

**A NEW POLITICS OF CASTE:
MATUA MAHASANGHA AND EMERGING DALIT
ASSERTIONS IN WEST BENGAL (1988-2019)**

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A New Politics of Caste: Matua Mahasangha and Emerging Dalit Assertions in West Bengal (1988-2019) submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of **Professor Dr. Manabi Majumdar** and **Professor Dr. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya**. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Abstract	3
List of Abbreviations	4
Glossary	6
List of Tables and Images	11
Introduction: Rethinking Caste and Politics in West Bengal	13
Chapter 1: <i>Pratibaadi Dharma</i> : Matua as a Religion of Protest	41
Chapter 2: The Making of the Matua Political Public	76
Chapter 3: Matua Mahasangha and the Politics of Dalit Migrants	118
Chapter 4: New Politics of Representation: Matua Mahasangha and Party Politics	148
Conclusion: A New Politics of Caste	180
Bibliography	187

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Abstract

This thesis examines the question of caste and politics in West Bengal through an ethnographic study of Matuas and their organisation, the Matua Mahasangha. Compared to other states, the politics of caste here has been different. Despite having one of the largest Scheduled Caste populations in the country, West Bengal, unlike other states, did not witness any major Dalit movement until the recent past. The hegemony of the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok* in all arenas of public life invisibilised caste from the mainstream public discourse for decades. Based on multi-sited ethnography of the processes of consolidation of the Matuas, their political and cultural assertions, and participation in electoral politics under the Matua Mahasangha, the thesis shows that the silence on caste has finally been broken. The thesis argues that the collective assertions of the Matuas, particularly since the mid-2000s, have introduced a new politics of caste in West Bengal.

To explore how the assertions of the Matuas are changing the relationship between caste and politics in the state, the thesis begins by exploring Matua Dharma, an anti-caste popular religion that serves as the ideological impetus behind the political activism of the Matuas. Thereafter, I show how the symbolic assertions of the Matuas for recognition of their distinct cultural identity in the public sphere, coupled with their movement for unconditional citizenship rights of Bengali Dalit migrants in India, have led to the making of what I call the Matua political public. Finally, the thesis looks at the new practices of representation that have emerged over the last decade, both at the level of electoral contest and in popular politics, because of the effective negotiations of the Matua Mahasangha with political parties, and engagement with the state. In short, the emerging assertions of the Matuas in West Bengal, the thesis asserts, have made a dent in the hitherto unchallenged hegemony of the upper castes and have created possibilities of democratisation from below.

List of Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students' Union
ABMM	Ashokenagar Block Matua Mahasangha
ADM	Additional District Magistrate
AIMM	All India Matua Mahasangha
AISCF	All India Scheduled Castes Federation
ARI	Association for the Refugee in India
BDO	Block Development Officer
BDS	Bharatiya Dalit Panthers
BDSS	Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BLRO	Block Land and Land Reforms Officer
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI-M	Communist Party of India – Marxist
EIRC	East India Refugee Council
FIR	First Information Report
GCPA	Greater Cooch Behar People's Association
INC	Indian National Congress/Congress
JACBR	Joint Action Committee for Bangali Refugees
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MM	Matua Mahasangha
MP	Member of Parliament
MPLADS	Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme
NBP	Namasudra Bikash Parishad
NRC	National Register of Citizens
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

OBC	Other Backward Classes
OCI	Overseas Citizen of India
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PRDS	Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha
SBMM	Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha
SC	Scheduled Caste
SSHGMM	Sri Sri Hari Guruchand Matua Mission
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TMC	Trinamool Congress
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council

