

Matua Women: Understanding Their Position in Bengal

(1990-2011)

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Abstract:

After 1990, Matuas religion became one of the most significant face of the Dalit movement in Bengal Their movements for constitutional rights and social justice has taken the Dalit movement in Bengal towards a new direction. From this era, the leadership of Matuas was transferred to an institution called 'Matua Mahasangha'. At this time Power transfer from the individual to the organization and Binapani Thakur led the movement. She was first Matua women leader in independent India. Therefore, in spite of it being an important event in the rise of women, the position of Matua women was different in the society as a whole. In this case, the women of Matua society were not held back either. Issues like women's emancipation and women's rights have come up as important topics of discussion in the lower caste Matua society. The present article discusses the position of women within the Matua's religious philosophy, their status within family, their constitutional rights and benefits and their socio-economic position. Above all, the position of Matua women in the political sphere of Bengal has also been analyzed by discussing the aforementioned issues.

Introduction:

Women's rights have become an important issue worldwide and are not only limited to India. Rights are being undermined worldwide with different rising arguments against them. India, renowned for being the biggest democracy in the world, deprives the fundamental right of equality, to the women. United Nations, in their journals on Female Rights, has described women as the largest outcasts of the society.¹ Usha Narayan argues that in the case of protecting Women's rights, the first and foremost step should be introducing women to Politics and increased participation in it.²

However, there are issues like ethnic background and refugee identity that need attention while talking about the position of lower-caster Matua women of Bengal. Naturally, the process of upward mobility or awakening of upper-caste women is very different from that of lower-caste Matua women. Their socio-economic and political position is utterly frustrating. It is because majority of the Matua population is poor and lower-caste. Urbashi Butalia, in her book, has shown that the role of women during partition has always been overlooked.³ Here, she used the term 'women' in a broader sense. Hence, a question arises. What was the position of lower-caste, poor, backward women in the partition? The current paper discusses the position of Matua women in society, their role and power inside their community, and their connection with modern politics, by analyzing the survey reports undertaken upon the social and political position of these women.

In Indian society, the constitution is meant to protect the rights of lower caste women. But, the important thing is that despite so many ventures, the position of women did not alter much. Issues like economic inequality, social status, ethnic identity, religious values are some of the rising questions revolving around women's rights. From July 1947 to mid-1951, women in the Telangana Peasant Revolt demonstrated extraordinary skill and courage.⁴ In 1972 under the leadership of Sundarlal Bahuguna in the Garowal district of Uttar Pradesh, the women of the Tehri Hills formed the Chipak movement.⁵ In 1973, women joined a joint committee to protest the massive price hike caused by drought and famine in large parts of Maharashtra.⁶ Women also participated extensively in the Navnirman movement in Gujarat. The uneducated tribal women overwhelmingly supported the anti-corruption movement in Bihar, under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan. It is true that in an independent India, a secular democratic constitution sought to establish gender equality. But it was the upper-class women who benefited from

the feminist ideas and the rural and lower-middle-class women were left out.⁷ For most of the Hindu lower caste women, human rights are still some unachievable dreams.

In the post-independence period, no political party took any efforts to help women's participation in politics. However, at that time, it was necessary to shift from movement-based politics to parliamentary politics. The five-year plan started with the idea of collective development, then took the course of development for women. The need to institutionally involve women in rural development was highlighted in the Women's Status Committee in 1974.⁸ A report on women's status, *Towards Equality*, published in December 1974, stated that women's participation in the political process was not as great as expected.⁹ Thus, this dearth of political power and status among women gradually increased, and created a vacuum in the political arena. The committee recommended a number of solutions - quotas for women candidates in political parties, women-only Panchayat as a temporary measure, and setting aside seats for women in the Municipality Council.¹⁰

The Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women (2006) report highlighted. a number of issues or problems related to Dalit or lower caste women in the essay "Status of Dalit Women in India" -

“Dalit women in South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh) face systematic and structural discrimination thrice over as Dalit, as women, and as poor.

The caste system declares Dalit women as impure and untouchables. Most of them work as manual scavengers, landless agricultural laborers, domestic helpers, and casual laborers. They are ill-paid, illiterate, and chronically suffer from various health problems.

