

Matua Community in West Bengal: Socio-Economic Dimensions and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper discussed the socio-economic conditions of Matua community in West Bengal. It has found that the community of Matuas in West Bengal, mainly consisting of the Scheduled Caste who migrated from Bangladesh, is struggling with socio-economic circumstances characterized by severe poverty, rural isolation, and dependence on farming and daily labour wages. They are in larger numbers in North 24 Parganas and Nadia regions. They still have lack in education and suffer from inequality of income, where most families are earning low income. Although they have seen some success in literacy rates, gender discrimination and quest for citizenship remain prominent factors in their socio-economic life. These challenges are foundational in nature due to their origin being the displacement experienced by them historically, majorly focusing on Citizenship Anxiety Act, socio-economic discrimination, and educational inequalities. Several policies have been launched by the Government of West Bengal to empower the Matua community by helping them socially and economically and educating them and acknowledging their cultural identity.

Keywords: *Citizenship Amendment Act, Harichand Thakur, Matua Community, Scheduled Caste, Welfare, & West Bengal.*

Introduction

The Matua community is a 19th century socio-religious reform movement that began in Orakandi, East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) by Sri Harichand Thakur for the purpose of improving the condition of the marginalised “untouchables” who were part of that society. The Matua community was focused on education, social equality and self-respect and upraise the lower caste Hindus from their caste-based oppression and conversions. The movement began around the 1860’s and provided a means for many of the peasant/lower caste communities, especially in the Orakandi area, to regain their dignity. The Matua community believed strongly in the principle of “Swayam Matua” or “self-empowerment”. As the Matua community began to gain momentum through their social and reform efforts led by Sri Harichand Thakur and then by his son, Guruchand Thakur, the Matua community was able to change from passively suffering oppression to actively asserting themselves by focusing on literacy, and becoming self-sufficient economically. During the partition of India in 1947, many Matuas migrated from East Bengal to India due to the resultant trauma and upheaval caused by the partition; yet a significant number of Matua families remained in Bangladesh. Today the Matua community in Bangladesh (particularly in Barishal) is a unique socio-economic group with many challenges facing them, such as landlessness, minority status, etc., yet they continue to practice their unique spiritual beliefs and traditions. Overall, the Matua Movement has evolved from a purely religious group to one that is very active politically in advocating for the rights of many marginalised groups as well as advocating for the rights of other minority groups.

The Matua community, which is a group of Dalit Hindus from what was once known as West Bengal, began arriving in large groups beginning with the partition of British India in 1947. It is due to the civil strife that plagued Bangladesh after its independence from Pakistan in 1971, mainly because of religious persecution, social discrimination and other factors. They are guided by the teachings of Harichand Thakur, with a head office in Thakurnagar, West Bengal. Their migration to India was mainly motivated by a desire to escape religious and societal oppression in the Bangladesh of the 1940s-1970s (and later) and to achieve political stability and socio-economic status. One of their primary purposes when settling in India was to gain community safety and equality among themselves in their new country (Ahmed, 2024). The general objective of the paper is to explore socio-economic dimensions and challenges of Matua community in West Bengal.

Education and Social Mobility of Matua community

In contemporary society, the principles of educational reforms espoused by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur have facilitated upward social mobility for Matuas by transitioning them from being labourers to teachers, businessmen, and civil servants (Chowdhury 114). The primary emphasis on “education” served as an empowerment tool for the community to take action against upper-caste domination and allowed them to achieve higher levels of literacy, income, and social status. The importance of formal education as highlighted by Guruchand Thakur helped the community to break free from the institutionalised barriers that had historically confined them to traditional occupations based on caste. The encouragement of both skill development and entrepreneurship by the movement contributed to the community gaining access to occupations. The encouragement

of equality through the promotion of an end to caste distinctions within the community provided the opportunity to participate in communities and public life. As a result of these changes, the community has developed a strong sense of unity and a strong identity, making it a politically active group in West Bengal today. The continued legacy of these organisational reforms will continue to serve as the foundation for social equity, education and development within the Matua communities.