Glossary

<i>Abeg</i>	Appeal
<i>Adda</i>	Gossip session
<i>Ajalchal</i>	Those whose water cannot be accepted by the Brahmins
<i>Anchal</i>	Administrative zone
<i>Andolan</i>	Movement
<i>Annaaprasana</i>	First rice-eating ceremony of a newborn child
<i>Antyaj</i>	The untouchables
<i>Avatar</i>	Incarnation
<i>Bandana</i>	Prayer
<i>Bhabadarsha</i>	Thought
<i>Bhakta</i>	Devotee
<i>Bhadralok</i>	Genteel, respectable class
<i>Bhaktakendrik</i>	Devotee centric
<i>Bhinno sampradaya</i>	Distinct community
<i>Bhog</i>	Enjoyment
<i>Bhoomipujan</i>	Foundation stone laying ceremony
<i>Bidrohi</i>	Rebel
<i>Boroma</i>	Elder Mother
<i>Chhotolok</i>	Lower caste, Lower class
<i>Daan</i>	Donation
<i>Dal</i>	Small group
<i>Dalapati</i>	Group leader
<i>Danka</i>	Traditional musical instrument
<i>Deva-dvija</i>	God-Brahmin
<i>Dham</i>	Pilgrimage, Holy place
<i>Dhan</i>	Property
<i>Dharma</i>	Religion, Faith
<i>Dharmandolan</i>	Religious movement

<i>Dharmiyo</i>	Religious
<i>Dhil</i>	Stone
<i>Dikhsa</i>	Initiation
<i>Dukkha</i>	Suffering
<i>Durbal</i>	Weak
<i>Garbastha</i>	Household
<i>Ghuspitiya</i>	Infiltrator
<i>Gosai</i>	Matua preachers
<i>Guna</i>	Quality
<i>Guru</i>	Teacher, Master
<i>Haribola moto</i>	People who always chant Hari, the Matuas
<i>Harimandir</i>	Temple of Harichand Thakur and Shanti Mata
<i>Hari saal</i>	Matua calendar
<i>Kala kanoon</i>	Draconian law
<i>Kammasagar</i>	Seas of wishes, Holy pond at MM headquarters
<i>Karmandolan</i>	Contributions
<i>Kashee</i>	Traditional musical instrument
<i>Kathakata</i>	Storytelling in large gatherings
<i>Kobigaan</i>	Song of poets, Rhymed couplets
<i>Kon:showl</i>	Trickery
<i>Jalsa</i>	Public celebration
<i>Jatra</i>	Folk theatre
<i>Jomi</i>	Land
<i>Laat Saheb</i>	Colonial officer
<i>Lila</i>	Miracle
<i>Madhyabitta</i>	Middle class
<i>Mandir</i>	Temple
<i>Mangalghat</i>	Holy pitcher
<i>Mantra</i>	Hymn
<i>Matadarsha</i>	Ideology
<i>Matoara</i>	Intoxicated, Maddened

<i>Mela</i>	Fair
<i>Mouchak</i>	Beehive
<i>Mukti</i>	Liberation
<i>Mukto</i>	Free
<i>Nabasakhs</i>	Mixed Shudras
<i>Nagarikatta</i>	Citizenship
<i>Nata mandir</i>	A hall in front of a temple
<i>Nipirito</i>	Oppressed
<i>Nisbaan</i>	Flag
<i>Notun Ma</i>	New mother
<i>Onuprobeshkari</i>	Infiltrator
<i>Paath</i>	Reading sessions
<i>Pagol</i>	Matua preachers
<i>Pakka</i>	Concrete
<i>Paribar</i>	Family
<i>Patit</i>	Fallen
<i>Patta</i>	Land ownership deed
<i>Pichiye pora manush</i>	The backward people
<i>Pradhan upodeshta</i>	Chief advisor
<i>Pramanya dalil</i>	Authoritative documents
<i>Prasad</i>	Sacrament, Offering
<i>Pratibaad</i>	Protest
<i>Pratibedan</i>	Report
<i>Pratibaadidharma</i>	Religion of protest
<i>Protisthan</i>	Institution
<i>Punorbashan</i>	Rehabilitation
<i>Purnabramha</i>	The absolute god
<i>Rajarsbi</i>	Person who has qualities of both king and saint
<i>Rajniti</i>	Politics
<i>Rashpurnima</i>	Auspicious day in the Hindu calendar
<i>Sabha</i>	Meeting