Dalit women earn for their families, but they have no control over their earnings. They have to do household chores along with other menial works and also face domestic violence.

Due to the patriarchal notion of community honor residing within women, the dominant castes often abuse or punish Dalit women to teach the entire Dalit community a good lesson.

Dalit women face abuses like verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape.

Dalit women are vulnerable everywhere, both in public as well as private places. Violence against Dalit women not only take place within their households but also in public places like temples, streets, fields, workplace, schools, and so on. Violence against Dalit women in public places is used as a means of social control.

Dalit women are poorly represented in the Parliament.”¹¹

However, nowhere in these highlighted issues, the Dalit women are addressed as activists or leaders of the Dalit Movement. Dr. B R Ambedkar preached in support of overall development and increased participation among women and argued that it would be the way of annihilating the caste-based discrimination in India.¹² Vimal Thorat says, After Independence, neither the women organizations nor Dalit activists addressed the caste and gender intersectionality".¹³ Gradually the Dalit movement became full-fledged and started addressing women as a unique entity.¹⁴ Hemlata Swarup says "Women's lives in India and the world over are circumscribed by what can be termed as five 'P's: Patriarchy, Productive resources access inadequacy, Poverty, Promotion advancement insufficiency and Powerlessness".¹⁵ Since 1980, the ethnic identity of women in India started playing a specific role in Politics, Sociology, and in stages of Feminism. Again, this Feminism has two different angles – 1. Savarna (upper-class women) and 2. Asavarna (lower-caste women).

The Asavarna women took inspiration for their movements from Phule and Ambedkar's mantra of “educate, organize and agitate”.¹⁶ Dalit Women's Organization was formed in Maharashtra around 1980. In 1990, Dalit Women's Literary Organization ‘*Sammadhini Dalit Shtri Sahitya Mancha*’ was formed. After 1995, various Dalit women's organizations were set which began working on the advancement and empowerment of women. These include The National Federation of Dalit Women, All India Dalit Women Forum, Maharashtra Dalit Women's Organization, etc. In 2003, “*Bahujaan Mahila Bicharmancha*” formed a massive movement against Manusmriti and revived the Ambedkarite Feminist Movement.¹⁷

Constitutional Rights and Dalit Women in India :

To protect women's rights in socio-economic and political spheres, the Indian Constitution provides women with a range of constitutional rights. The constitution has agreed upon the equality of men and women as well as has granted women with a few special rights in need. The constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14) and no discrimination by the state (Article 15(1)). It allows special provisions to be made by the State in favor of women and children (Article 15(3)).¹⁸ It ensures equal opportunity at the workplace (Article 16(2)), the prohibition of forced labor (Article 23(1)), the right to an adequate means to livelihood (Article 39a), equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39d)¹⁹, secures that women's health and strength are not abused and that they are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength (Article 39e). It also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief. (Article 42). Besides, it renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)). Article 243D-(4) states that not less than one-third of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women and Article states that not less than one-third of the total number of officers of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level shall be reserved for women as well. In the case of Municipality elections, a minimum of one-third of the total seats are reserved for women as well (Article 243T-3)²⁰ and it also states that the offices of Chairpersons in the Municipalities for women in such a manner as the legislature of a State may, by law, provide (Article 243T-4). Though, such extensive provisions for women are made by the Indian constitution, in reality, the rights of women are degraded and declined in every possible sphere. In such a situation, we can only assume the miserable condition of lower-caste women in the society.

73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution (1992) ensured that a minimum of one-third of the total seats in Panchayats and Municipalities will be reserved for Scheduled Castes. Later, the idea of reserving 33% of seats in the Parliament and in the State Legislatures for women was also proposed. The bill passed in Rajya Sabha on 9th March 2010, but has been stuck in the lower house since then. Samajwaadi Party and Mayabati did not support the bill as they asked for sub-reservation for Dalit women. Later, in the event of changed Government, Minister of Minority Affairs, Nazma Heptullah said, "It is the will of the men in Parliament and not the women which are required to pass these Bills."²¹