There are certain paradoxes in the “refugeehood” process undergone by the Matuas after the Partition. While they had initially been forced to leave their homes, this has resulted in severe economic marginalisation and disruption in their education. Their belief in education for self-help has resulted in the 2nd and 3rd generation Matuas becoming more educated than the other groups under the Scheduled Caste category (Sen 38). The Mahasangha enables youth in border districts of West Bengal to attend school through the establishment of schools and increasing literacy rates of lower caste groups. They provide vocational training to increase their socio-economic well-being. Mahasangha promotes the empowerment of marginalised groups by access to educational opportunities and the documentation they need to qualify for the assistance they need.

Livelihood and Life style of Matua community

Most of the Matua communities of West Bengal live in the bordering districts, among which the highest populations are found in 24 Parganas, Nadia and Jalpaiguri. The main clusters of Matua people are located largely in North 24 Parganas. The central location providing them with social/political power where the headquarters of the Matua Mahasangha are located. This area is primary settlement area

for post-partition immigrants with a dense concentration of Matuas. Significant concentrations of Matua-related politics can be found along with other areas in Jalpaiguri where migrants from East Pakistan had settled. Individuals belonging to the Matua community predominantly reside in bordering districts.

Due to historical marginalisation as a community of partition refugees, the Matua community experiences significant economic limitations. A large part of the Matua community's economic vulnerability relates to the inadequate formalization of land rights in refugee colonies. Many members of the Matua community suffer from the 'vicious cycle' of poverty, lack of security in their livelihoods, and limited access to formal credit or developmental resources because they cannot formalise their property. Many Matua families are moving to urban areas for searching employment (Ahmed 246-247). For those who have been able to experience any upward mobility from this shift, it has only benefited a small number of Matua community members. Majority of the Matua community members have moved into low-paid, insecure, and informal urban jobs. Welfare programs have been made available to Matua community members in West Bengal and have reached most of the Matua community members.

Matua forms the largest socio-religious community in West Bengal. The Matua community is a 19th, century phenomenon and is a social movement against caste oppression initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. Equality, education, and devotion are the main beliefs of the Matua community. Therefore, their ways of living are predicated on these three core values of human behaviour. In addition to that, they stick to the guidelines of simplicity, humility, and honesty. Their goal is to eliminate through their actions oppression and alienation in their society. From an

economic standpoint, they are quite vulnerable as a society. Most of the Matua people live around the poverty line and have very limited means to support themselves and their families. Manual labour constitutes the primary sources of income among the majority of the Matua communities, which include farming and fishing occupations, besides small-scale business enterprises. The other Matua groups found in Thakurnagar (North 24 Parganas) are engaged either in garland making or are involved in unorganised occupations at lower pay scales. In general, the rural masses are poor, indeed, finding some means of livelihood poses a huge problem. The womenfolk of the Matua community are usually seen working alongside their male counterparts on the farm, while they also secure employment as maidservants outside.

The Matua community's religious philosophies are intertwined with their lifestyle, promoting simple communal living, equality among its members. They attain "Swayam-Dikshiti" (self-realisation) through continuously chanting Harichand Thakur (Hari). They reject the need for priests and instead have the faith in self-realisation through achieving their purity. They live according to a set of twelve commandments known as Dwadash Agya, which emphasise truthfulness about one another and how to treat others with love and respect, particularly women. The gamchha (the towel) and the aichar mala (a garland of beads) are also symbols of their faith. The Matua Baruni Mela is one of their largest gatherings, where Matua members from all around come to Thakurnagar in March to pray, sing and eat together. Matua families mostly reside in rural areas and border districts in many simple, mostly unrefined houses, typically constructed of mud. The Matua community adheres to their religious beliefs and uses their culture to encourage simple community-based living (Biswas 6-10).