<i>Sabbapati</i>	President
<i>Sadharan sampadak</i>	General Secretary
<i>Sadhu</i>	Matua preachers
<i>Saba-sanghadhipati</i>	Joint organisational head
<i>Sahitya</i>	Literature
<i>Sammelan</i>	Meeting
<i>Samya</i>	Equality
<i>Samasya</i>	Problem
<i>Samyabaad-er dharma</i>	Religion of equality
<i>Sangathan</i>	Organisation
<i>Sanghadhipati</i>	Organisational head
<i>Shakha</i>	Organisational branch
<i>Shakti</i>	Strength
<i>Sharanarthi</i>	The persecuted refugee
<i>Shastras</i>	Scriptures
<i>Shivavatar</i>	Avatar of Hindu god Shiva
<i>Shouchachar</i>	Practices of purity-pollution
<i>Shota</i>	Stick, marker of Matua identity
<i>Shraddhanushthan</i>	Death ceremonies
<i>Shuddhi</i>	Ritual purification
<i>Sthapan</i>	Laying
<i>Swadhin</i>	Independent
<i>Swatantra</i>	Autonomous
<i>Tamasha</i>	Folk theatre
<i>Tantra</i>	Scripture
<i>Thakurbari</i>	Residence of the Thakur family
<i>Tirtha</i>	Pilgrimage
<i>Tyag</i>	Sacrifice
<i>Udbastu</i>	Refugee, Migrant
<i>Upahasa</i>	Mocking
<i>Utsab</i>	Festival

Vidhi

Rules

Vidya

Education

Viranganas

Heroic women

Vivaha

Marriage

List of Tables

1. Table I: The Structure of the Matua Mahasangha	109
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List of Images¹

1. Photograph of the MM's meeting on 2 March 1994 used as a book cover	39
2. Poster of the MM's meeting on 28 December 2010	39
3. Poster of the MM's meeting in Thakurnagar on 2 February 2019	40
4. The MM's headquarters in Thakurnagar	110
5. The <i>natamandir</i> at the MM's headquarters	110
6. The central office of the MM	111
7. The <i>Harimandir</i> at the MM's headquarters	111
8. A book stall at a local Matua <i>utsab</i>	112
9. A local bus stop in Ashokenagar with images of Harichand Thakur, Shanti Mata and Guruchand Thakur	112
10. A local club in Thakurnagar with wall paintings depicting the life of Harichand Thakur	113
11. From right to left: Portraits of Rabindranath Tagore, Harichand Thakur and Swami Vivekananda at a local school in Thakurnagar	113
12. The <i>Matua Mahasangha Patrika</i>	114

¹All images courtesy of the author.

13. <i>Rajagrihe Satabarsha</i> , a local periodical	114
14. Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetana Mancha, a Dalit organisation's stall at the Matua Dharma Mahamela	115
15. A Matua <i>dal</i> arriving at the Matua Dharma Mahamela	115
16. Panel discussion at the local Matua <i>utsab</i>	116
17. A <i>kabigaan</i> performance at a local Matua <i>utsab</i>	116
18. Images of Matua icons and chief minister Mamata Banerjee on a gate leading to the Matua Dharma Mahamela in 2013	117
19. Community lunch at the Matua Dharma Mahamela in 2013	117
20. The MM's hunger strike in Thakurnagar in 2014 in demand of unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali migrants	146
21. The MM's rally in Kolkata in 2016	146
22. Baroma Binapani Debi at the MM's rally in Kolkata in 2016	147
23. Binapani Debi at her residence, 'The Exile', in Thakurnagar.	147
24. Contributions by TMC lawmakers on a plaque at the MM headquarters	178
25. A Bahujan Samaj Party poster using the image of Harichand Thakur	178
26. A gate leading to Amit Shah's rally in Thakurnagar in 2021	179
27. A booklet on Harichand Thakur published by Forward Bloc leader Haripada Biswas	179

Introduction: Rethinking Caste and Politics in West Bengal

The politics of caste in West Bengal is changing. For decades, upper-caste Bengalis have held onto the much-cherished imagination that caste does not matter in the state like it does in other parts of the country. Such an imagination, as scholars have shown through ethnographies of local politics, is “a long-held myth”.² In this thesis, I show that this myth, created, reproduced and carefully maintained by the upper castes, has finally been challenged due to the emerging assertions of Dalits.³ My research examines this changing politics of caste in contemporary West Bengal by presenting an ethnographic account of the political and cultural assertions of the Matuas led by their religious organisation, the Matua Mahasangha (MM). Let me begin by narrating three events that perfectly capture this change.