Although the Indian Constitution speaks of equality, the political participation and representation of women in the Rajya Sabha, Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assembly, and Panchayat is not adequate. In India, in 1977, the Ashok Mehta Committee for the Review of the Panchayat System of India gave priority to the inclusion of women in rural development.²² In 1988, the National Perspective Plan for Women raised the issue of protection of women in panchayats. The plan calls for the reservation of 30 percent seats for women in panchayats, district councils, and municipalities.²³ In the 1970s and 80s, the leftist women's movement was formed to defend social rights and justice. One noteworthy thing among all these is, women of upper caste people and women from families with Political backgrounds benefitted sufficiently from these plans, and their participation and active leadership in Indian politics increased significantly. However, the scenario was not the same when they came to lower caste women.²⁴ Naturally, the issue of active women participants in the larger political field was not holistic or inclusive. Much later, from the 80s, different political parties started including issues regarding women's rights in their Election Manifestos.²⁵

Based on the National Perspective Plan for Women and the report of the Ashok Mehta Committee, the Government of India adopted a policy of protection of women's rights in politics in the late eighties. In 1985, the Karnataka government reserved 20 percent seats in Panchayats for women for the first time.²⁶ In 1989, the 64th Amendment to the Constitution introduced the bill for the reservation of 30 percent seats for women, but the bill was not passed in Parliament. In 1992, the 72-73rd amendment to the constitution brought about a crucial change in the panchayat system. In 1993, with the support of all the states in the country, the ratio of men and women in panchayats and the entire administration was increased to one-third.²⁷ As a result, the direct participation of about 10 lakh women in the administration was secured. At all three levels of the panchayat system, seats are reserved for women as well as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Since the 1993 panchayat elections, the number of women's seats has exceeded 33 percent in some places. In 2005, for the first time, the Bihar government reserved 50 percent seats in panchayats for women. Later, the UPA government enacted a law reserving 50 percent seats

in the panchayat for women. But the issue of reserving 33 percent seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies has been debated since. Although the issue of reservation of seats for women was raised in the 81st Amendment to the Constitution in 1986, it was rejected. Again it was raised in the amendment of the constitution in 1998. But the bill was passed on March 8, 2010.²⁸

Post-independence, women in India, especially upper-class women profited from these constitutional rights. However, the scenario among the lower-caste women was not so special. The life conditions of lower-caste Matua women continued to be miserable. The Matua community further suffered for their dire economic condition as well as for the inadequacy of literacy among them. Though, the socio-economic and political situation improved for the Matua community since Independence, the rate of literacy and the upward economic mobility of women was much lower than that of men. The literacy rate is 69.43%. The population of children of 0 to 6 years old is 11.91% of the total population and there are 945 females per 1000 males creating a huge gender gap.

Although the largest proportion of Matua women are within the Namashudra society, the presence of Matua women can be observed in all the castes of the lower caste society. In this present research, statistics of Matua women belonging to the respective castes, have been evaluated.

Though ideologically Matuas lay their belief in the overall progress and independence of women, in reality, the place of women within the Matua community is somewhat different because of their underdeveloped social status and lack of education. Within the Matuas, the positions and social status of women are as equal to as of men and women, usually, do not have any separate social or religious obligations. Matuas preach in support of gender equality as they believe that the overall development of a community is impossible if they abandon half the population, i.e., women in that process. Thus, the three major religious texts of Matuas speak in favor of gender equality. Guruchand Thakur established a school for women for their educational development and spoke of their overall improvement of living quality. Their conditions, however, became more grave once they arrived in this country during partition. In India, Pramath Chand Thakur established schools to educate women. There are three reasons behind the change or consciousness that has arisen among the Matua women in West Bengal since 1947. First, the present Matua sentiment supports the freedom of women; second, improvement in overall education, and third, beneficial provisions provided by the Constitution.

