimension of the study is based on an extensive primary survey conducted among Matua community members, political activists, and local leaders in Matua-influenced constituencies. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to gather insights into community perceptions, historical grievances, and the evolving role of ethnicity in political decision-making. This study pays particular attention to factors such as economic deprivation, developmental expectations, social stratification, and cultural identity, which have collectively shaped patterns of political engagement and vote shifting.

To complement these findings, a detailed literature review was conducted to situate the analysis within the broader theoretical frameworks of ethnicity, caste politics, and religious mobilisation in India. In addition, political party manifestos, news media reports, and archival records were systematically examined to assess the strategies adopted by major political parties—such as symbolic inclusion, welfare promises, and cultural representation—to mobilise the Matua electorate.

By integrating quantitative electoral data with qualitative narratives and documentary evidence, this study adopts a comprehensive methodological framework that allows for nuanced understanding of the interplay between ethnicity, political strategy, and electoral outcomes within the Matua community of West Bengal.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Ethnic Voting Patterns

The Matua community is a historically marginalised socio-religious group of Dalit refugees who have grown to be the deciding factor in the electoral results of West Bengal.

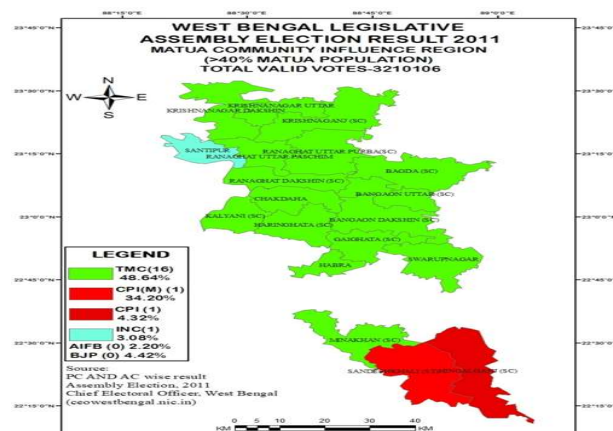


Figure 2

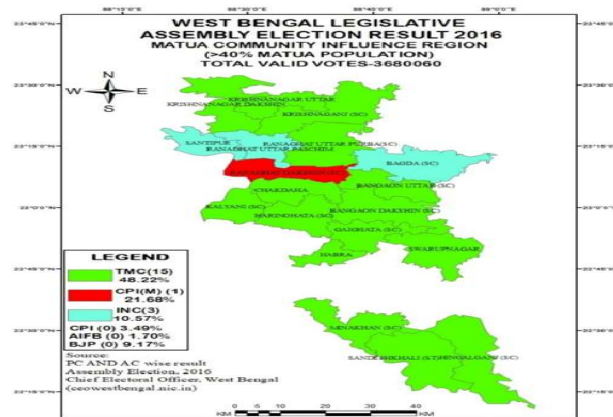


Figure 3

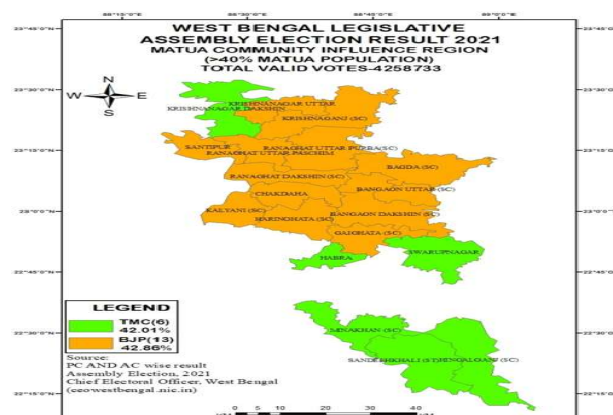


Figure 4

Their political journey represents an intersection of ethnic identity, refugee consciousness and developmental aspirations. The evolution of Matua voting behaviour underlines the way in which the articulation of citizenship, welfare, and cultural belonging becomes a focal point in the political strategies of competing parties across the varied electoral landscape of the state. (A. Guha, 2022)

The TMC emerged as the strongest political force in all Matua-dominated constituencies during the 2011 West Bengal Legislative Assembly Election. The party won 16 out of 19 seats, having received 48.64 % of the votes, indicating a massive transfer of leftist votes to the TMC. The CPI(M) and CPI won one seat each, securing 34.20 % and 4.32 % of the votes, respectively, while the Indian National Congress won one seat with 3.08 % vote share. The TMC's ascendancy in this phase is attributed to its political rhetoric on refugee rehabilitation and inclusive development, which matched the long-awaited demand for social justice and citizenship recognition by the Matua. Welfare initiatives, in addition to symbolic outreach towards Matua religious institutions, reinforced this alignment (Figure 2).