I

The first event dates back to 2 March 1994. Thousands of Matuas gathered on the grounds in front of Shahid Minar, a prominent location for public gatherings in the heart

²Dayabati Roy, “Caste and Power: An Ethnography in West Bengal, India”, *Modern Asian Studies* 46(4) (2012): 948; Arild. E. Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Ritanjan Das, “Narratives of the Dispossessed and Casteless: Politics of Land and Caste in Rajarhat, West Bengal”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50(5) (2020): 806-830.

³The term ‘Dalit’, meaning ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’, was used by B.R. Ambedkar in 1928 in his fortnightly *Bahishkrut Bharat*. He defined Dalithood as “a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste brahminical order” (Gopal Guru, “The Politics of Naming”, *Seminar* 471 (1998): 14-18). Historian Anupama Rao has showed that the term is “both analytic and prescriptive: *it defines the historical structures and practices of dispossession that experientially mark someone as Dalit and simultaneously identifies the Dalit as someone seeking to escape those same structures*”; it signifies “a process of becoming and a community-in-the-making” by converting “a negative description into a confrontational identity” (emphasis in original) (Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013), 1-16). The term is used by the ex-untouchables as a self-referential collective political identity. The term Dalit is used by the Matuas to define themselves in addition to other terms such as *patit* (fallen), *nipirito* (oppressed), and *pichiye pora manush* (the backward people). Therefore, I use the term Dalit to describe the Matuas in the thesis.

of Calcutta. They came from faraway places to attend the *Matua Dharma Mahasamabesh*, a religious meeting organised by the MM for the first time in the city. Quite naturally, there was unmatched enthusiasm amongst the crowd. The objective of this *Mahasamabesh* was three-fold: one, to create awareness about the teachings and contributions of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the founders of Matua Dharma; two, to consolidate devotees, scattered demographically in different parts of the country, under the aegis of the MM; and three, to demand that Harichand Thakur's birth anniversary be declared a national holiday.⁴ The main speakers at the event included Binapani Debi (former religious head of the MM) and her son Kapil Krishna Thakur, Ganapati Biswas (ex-general secretary), and a few noted Matua intellectuals. In his speech, Kapil Krishna Thakur, the then *sangbadhipati* (organisational head) of the MM, urged devotees to uphold the ideology (*matadarsha*) and thought (*bhabadarsha*) of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur to uproot "Brahminism and feudalism" from society.⁵ This *Mahasamabesh*, as mentioned in the eighth annual report (*pratibedan*) of the MM, and other print and oral sources, was the first big step in the MM's organisational career.

The event caught public attention at large. This is evident from the following excerpt of a newspaper report published in a leading English daily:

"...the central parts of the city were taken over by a large number of devotees of a little-known organization called the "Matua Mahasangh" ...

As for the huge turnout at the devotees' rally on the maidan, which disrupted traffic arrangements, all one gathered was that they had come

⁴*Matua Mahasangher 8-tama Barshik Sammelan-e Kendriya Karyanirbahee Committee-r Pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, November 17, 1994), 10-19.

⁵*Matua Mahasangher 8-tama Barshik Sammelan-e Kendriya Karyanirbahee Committee-r Pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan*, 14.

at the “call of the Baba”. Who the “Baba” was could not be ascertained, but it was clear that a new godman had arrived on the scene.”⁶

Such a description of the event leads us to two plausible inferences. First, the large turnout of devotees at the meeting testified to the fact that the MM, as a religious organisation, enjoyed considerable mass support. However, in spite of its popular appeal, the MM was ‘a little-known organisation’ among the urban, English-educated class that subscribes to English dailies. In West Bengal, this class has been historically constituted by mainly three upper castes, namely Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas, who came to be known as the *bhadralok* (the genteel/respectable class).⁷ The urban, upper-caste *bhadralok*, as Partha Chatterjee has shown, commanded hegemonic control over all avenues of public life in the state.⁸ The myth that caste does not matter in the state, as we shall see, was created and maintained by the *bhadralok* and the institutions controlled by them, strictly for political reasons. Therefore, as the report shows, an organisation such as the MM, the members of which are almost entirely Dalits, remained outside the dominant *bhadralok* public sphere in the 1990s.