Women in Matua Philosophy:

Matua philosophy states in favor of gender equality as it forbids to neglect women and states that men and women have equal parts and importance in domestic life as well as in the social one and preaches about an integrated and balanced lifestyle between them. Harichand Thakur has expressed his views on this. Within Matua's ideology, it is precisely said: *Koribe Grihastha Dharma Loye Nijo Naari* (Perform all religious practices with your own wife). It also states that – *Ek Naari Bramhachari, Byatikrame Swechhachari* (Living with more than one woman is perverseness).²⁹

Guruchand Thakur, son of Sree Harichand Thakur said:

“Sunechhi Pitaar Kachhe Ami Bohubaar,
Nari o Purush Paabe Sama Adhikar.
Samaaj e Purush Pabe Jei Adhikaar,
Naari o Paibe Taha Korile Bichar.”³⁰

(I have heard from my father Men and women will have equal rights The rights that a man has in society
A woman should have the same if you think)

Hari Leelamrita book also states the same.

‘Meyera Purusha Bosi Akpate Khay
Meyeder Eto Khay Pododhula Loy
Purush Dholiya Pore Meyeder Pay.’³¹

(Men and women seat and eat their meal together They bow down to women and eat their orts

Men lie down at the feet of women in respect).

The value of education in a society and culture can be determined by finding out whether women have been brought under the purview of education. It also helps to identify how much, men have been able to control their selfishness, their self-centeredness, absolute power-hunger, and aggressive domination that is deeply rooted in their mind by realizing how much acceptance has been given to the right of women and how far their opinion is valued in the subject of marriage, family, and religion.³² The lack of sympathy and inhumane condition of widows troubled Guruchand Thakur deeply. He was intensely interested in women's education system, their decency, the craftsmanship, the skills of women in the art and culture, and even in their daily lifestyles. In those days, he started the *Nari Jagran Nari Pragati* movement by strongly asking for the freedom of women to participate in public life and to improve women's place in society for the betterment of society. Keeping in mind the Matua ideology of his father, Guruchand Thakur gave respect and value to women in all spheres in the Matua movement. His conscientious humanity surrounded him. He said that issues like illiteracy and superstition of the neglected backward women should be taken seriously.

At the root of the change in the cultural consciousness of the twentieth century is the change in the way of family and domestic life. During this time, the spirit of the emancipation of women has dissipated all over the world. In the substantial world outside of domestic life, men, as well as women have entered the life of active participation. Therefore, to make women equal in society and the world, we need a suitable education system based on cooperation. In the mock trial designed by Harichand Thakur to give justice against the oppressive zamindars (land-owner), he gave the role of judge, lawyer, and other associates to some and punished the zamindar.³³

Later, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur kept the trend of the progress of women Alive and intact. In 1339 BS, 24th Ashwin (1932 AD) formed *Harichand Guruchand Mission*.³⁴ In his speech, president Pramatha Ranjan Thakur said, "If an institution is to be established, then it is necessary to keep in touch with the civilization of the country. Otherwise, no organization can perform their duties properly. A new epoch has come into the country with time. In this age, the path of progress is through education and financial development. These two aspects are always necessary for every household. So the purpose of our community will be to educate every child regardless of their gender. The need for women's education has now become more pertinent. We need to concentrate on that. If there is an educated and intelligent wife in the family, the overall well-being of the family will be improved. Even if all the men in a family are educated, that is not possible or cannot be achieved. A woman improves her household tenfold when she is educated and intelligent". He also said, "We have to promise that we will not marry a girl at an early age. Child marriage is a common practice and it is the explanation behind the increased number of child widows. Once child marriage is prohibited, the number of widows will also decrease".³⁵

The 1911 census report shows that 22 percent of the Namasudras between the ages of 5 and 12 are married or widowed which is more than the upper castes.³⁶ CS Mid, a contemporary Australian pastor of Guruchand Thakur, in his book *The Namahsudra in Bengal* (1911), says that Namasudra women have extraordinary power. They are strong and hardworking.³⁷ Guruchand Thakur has given importance to this section of the society. For the advancement of this backward nation, women's education, sympathy for widows, education of orphans, and poor women were sufficiently sensitive. Guruchand Tagore was the guide in women's education in the lower caste society. He had set up the first school in his house. He worked for providing education to lower-caste poor women for the overall development of his community and also worked to relieve the suffering of widows. He built a school for girls in his own house –

*"naari shiksha tore prabhu apan alay
shanti satyavama naame school gore daye"*³⁸

(The leader has built Shanti Satyavama School for the purpose of educating women).