Table 1: Livelihood and Lifestyle of the Matua Community

Aspect	Description
Main Festival	BaruniMela (Matua MahaMela) is a festival commemorating the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur and takes place in March or April at Thakurnagar.
Social Structure	There are three main categories of people: 1) Religious people such as Sadhus and Gosains, 2) Educated elites and intellectuals known as Bhadrolok, and 3) Economically / socially disadvantaged workers.
Daily Life Philosophy	The guiding principle is Hate kammukhenam "performing the duties of the world (work) while chanting the holy name of Hari".
Cultural Symbols	The central part of their identity and worship is the use of Ganchha (cotton towels) and Achar Mala (string of prayer beads).
Key Livelihood Activity	Making flower garlands is one of the local, home, based economic activities in regions like Thakurnagar.
Residential Pattern	They have a high concentration in the border districts and in refugee colonies.
Women's Roles	According to the philosophy, all are equal, but in reality, many women are either confined to housework or working as domestic helpers/ agricultural labourers in order to supplement family income.
Economic Status	A large portion of the community is economically backward, often living in refugee colonies or unofficial settlements.
Occupational Diversity	While mostly agrarian/labour-oriented, many have diversified into small business, teaching, and other white-collar jobs.
Primary Livelihood	Traditionally, they worked as fishermen, farmers, and manual labourers. In West Bengal, many in the lower-income bracket work as factory workers, day labourers, or are involved in small cottage industries.

Source: Roy, Sanchita. "Namasudra and the Matua Religion" *International Journal of Reviews and Research in Social Sciences* 7.3 (2019): 619- 622. DOI: 10.5958/2454-2687.2019.00038.8

The community of Matua people largely consists of refugees who were forced out of still rural Bangladesh after the partition and during the liberation struggle from Pakistan in 1971. These refugees often struggle to obtain necessary documentation for citizenship making the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) a key political issue within their community. Based on the teachings of Guruchand Thakur, education is seen by this community as a means of breaking free from social slavery. The Matua community is also a large organised voting block and acts as a voting block through the Matua Mahasangha. It is the major organisation responsible for coordinating actions regarding the Matua community's social and political activities. The Matua community continues to fight for both higher statuses within society and greater legal rights and recognition in West Bengal; and has a unique draw in its connection to spirituality while also being very active politically (Halder 468-470).

Citizenship & Legal Status of Matua community

Community of Matua, largely composed of Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, who's legal and citizenship issues have not yet been sorted out. Although many of these individuals may have resided in India for many years, there is an apparent danger that they may be left out during the Special Intensive Revision of the voter list. The Union Home Ministry has set up committees to expedite the process of applying for Indian citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 to ease the concerns of the Matua community. The Matua community is largely a Scheduled Caste group made up of millions who moved to West Bengal from Bangladesh prior to and coming out of the 1971 War. Although many people from the Matua community possess various official documents, such as Aadhar cards or Voter I.D. cards, their citizenship is in limbo and are relying on the CAA

for evidence of legal status as citizens of India. The purpose of the CAA is to formally, legally grant citizenship status to those who entered India for reasons of religious persecution before December 31, 2014.

The desire to own a CAA/NRC is associated with the aspirations of the Matua community to attain legal and secure citizenship status for themselves as Indians, thus giving millions of such people from Bangladesh a chance to lead a stable socio-economic life, devoid of the “refugee” tag. This is a double-edged sword approach because it recognises the right of such refugees to stay on Indian soil without any fear of deportation or loss of identity. Identity politics and the All India Matua Mahasangha have altered the Matua community from being marginalised and neglected to becoming a significant political force that even a brief glance at West Bengal’s electoral map will reveal is a major swing vote. The community is now attracting the attention of political parties due to their demand for citizenship, infrastructure, and social recognition, which the leaders of the Mahasangha are compelling them to be a united front.

One of the biggest challenges for this group is that they do not have adequate documentation to demonstrate their origin from Bangladesh. The Matua community represents a sizable and powerful voting bloc in West Bengal and has been caught or “on-the-fence” between being promised citizenship and having fear of being excluded from the rolling out of new citizenship laws and rules. To provide people who do not have all the documentation required for CAA applications with some form of proof of their origin, “eligibility certificates” are being issued through camps established for issuing these certificates. However, there are also widespread fears that many Matua’s will be excluded from the final revised roll of electors, adding to their anxiety. The situation is still very

much on a “fluid” basis and is heavily impacted by both state and federal politics; and the Matua Community is looking for assurance of citizenship by means of having documentation, and formal, recognised proof of their citizenship.