By the time of the 2016 assembly elections, the TMC continued its dominance but confronted increasing obstacles in retaining its distinctive hold on Matua voters. The TMC captured 15 constituencies with 48.22 %, while CPI(M) and Congress made some profits by capturing one seat with 21.68 % and three seats (10.57 %) (Figure 3). This modest dent in the TMC's vote share displays the developing frustration that the promise of regularisation of citizenship and monetary mobility remains unfulfilled. Despite the decrease, caste and refugee agencies continue to benefit from the TMC's social welfare applications, along with Kanyashree, Sabuj Sathi, and Housing Assistance. However, sections of the Matua populace began to express doubts about the party's ability to institutionalise their criminal and political inclusion.

However, in the 2021 Assembly Election, the Matua vote base underwent a significant realignment, casting BJP as a serious competitor. The BJP's strategic invocation of the CAA framed the question of refugee identity as a national one and, therefore, found significant resonance among the Matuas, who have always eyed permanent citizenship recognition. In the same election, the BJP secured 13 constituencies with 42.86 %, while the TMC's share decreased to six seats with 42.01 % of the votes (Figure 4). This electorally transformed constituency indicates the evolution of ethnic mobilisation from a welfare-based to a citizenship-based one, as the BJP successfully embedded refugee identity within its wider narrative of religious and national belonging. However, the possible exclusionary implications of the NRC made people cautious about unconditional support. Overall, the electoral behaviour of the Matua community moved from a cohesive voting bloc for the TMC to a politically contested and polarised electorate, the latter responsive to both symbolic recognition and material guarantee. This transformation underlines the intersection of ethnicity, refugee status, and political representation in producing a volatile yet strategically significant pattern of voting in contemporary West Bengal.

Strategies of Political Parties

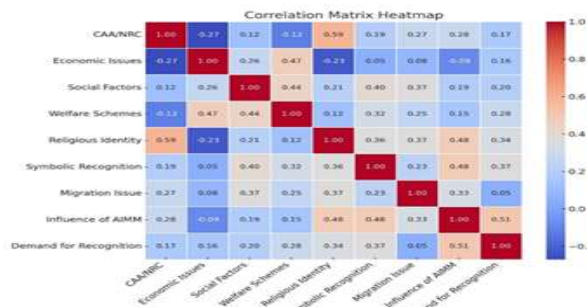


Figure 5

Figure 5 shows a correlation matrix heatmap of key variables in the Matua community: CAA/NRC, economic issues, social factors, welfare schemes, religious identity, symbolic recognition, migration issues, and the influence of AIMM and demand for recognition. The highest positive correlation (0.589) is observed between religious identity and CAA/NRC, indicating that citizenship policies are closely associated with religious and ethnic identity. The positive correlation with migration issues (0.268) reflects their historical migration from Bangladesh and the salience of migration discourse in their political engagement. On the other hand, the negative correlation between economic issues and CAA/NRC is -0.271, indicating that identity-based concerns are far greater than purely economic ones in shaping their political attitudes.

Economic issues and welfare schemes fall in the moderately positive range (0.473), indicating that welfare policies contribute to the community's material well-being, while remaining distinct from religious mobilisation. Religious identity is strongly related to both symbolic recognition (0.360) and the demand for recognition (0.337), which means that a spiritual and cultural identity underpins political claims for recognition. Finally, the strong correlation between religious identity and the influence of AIMM (0.479) underlines the position of religious leaders as intermediaries. For this reason, political parties reach out to these figures using symbolic gestures, such as attending Matua festivals or naming institutions, to attract ethnic solidarity.