On 10th March 1907, Guruchand Thakur submitted an official written statement pleading for the education of lower-castes to the British Government.³⁹ Later, Pramath Chand Thakur accentuated the need for women's education keeping in mind the objectives of his predecessors. He emphasized the improvement of men as well as women in the field of education. He established a school for the education of girls in Thakurnagar. Matua women, like women in other parts of the society, were socially deprived as they had no power or opportunity. However,

the situation of Matua women arriving in India east Pakistan has changed a lot. In this case, the opportunity provided by the constitution has proven to be significant. Another crucial thing is the issue of social hierarchy. In east Pakistan, their social destitution was much worse because of their inferior position in the social hierarchy. However, this situation in India has improved, albeit slightly.

Matua idealist women are known as Matua-Mata or Maa Gonsai (mother of Matuas) inside the community. In the case of spirituality, matua women have the same rights as matua men. The main traits of the Matua community are *gamchha* (cotton towels) and *aichar mala** (a string of beads). The common women of the Matua community as well as the *maa-gonsais* are allowed to use *gamchha* and *aichar mala* at places of worship. Above all, the women can perform all kinds of social and religious events following the rules and regulations of the Matua religion without any obstruction.

In the history of the Matua religious movement, we get the name of the contemporary devotees of Guruchand Thakur. The name of those religious preachers are – *dwadosh rudra*, *baish bramhachari*, *choushatti mahajan*, *chourish sadhika*, and *batrish dhali*. The women who took major role inside the circle of Guruchand are - *Kusum*, *Bou Thakurani*, *Rasamati*, *Pramila*, *Ful mala Devi*, *Dariar kanya*, *Elakeshi Tapati or Tota Savitri*, *Kanchan*, *Shanti Binodini*, *Bhagwati*, *Kailasamoni*, *Saraswati*, or *Gadhuli Hat Bari (wife of Guru Bardhali) Lal Moti*, *Jaymati*, *Manmati*, *Ambika Devi*, *Bilasini*, *Janaki*, *Pagli Das*, *Kanya Birja*, *Radhamani*, *Sadhana*, *Prabhati*, *Padma Thakurani*, *Ratan*, *Mani*, *Sadhana*, *Manabendrer Janani*. These are the leading thirty-four female devotees who worked alongside Guruchand.⁴⁰ They are mentioned as chourish gopi (thirty-four female guardians). In *the book of Guruchand Charit* –

“ Chourish se Gopi Jaani Braja Gopi Roye ”.⁴¹

(Those thirty-four women are the holy belles of their village)*

The effective role of women in the Matua society is especially evident in the Matua religion as both men and women were equally qualified to participate in the Matua religion and Hariguru Chand was very liberal in this regard. The tradition of accepting men and women as equal is still accepted and practiced in Matua religion. Recently, in a lecture, Binapani Debi addressed this issue saying, women around the world should contribute equally with men in work, life, and religion, and asked the Matua women to take active roles.⁴²

The issue of gender equality is addressed in the text *Guruchand Charitra Sudha* while describing a meeting :

“ He re Matua Gaane Anandita Sarbajane

Naam Rase Roilo Magan

Nara-naari Sabe Mili, Koritechhe Premakeli

Ankhi Jaale Vesechhe Badan”.⁴³

- “Nare Bole Hari Hari, Uludhoni Kore Naari

Dhan-Durba Keho Shire Dey.”⁴⁴

(Every matua is happy now They are immersed in the name of God Men and women are singing song With tears of joy in their eyes. Men are repeating the name of God Women are making ululating sounds of festivity and a few are spreading dhaan-durba).*

The people of the lower caste Namashudra society within the Matua society had outstanding skills in literature and music. Women also participated independently, especially as *kabiyals* and musicians. In post-independence India, some eminent female kabiyals are Mrs. Sandhya Sarkar, Mrs. Uma Sarkar, Mrs. Mira Sarkar Bishakha Biswas, Pipasa Gain, and others.