Second, the way in which the event was reported demonstrates not only lazy journalism, but more importantly, it was a careful and conscious attempt to ridicule, delegitimise, and not recognise a Dalit politico-cultural initiative. The report was titled “Rationality takes a back seat in Calcutta” as it considered the MM’s meeting an irrational development in the citadel of the *bhadralok* establishment. Moreover, the Matua preceptors, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, were unknown in the mainstream public sphere and could be derisively referred to as “Baba” and “new godman” in the report without much

⁶Sumanta Sen, “Rationality takes a back seat in Calcutta”, *The Times of India*, March 5, 1994.

⁷Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 70. The opposite of the term *bhadralok* in Bengali is *chhotolok*, meaning lower castes. The term *chhotolok* is used in other contexts as well. See Roy, “Caste and Power”, 953.

⁸Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*.

investigation. In other words, the report demonstrates the Bengali *bhadralok*'s politics of caste. The *bhadralok*, as we shall discuss later, represents "the mutated upper-caste self" that draws power from its higher rank in the caste hierarchy but talks in a secular-modern language because of English education and other historical privileges, and insists on considering caste a premodern category to perpetuate its hegemony over society and politics.

II

Sixteen years later, the MM organised its second meeting in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) on 28 December 2010. This time, the agenda of the meeting was strictly political: the demand for "re-amendment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, and resolution of the refugee problem".¹⁰ The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, passed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government at the Centre, introduced the category of "illegal migrants" in the citizenship law of India.¹¹ Under this new law, migrants who entered Indian territory after 25 March 1971 without valid documents fell in the category of illegal migrants. Dalit migrants from Bangladesh such as the Namasudras (an ex-untouchable caste), a significant section of whom are Matuas, who migrated to India after the aforementioned cut-off date felt threatened by the enactment of this law. Those who had migrated before the cut-off date also came under the scanner due to either unavailability or loss of valid documents. Multiple incidents of arrests and administrative harassment of refugee families were reported in and outside West Bengal.¹² What is important to note is that none of the major

⁹Aditya Nigam, "Secularism, Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique", *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(48) (2000): 4262.

¹⁰MM Poster, December 28, 2010

¹¹Anupama Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 136-7.

¹²See Vasudha Chhotray, "Nullification of Citizenship: Negotiating Authority Without Identity Documents in Coastal Odisha, India", *Contemporary South Asia* 26 (2) (2017): 175-190; Praskanva Sinharay, "Caste, Migration and Identity", *Seminar* 645 (2013): 2-6.

bhadralok-dominated political parties from the state such as the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) opposed the law. At the time, the migrants, who had become victims of the law, needed a platform to voice their opposition vis-à-vis the 2003 Act. The “draconian law of 2003” (*du-bazar teen-er kala kanoon*), as the Matuas termed it, thus led to the political consolidation of the community under the banner of the MM, an organisation of its own.¹³ After the passage of this law, the MM gradually emerged as the new representative organisation of Dalit refugees in the state.

The meeting on 28 December 2010 was therefore organised by the MM to raise its demand of “unconditional citizenship rights” (*nirsharto nagarikotto*) for East Bengali migrants in India. The meeting was called at a strategic time before the 2011 state assembly election to display the organisational influence of the MM over the numerically strong Matua community. According to the 2001 Census, Namasudras constitute 17.4% of the total Scheduled Caste population of West Bengal and are the second-most numerous Scheduled Caste group in the state.¹⁴ The MM claimed that most people from the Namasudra community are Matuas and the organisation could influence their voting behaviour. Interestingly, political parties neither denied this claim nor doubted the organisational influence of the MM. Rather, the MM’s rally was attended by representatives of all major political parties such as the CPI-M, the TMC, the Congress, and the BJP as well as refugee organisations such as the Sara Bharat Bangali Udbastu Samannoy Committee. Prominent political leaders across party affiliations shared the dais with the Matua leadership viz. Binapani Debi, Kapil Krishna Thakur, and Manjul Krishna Thakur. They spoke at the event, sympathised with the MM’s demand unequivocally, and promised