Gender, Health, and Social Well-being of Matua community

Patriarchal norms are profoundly ingrained in the community. It has combined with extreme economic deprivation to hinder the social and political empowerment of Matua women. The Matua movement, initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, propagates equality and inspires women to get educated, but these women have been subjected to a “triple burden” being marginalised as Dalits, as women, and as economically weak refugees. Inequalities in availability of decent medical care and sanitation between the Matua refugee colonies in West Bengal and the adjoining localities are primarily due to the “unrecognised” status of the former, which results in poorer infrastructure and systemic exclusion. Most Matua refugee colonies are plagued by conditions of overcrowding, shortage of formal sanitation, and very limited access to healthcare.

The Matua religious movement, started by Harichand Thakur around the middle of 19th century, has played a significant role in the change of Namasudra community in Bengal from a marginalised, untouchable group to a self-respecting, politically aware, and well-organised community. The movement, by offering an alternative, egalitarian religious identity that does not acknowledge caste hierarchy and Brahmanical rituals, has raised the community’s self-esteem and decreased their social discrimination. Border districts are vital in West Bengal politics because a large number of Matuas, who are a significant refugee community among the Dalits live there. These are really important areas

where recently the voter list purges happened which have created a scared feeling among the people for their exclusion from voting. The leading frontline driver forces behind poverty and marginalisation of the Matua refugees have been their economic non-inclusion and continued exclusion from the main stream society. These Scheduled caste refugees have faced economic, social, and political instability over the past few decades. Most of the refugees belong to the Matua community, which is caught in the cycle of poverty and marginalization and becomes a hindrance in transforming the society of Matuas. The link between the Matua community in West Bengal and Bangladesh made it possible the sharing of practices of political renewal and rituals. Matua community constitutes the one of the largest Dalit groups of Namasudra in West Bengal and Bangladesh. Their spiritual identity as simple followers of Bhakti is turned into a political identity. They adopt political participation as an approach which is in line with the concept of 'worldly duties' (householder life) of the two founders, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. The deletion of voter names in Matua, majority border constituencies of West Bengal were an action that led to serious, long term socio-economic consequences. These people are at the risk of going through 'rootless' descending as one who cannot exhibit the right to one's origins depends on whether or not one carries relevant document. Therefore, lacking in documental proof, poor people especially displaced refugees are vulnerable to be losing their roots (Halder, 110-115).

Challenges of Matua community and Government initiatives

There are many challenges that face the Matua people, living in West Bengal and across India, as they pursue the realisation of citizenship, economic inequalities, reconciling gap in ideology, and overcoming discrimination

within society. Additionally, there are concerns about their citizenship as many of them are still awaiting its full implementation according to the CAA, leading to considerable political instability.

Many families have very little money and rely on small farms or working on a daily basis for a living. However, even with improvements in education, they still have problems with poverty, hunger, and how to grow as a society. There is growing tension within the community about politics and how to interpret Matua. Caste discrimination can be either very subtle or direct, but evidence continues to pile up showing that, even with such large populations, members of community do not have representation at the highest government levels, and this can also apply to women involved in the community. These women have many challenges when trying to enter the workplace or participate in the political process, and many remain at home and take care of the family.

Table 2: Key Challenges Faced by the Matua Community in West Bengal

Challenge Area	Specific Issues
Gender-Based Constraints	Matua women face a dual burden of social restrictions and limited educational/professional opportunities.
Internal/Leadership	There are internal conflicts within the Matua leadership (for example, a dispute over who will have control of the Thakurnagar temple).
Social	They remain socially backward and marginalized even though their population size is big.
Economic	Most of them live in poverty and are day labourers or work in small industries.
Political	They are exploited as a "vote bank," and there is voter insecurity due to the deletion of the electoral rolls in the border districts.
Citizenship & Legal	Many of the migrants from Bangladesh do not have official citizenship documents resulting in fear of exclusion and dependence on CAA.