Social Status of Matua Women :

Surveys on Matua Women show that the social position of these women changed dramatically since they became refugees in and around 1950. However, these changes refer to the change of economic growth of their families which was influenced by the occupation of the head of their family. But in the case of women empowerment or their development or emancipation, nothing changed whatsoever. The *Shanti Satyavama Samiti* was formed on 5th December 1990 with the undertakings of Akshay Chandra Kanjilal with the intention of protecting women's rights.⁴⁵ Since then, it has been a standing committee of Matua Mahasangha. The 28th Annual Conference of the Matua Mahasangha in 2012 called for more representation from enlightened and informed women and asked for their active participation in this committee.⁴⁶ Though Matua Ideology and their religious philosophy give the right of equality to men and women, in reality, the social situation of women is much more difficult due to various important factors like ethnic discrimination, refugee status, lack of access to education, economic vulnerability, child marriage, lack of literacy in the previous generation, and psychology of inferiority.

Because of their refugee identity, they were being subjected to racial discrimination and as a part of a lower-caste community, those discriminations affected them deeply. Though constitutional rights and Matua movements and their rapidly evolving social status enabled them to overcome this discrimination, in reality, the tradition of discrimination is still very much alive. According to the report of eminent economist Amartya Sen's *Pratichi Trust*, even in the first decade of the 21st century, due to their lower caste identity, they were forced to sit outside the classroom in schools in several districts of Bengal.⁴⁷

Being refugees, they did not have any permanent place to stay in the first place and roamed frequently from one place to another and the issue of women's education was not given any importance at this stage. As a result, they failed to build a strong women's organization. Access to school or the ability to receive an education was not easy with their refugee female identity which caused their lack of literacy during post-independence India. In this present time, they received the benefits of a more preferable schooling system, decreased racial discrimination, and various constitution rights and quotas. Though their conditions have certainly improved, that is not either inclusive or extensive.

Economic Condition of Matua Women:

The economic condition of these women was awful and miserable. Their economic condition was determined by the economic status of the head of their family. The women of the house usually devoted themselves to household chores. Few women engaged in work outside their households to improve their economic stability. In his book, *Itibrittey Chandal Jiban* (Priyashilpa Prakashan, 2013), the eminent Dalit writer Manaranjan Byapari gave a vivid description of the inside life of such women while describing his mother who often did not have minimal essential clothing due to their financial distress and would not go out until it was dark and would stay at the darkest corner of their house during the day wrapping old, torn mosquito net.⁴⁸ Refugee lower caste Matua women often took part in agriculture and provided their labor in crop production of their own family. After migrating to this country, they started working at other people's farming as well. Very few women went to urban areas in search of jobs and most of them worked as maids or worked at factories.

Though the financial condition of these women is improving, the process is still very slow. Women are still thought to be the ideal housewives. However, most of the married women are now involved in some kind of jobs earning money. The jobs include sewing, knitting, preparing garlands, home tutoring, or in some kind of home crafts or cottage industries. Sewing is found to be the most popular job among these women so far. The current surveyed 309 women aging across 18 to 85. 185 of these women are housewives; 3 women work at Government jobs and 23 of them work in Private jobs. 61 of them are involved in farming and all of them work on their own agricultural land. Rest 38 women are into some kind of business.

Results of the Survey:

In India, the total Scheduled Caste population (2011 census) is 201378372 of which the population of males is 103535314 and the female is 97843058. The population of SC children aged between 0 to 6 is 14.5% of the total. The literacy rate is 66.97%. In terms of the gender gap, there are 945 females per 1000 males. The SC population of India is 16.6% of the total population and in West Bengal, the SC population is 23.5%. As found in

the 2011 census, the Population growth rate among them is 1.91% which is comparatively much higher than the average 1.53% growth rate of India.⁴⁹

In this present research of Matua women in Bengal, five villages have been selected. The first reason for choosing these villages is that about one-fourth of the total rural population believes in the Matua ideology. The second reason is that everyone here is from the lower-caste Namashudra. The third reason is that everyone is a refugee.

The villages are - Ambedkar Nagar, Paste Office, Gabardanga, Thana - Habra, District North 24 Parganas. Mavaladanga, Panchayat Dharampur 2, North 24 Parganas, Pin 843249. Chikan Para, Thana - Gaighata, Mahakuma - Bangaon North 24 Parganas, Pin 84326. Village - Shutri, Panchayat - Ichapur 2, Thana Gaighata, North 24 Parganas. Pin-643241 Narayanpur, Block - Karimpur Thana Thanarpara, Sub-Division - Tehatta, Pin-741152.