The positive linkage between welfare schemes and the AIMM influence is 0.512, underlining that religious leadership converts demands for recognition into concrete political mobilisation. While the BJP sells the narrative of the CAA/NRC as an assurance of citizenship rights to Matuas, the TMC focuses on inclusive welfare and critiques exclusionary policies. The Congress and the Left stress socio-economic equity while warning against divisive identity politics. Finally, the data indicate that religious identity, along with migration, recognition, and symbolic representation, remains the fundamental axis of the Matua's political mobilisation, supported but not replaced by welfare-driven appeals.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.703
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	263.523
	df	36
	Sig.	0

In West Bengal, the Matua community is a sizeable constituency, and political parties have attempted to woo it by making appeals along the axes of ethnicity, religion and welfare. From Table 2, we find nine significant factors that shape Matua political behaviour. I) Component One: Citizenship has implications for the CAA and NRC, both of which are considered very important to refugee-origin Matuas in their search for legal recognition and security. II) Component Two is composed of a single item representing the economic interests of the respondent: promises of jobs and alleviation of poverty attract voters. III) Component Three is social justice: the allocation of resources, legal protection, and equality are the drivers for aligning with a party that promotes anti-discriminatory policies. IV) Component Four represents welfare schemes: a set of questions that captures what people feel about how welfare schemes are reaching them. V) Component Five is an ethno-religious identity factor: candidates from a similar cultural or religious background as the Matuas are at an electoral advantage. VI) Component Six is symbolic recognition: religious and cultural affirmation. VII) Component Seven is migration: a diachronic theme in history and politics. VIII) Component Eight is religious consolidation through the AIMM, and IX) Component Nine is cultural recognition.

Table 2: Total Variance Explained

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	3.048	33.867	33.867	2.575	28.61	28.61	2.077
2	1.897	21.076	54.943	1.416	15.731	44.34	1.742
3	1.086	12.066	67.009	0.618	6.872	51.212	1.864
4	0.706	7.844	74.853				
5	0.664	7.375	82.229				
6	0.508	5.64	87.869				
7	0.464	5.157	93.026				
8	0.319	3.541	96.567				
9	0.309	3.433	100				
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.							
a. When factors are correlated, the sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain the total variance.							

From Table 1, statistical tests confirm data robustness for factor analysis: KMO = 0.703; Bartlett's Test $\chi^2 = 263.523$, $p < 0.001$. Thus, the first three components explained 67.009 % of the total variance, showing strong explanatory adequacy. (Figure 6) Both TMC and BJP have invested heavily in addressing Matua concerns: BJP foregrounds citizenship rights under the CAA, while TMC focuses on welfare-based development and inclusivity. This represents a competition in the deepening bipolarity of West Bengal politics, traditionally dominated first by the Left and then by the TMC. Increasing ethnic and caste-based mobilisation engenders greater political polarisation, creating a contested landscape wherein identity politics increasingly influence both electoral behaviour and policy discourse.

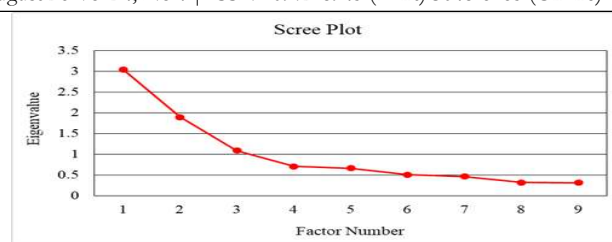


Figure 6

CONCLUSION

This study engages with the intersectionality of ethnic identity and electoral behaviour in West Bengal's Matua community and charts a significant political transformation from a consolidated support base for the TMC to one that is contested, with the BJP emerging as a leading player. At the centre of this transformation is a contestation over the Citizenship Amendment Act and refugee rights, which reshapes the community's notions of citizenship, security, and belonging. The findings underline that ethnic consciousness, religious symbolism, and welfare concerns underpin voting behaviour, thereby illustrating how identity politics can reconstitute electoral alliances. Political parties must, therefore, transcend mere short-term mobilisation strategies and assume an inclusive and development-oriented approach to cater to the socio-economic and cultural aspirations of marginalised groups such as the Matuas. Such a course might help ensure more sustainable engagement and reduce the polarisation. Further research should be extended to other marginalised communities to understand how identity-driven politics plays out in governance and policy formation in West Bengal.

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