¹³All translations from Bengali to English are done by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

¹⁴ West Bengal Data Highlights: The Scheduled Castes, Census of India 2001, www.censusindia.gov.in.
https://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_sc_westbengal.pdf. Accessed August 5, 2021.

that their parties would raise the issue in parliament. After the meeting, a delegation of the MM met chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and the governor of the state to submit deputations vis-à-vis its demand. The MM called this meeting a “*nojirbihin samabesh*”, meaning an ‘unparalleled meeting’¹⁵ that brought political arch-rivals on the same platform in support of its demand. Media outlets reported that the MM’s rally was the “proof” that “Matuas are a force no party in Bengal can ignore”.¹⁶ In short, this pre-election rally of the MM turned out to be a watershed in its political journey and provided the organisation considerable visibility as an emerging vote bank in the politics of the state.

III

The third event in our discussion is the *International Matua Mahasammelan and Dharma Sabha* held a few months before the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The event was organised in Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas district near the MM headquarters on 2 February 2019 by Matua leader Shantanu Thakur who currently heads one faction of the MM.¹⁷ This meeting provided a new twist to Matua politics, and brought it to national political limelight. The chief guest and the main speaker at this event was prime minister Narendra Modi. It is necessary to have a little background at this point to understand what made the prime minister visit the MM headquarters and address its rally.

In 2014, the BJP, in its election manifesto, promised that “India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here”.¹⁸ Soon after coming to power at the Centre in 2014 with an overwhelming majority, the BJP government under Modi tabled the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, at the Lok Sabha.

¹⁵*Matua Mahasangher 25-tama Barsbik Sammelan Kendriya Karyanirbabee Committee-r Pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, November 10, 2011), 7-8.

¹⁶TNN, “Votebank bait blurs enemy lines”, *Times of India*, December 29, 2010. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Votebank-bait-blurs-enemy-lines/articleshow/7182271.cms>. Accessed April 5, 2021.

¹⁷I shall discuss the factionalism within the MM in detail in Chapter Four.

¹⁸BJP Election Manifesto 2014, 40.

Under the provisions of this Bill, people belonging to six religions (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians) who migrated to India from three neighbouring Muslim-majority nations (Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan) on or before 31 December 2014 were excluded from the category of illegal migrants. The Bill also eased the process of citizenship by naturalisation for the above-mentioned migrants by reducing the number of years required to qualify for citizenship. This Bill was vehemently opposed in parliament for making religion an eligibility criterion for citizenship and thus violating Article 14 of the Indian Constitution.¹⁹ It could not be passed in both the chambers of parliament before the end of the government's term. However, the question of citizenship and illegal migration occupied the centre stage in the political campaign of the BJP before the 2019 Lok Sabha election. In its election manifesto, the BJP promised to enact the Citizenship Amendment Bill for "the protection of individuals of religious minority communities from neighbouring countries escaping persecution".²⁰ The BJP's promise to grant citizenship to Hindu migrants from Bangladesh brought the party close to the Matuas. For the BJP, the narrative of granting citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from the three neighbouring Muslim-majority countries was part of a twin strategy: on the one hand, it aimed at mobilising the Hindu refugees; on the other hand, it created social antagonisms between lower-caste Hindus and non-Hindu migrants by revitalising an already existing communal binary, i.e. *sharanarthi banam onuprobeshkari* (refugee/infiltrator), around the figure of the illegal migrant.²¹

Given this background, Modi's visit to the MM headquarters in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha election was therefore the BJP's poll strategy to reach out to the Matuas.

¹⁹ "The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016", PRS Legislative Research. <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-citizenship-amendment-bill-2016>. Accessed August 5, 2021.

²⁰ BJP Sankalp Patra Lok Sabha 2019, 12.