The survey, conducted on 309 women, took into account the views of women between the ages of 18 and 85. The number of women aged 18 to 30 in the survey is 89. There are 130 women in the age group of 30 to 50 years. The number of women aged 50 to 60 is 58. And 32 women over the age of 60. All they had child marriages. Among women aged 18 to 30, 10.68 percent are unmarried and 6.79 percent are female graduates. 2.26 percent of women are studying for MA or have finished their studies. 21.6 percent of women are involved in agriculture. 59.54 percent of women are involved in domestic work. 1.24 percent of women are involved in government work. 12.29 percent of women are involved in the business. 6.47 percent of women are involved in some form of production. 91 percent of women over the age of 50 are illiterate and most of them (around 85 percent) had child marriages. Among those who are literates, 30 percent of them took part in the Indian government's literacy campaign.

Political participation and women

Participation in politics indicates the direction of human empowerment and certainly, it is an important issue. "Research in participation and empowerment links them bi-directionally, empowered individuals may be more likely to participate in organizations, and participation promotes empowerment".⁵⁰ First of all, let's focus on the issue of Political Participation. Different Sociologists have interpreted the issue of people's involvement in politics in different ways. According to McCloskey, the political participation of an individual is indicated by the people who, individually enter the administration and actively or passively participates in the process of electing the Government and in the formulation of general policies.⁵¹ Verba and Nie, on the other hand, defined Political participation as – "Those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take".⁵² Thus, political participation is determined by the voluntary activities by individual citizens intended to influence the government and its policies, directly or indirectly. The people of the modern and powerful state become more aware of political policies and ideals and the majority of the entire population becomes aware of empowerment.

The socio-economic environment will have a direct impact on political participation, socio-economic variables include education, occupation, income, age, caste, religion, sex, family background residence, etc.⁵³

Schonfeld mentioned ten types of activities in the field of political participation given the idea and method of it. Those are – 1) running for or holding public or party office, 2) belonging to a party or political organization, 3) working in an election, 4) attending political meetings and rallies, 5) making a financial contribution to a party or a political organization, 6) contacting public officials, 7) publicly expressing a political opinion in order to convince others, 8) engaging in political discussion, 9) voting and 10) exposing oneself to political stimuli.⁵⁴

M Srinivas argues that the political process tends to strengthen the loyalties of caste, at least in the short run; 'one of the short-term effects of the universal adult franchise is to strengthen caste'⁵⁵ others like K. Gough believe that politics in the modern sense tends to be disruptive of caste.⁵⁶ Politics is a competitive enterprise, its

purpose is the acquisition of power for the realization of certain goals, and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiance in order to mobilize and consolidate the position⁵⁷

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

Binapani Thakur as Religious Reformist and Her Influences:

Pramath Chand Thakur led the Matuas in post-independence India. After his death, his wife Binapani Thakur took the leadership on her hands. So, Matua was a patriarchal community from 1947 to 1990 and became matriarchal since 1990. During this time, the influence of Matuas became widespread and they established their role in Bengal politics significantly. The first women's organization of Matuas was 'Shanti Satyavama Nirvaan Committee' which was formed on 5th December, 1990 at Thakur Bari of Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas. This committee is the largest organization of women inside the community and they take part in every ceremony that is presented by the Thakur Bari. The monthly meeting of this committee is held on the third Wednesday of each month from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. at Thakur Bari. Later, women's committees were formed in different parts of Bengal in the form of the Shanti Satyabhama Committee. This committee is supported by the Matua Mahasangha and more and more women are encouraged to form such committees.