Source: Bala, Arghya and Roy, Sumita. Between faith and fear: The Matua and the electoral roll Current Issue (Feb. 11, 2026). <https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/social-justice/matua-voters-citizenship-anxiety-sir/article70616110.ece>

There has been an increase in education; however, there are still people who rely on informal low-wage jobs; thus, developing stronger economic empowerment is necessary. There is a need for additional emphasis on improvements to the medical infrastructure. The political strength of the community within West Bengal will ensure that their social and economic demands will continue to create and affect state policy. The government of West Bengal has undertaken a number of development initiatives aimed at improving the status of the Matua community. These initiatives include the establishment of the Matua Development Board, Namasudra Development Board, and citizenship rights. The Matua Development Board was created to promote the overall development of the Matua community through infrastructure development and social and economic upliftment. The Namasudra Development

Board is responsible for development of the Namasudra community, of which the Matua community is a major part. Other initiatives include the establishment of Harichand-Guruchand University; declare state holidays in honour of Harichand Thakur's birthday, and implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act.

In Thakurnagar, North 24-Parganas, Harichand-Guruchand University was founded with the intention of fostering the educational advancement of the surrounding community. On the birthday of Harichand Thakur, a state holiday has been declared in his honour. The government has attempted to regularise refugee settlement and grant land rights to members of this cultural group (Matua). The state has offered financial assistance for the ongoing development of the Matua Mahasangha and other types of religious or social facilities that the Matua community utilizes. These initiatives raise awareness about and seek to remedy the specific needs of the Matua community, such as obtaining citizenship, accessing an education, or developing physical infrastructure in order to support their cultural and political identity throughout West Bengal (Lahiri, 7782-7784).

Table 3: Key West Bengal Government Policies for Development of Matua Community

Category	Policy / Initiative	Key Details (As of 2026)
Administrative	Matua Development Board	Created as an incubator for socio, economic development and focused welfare delivery
Economy	KisanMandi/Markets	Establishing new ITIs, Polytechnics, and a KisanMandi in Gaighata.
	Land Rights (Pattas)	Distribution of land ownership certificates to the refugees living in the colonies, which helped a lot of Matua families.
Culture	BangaBibhushan	Conferred the state's highest honor on Matua matriarch Binapani Devi.
	State Holiday	A state holiday has been declared on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur.
Infrastructure	Transportation & Civic Amenities	Infrastructure like bridge construction, roads drinking water(alatripti project), and sanitation
	Pilgrimage Infrastructure	Besides infrastructure development in Thakurnagar and its adjoining areas.
Education	P.R. Thakur Govt College	Located at Gaighata, the main aim is to provide better education opportunities.
	Harichand-Guruchand University	Located at Thakurnagar (North 24 Parganas) with an extension campus in Krishnanagar.

Source: Sinharay, Praskanva. "Harichand-Guruchand Thakur: the emerging icons of Dalit politics in West Bengal" Religion 52 (2022): 396-401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2094784>

Conclusion

The Matua people have emerged as a potent socio-religious and political community in West Bengal. Matuaism is their religion, which is an offshoot of Hinduism, centered around self-respect and community organization. The majority of this community continues to be in poor economic circumstances. Majority of community members either are involved in agricultural activities or work as fishermen, or are employed in the industrial sector, particularly as factory workers and unskilled workers. Some families are still living in crude mud huts in refugee colonies or unauthorized areas without basic facilities such as potable water or healthcare services.

The Matua community is reported to have shown significant progress in literacy rates and many members have used the education to reach high levels of achievement. While many people in this community have shown improvement, many of the community are still struggle with their economic status which typically includes agricultural work, factory jobs or very low wage jobs in informal economy. The Matua Development Board, which was established in the year 2018, is an initiative taken by the government of West Bengal State to support the efforts of the Matua community. Matua Development Board has been concentrating on issues related to Education, Infrastructure, and Finance Empowerment. The main strategies that the State is planning to undertake in order to meet Targeted Welfare Schemes, Education for Income Generation, and Infrastructure Development at Thakur Nagar, thereby improving the living conditions of most of the people living there.

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