²¹ Michael Gillan, "Refugees or Infiltrators? The Bharatiya Janata Party and "Illegal" Migration from Bangladesh", *Asian Studies Review* 26 (1) (2002): 73-95.

It also entailed the electoral salience of the numerically strong Matuas in West Bengal politics. The meeting was attended by selected members of the Thakur family, state BJP leaders, and a Matua delegation from Orakandi, Bangladesh (the birthplace of Harichand Thakur). As expected, Modi raised the issue of citizenship of persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries in his speech, attacked the TMC for not supporting the Citizenship Amendment Bill in parliament, and reiterated the BJP's promise to grant citizenship to Hindu migrants. Shantanu Thakur thanked Modi for his visit, and assured him of the support of the Matuas in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

The three aforementioned events demonstrate the changing dynamics of caste and politics in West Bengal. The first event shows how a Dalit politico-cultural initiative could be ridiculed and thereby delegitimised by the dominant establishment. It is a classic example of what Gopal Guru calls the “passive mode of social boycott”.²² It is enacted through subtle social mechanisms of the upper-caste-dominated institutions that reluctantly or deliberately deny recognition to a specific set of knowledges and thereby curb their dissemination in the public domain. This process enables the reproduction of the conditions of upper-caste hegemony and keeps it intact. Not talking about caste constitutes a politics of “Hindu politeness”.²³ It enables the upper castes to deny or silence the persistence of caste-based discriminations and inequalities in society, and simultaneously refuse to recognise or deliberately delegitimise the political actions of people who use caste to fight inequalities and social injustice. The myth that caste does not matter in West Bengal germinates from this conscious agenda of the upper-caste *bhadralok*.

²²Gopal Guru, “A Tragic Exit from Social Death”, *Outlook*, February 1, 2016. <https://magazine.outlookindia.com/story/a-tragic-exit-from-social-death/296480>. Accessed on April 5, 2021.

²³Suryakant Waghmore, “From Hierarchy to Hindu Politeness: Caste Atrocities and Dalit Protest in Rural Marathwada”, In *Contested Hierarchies, Persisting Influence: Caste and Power in Twenty-first century India*, ed. Surinder S. Jodhka and James Manor (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2018), 111-139.

This was evident when former chief minister Jyoti Basu remarked before the Mandal Commission that “caste was a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle was no longer relevant to West Bengal”.²⁴

The second and third events, however, show the weakening of *bhadralok* control over politics. The assertions of the Matuas as an electorally salient Dalit community led by the MM have thrown a fresh challenge to the hegemony of the *bhadralok*. It changed the terms of politics as the *bhadralok*-led political parties now rallied behind the MM to ensure Matua votes. The MM thus started bargaining with the political parties on behalf of the Matuas to address its demands in exchange for electoral support. Here, it is important to note that the MM consolidated the Matuas not only on the question of legal citizenship rights, but also consolidated the community around other crucial demands that revolved around issues of recognition, representation, political equality, and development. Apart from the demand of “unconditional citizenship rights” for Dalit migrants, the MM’s demands include official commemoration of Matua icons, nomination of Matua leaders as election candidates, and recognition of the community’s distinct cultural identity in the mainstream discourse. The assertions of the Matuas in the public sphere, as the thesis shows, thus led to the rise of new political actors, new practices of representation, new electoral alliances, and the incorporation of their demands, partially or fully, in the policies and development agenda of the state. The thesis shall discuss all these aspects of contemporary Matua politics. In other words, the thesis argues that the emerging assertions of Dalits and their organisations have introduced “a new politics of caste” in West Bengal.²⁵

²⁴Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 255.

²⁵Praskanva Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(34) (2012): 26-27.