Binapani Thakur (Boro maa), the wife of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, had traveled to various provinces of India to propagate the Matua philosophy. In November- December 1986, she preached Matua Philosophies in Uttar Pradesh. In May 1990, she preached in No. 1, No. 2, and 36 Bengali villages in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh. She also visited Sarguja district and Satana district of Madhya Pradesh to spread Matua ideologies. Binapani Devi, along with the Maha Sanghadhipati of All India Matua Mahasangha Kapil Krishna Thakur visited refugee colonies in Bihar. She arrived in Andaman on 2nd february 1984 and visited Krishnapur Public Sri Sri Hari Temple in Andaman on 3rd February 1984. From there she devoted herself to the preaching of the Matua religion. Then she arrived at Kolkata from Andaman on 23 March 1984. Binapani Devi not only spread the Matua ideology but also arranged five large public rallies in the heart of Kolkata to uphold the rights of the people of the Matua community.

She was not a direct member of any political party. But from the last decade of the twentieth century, she became the chief adviser of Matua votes in Bengal. In order to analyze the political transition of the Matuas as a whole in the post-independence period, an informative discussion of the social position of women within the Matuas and their political transitions was relevant in the present research paper. It must be admitted that the position of the refugee Matua women in the post-independence era has gradually changed but this change is negligible compared to the men. The changes that have taken place among men did not reach women at the same time. The main and important reason behind this problem is the reluctance of male members of society towards daughters or women. The reason for such reluctance is again due to the position in the male-dominated society. The fathers of the family are not as much invested in a daughter as they are in the case of a son which is the root of all problems. The Matua women who want to educate themselves and become independent are being oppressed again by the upper-class Hindus.

The Matua ideology indeed has an important role to play in the awakening or progress that is being observed in Bengal, especially among the lower class Namashudra women. This effect exists even though it is not clearly visible. Due to the full support of the Matua ideology, especially in the matter of political rights of Matua women, the struggle for political rights has turned into a struggle of propagating and implementing the Matua ideology. Through their constitutional rights, the lower class Namasudras in Bengal have been able to enter the field of direct political struggle, but such struggle or political participation does not prove the holistic political consciousness of the Matua women in general. The important thing, in this case, is that lower caste women are mostly relying on men to get their political views. Women are being made to participate in electoral politics only for the purpose of complying with legal obligations. However, it is not true that all of the female politicians are politically unconscious. Although no accurate information can be given in this case, the number of women with independent political consciousness is negligible. Child marriage is the main obstacle to women of Bengal in this case. According to the 1911 census, the report found that 22 percent of the Namashudras between the ages of 5 and 12 were married or widowed and the percentage was higher than the upper caste. Exactly 100 years later, the

situation has remained the same without any changes. 23.8 percent of Namashudra girls are married off before the age of 18 which is higher than the 21 percentage of girls in case of general caste.

After the demise of Boromaa, her daughter-in-law Mamata Bala Thakur was elected from Bangaon Lok Sabha in 2015 election and became the chief advisor and matriarch of Matua community. However, that part is not included as a part of this current research.

Conclusion:

The issue of development or awakening of women inside the Matua community is a continuous process which has just only begun. However, their effort is continuously being disrupted by their financial instability. On the brighter side, cases of sex-selective abortion or female feticide is almost non-existent among Matuas. In all social aspects, the men of the community encourage the presence of women and appreciate it. The essay showed that from the Eighties to this day, the ruling power of the community is in the hands of women which proves that Matuas do not think women as weak and do not objectify them as well. They also, accept the equality of men and women.

The condition of the women of 'babu' or bhadrolok families and the condition of poor Matua women are not the same at all. These lower-caste women are suffering from malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty, and child marriage. During my research, I have experienced many Matua women admitting that they could not afford higher education for their children in spite they strive to educate them properly and they have also acknowledged that they would have sent their children for higher education if they had minimal support or ability to do so. At the same time, I have seen many matua families expending their last resources for their children's education Judging from all the data in the present study, it can be recognized that a small fraction of Matua women is able to make their way in the society through education and economic development but the rest of the women are languishing far behind. Furthermore those who have established themselves independently are again acknowledging oppression by the upper class. Thus, the issue of women's rights for Matua women is complex and the women have only started to fight for it on their own.

Notes:

- *Gopi - A group of female cowherdesses who have religious importance in some religion.
- *Braja - A holy place.
- *Dhan Durba- Type of grass used like confetti in some religious practices.
- *Aichar Mala- Made by coconut shell

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