Rethinking Caste in Bengal Politics

To understand the ‘newness’ of this politics of caste in present-day West Bengal, it is useful to have a look at the existing literature on caste and Bengal politics. First, scholars such as Nirmal Kumar Bose and Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal have taken a historical-anthropological perspective to understand the operations of caste in this region.²⁶ These scholars have tried to investigate whether the caste structure in Bengal was strictly based on principles of purity-pollution or if it was an economic arrangement. They explored local structures of social hierarchy, the different caste-based occupations and the changes brought to them both in the traditional context as well as under modernisation, and the processes of social mobility. Rather than laying stress on the religious ideology of caste, or understanding caste as a system of “true hierarchy” based on universal principles of purity-pollution²⁷, Bose looked at the economic aspect of caste as a traditional non-competitive system of production and distribution that underwent changes under the effects of modernisation, multiple social reforms, and advent of colonial commerce.²⁸ Comparing Bengal with its neighbouring regions, Bose hinted at the exceptionalism of this region vis-à-vis the caste question as he wrote that caste had played “a more negligible role” in West Bengal than in Bihar.²⁹ Sanyal, on the other hand, provided a detailed sketch of caste hierarchy among Hindus in medieval Bengal.³⁰ According to him, there are two

²⁶See Nirmal Kumar Bose, “Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 71(281) (1958): 397-412; Nirmal Kumar Bose, “Class and Caste”, *The Economic Weekly* (July 28, 1965): 1137-1340; Hitesranjan Sanyal “Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two Case Studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 30(2) (1971): 315-339; Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1981).

²⁷Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Also see, M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

²⁸Bose, “Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal”; Bose, “Class and Caste”.

²⁹Bose, “Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal”, 409.

³⁰The caste hierarchy in Bengal, as Sanyal noted, can be ritually ranked in six broad groups: (i) the Brahmins, (ii) the Baidyas and the Kayasthas (whose ritual rank is the same as the mixed Shudras), (iii) the *Nabasakhs* (mixed Shudras), (iv) the *Ajalchal* castes (those whose water cannot be accepted by the Brahmins) castes, (v) the intermediary castes who rank between the *Nabasakhs* and the

predominant *varnas* in Bengal viz. the Brahmins and the Shudras, and the two other *varnas* i.e. the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas are “a handful of scattered migrants” in the province.³¹ The two dominant *varnas*, the Brahmins and the Shudras, are further divided into what Dipankar Gupta has called “discrete castes”³², i.e. the wide range of *jatis* and sub-castes (*sreni*, *samaj*, *asram*, or *thak*).³³ Apart from the Brahmins, the other two “dominant castes”³⁴ in Bengal are the Baidyas and the Kayasthas. The latter two caste groups, i.e. the Baidyas and the Kayasthas, were the ‘clean Shudras’ (mixed castes) who enjoyed a higher social status because of their landholdings and entry into respected professions compared to the ‘unclean Shudras’ (*Nabasakh*, *Ajalchal* and *Antyaj* castes) that included traders, agriculturalists, artisans, service providers, and scavengers.³⁵ For Sanyal, social mobility in Bengal happened through the practices of acculturation, changing patterns of land ownership, and changes in the occupations of various caste groups (*jati* or *sreni*). It resulted in the emergence of new castes, fragmentation within castes, movements of a sub-caste for recognition as a separate caste, and so on.³⁶ Apart from making efforts to improve their position in the caste ranking through the adoption of the rituals and practices of the higher castes, i.e. what M.N. Srinivas called “sanskritization”³⁷, the lower-caste communities also converted to other religions to escape the Hindu caste system. Religions such as Islam and Christianity offered these people, at least at the theological level, an egalitarian and non-

Ajalchals, and (vi) the *Antyaj* castes (the untouchables). For detail, see Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, 36-38.

³¹Sanyal “Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India, 315.

³²Dipankar Gupta, “Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes”, in *Social Stratification*, ed. Dipankar Gupta (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 110-142.

³³Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, 22-23.

³⁴The concept of ‘dominant caste’, developed by M.N. Srinivas, refers to a specific caste which is powerful in a particular region due to their dominant position in society (Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, 10-23).

³⁵Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, 36-38.

³⁶Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, 14-15.

³⁷Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, 1-45.

discriminatory system.³⁸ The historical-anthropological approach also led scholars to explore the adherence of the lower castes to popular religions that were (and are) distinctively different from the doctrinal religions of the elites.³⁹ Scholars have pointed out that these popular religions offered the poor and the oppressed masses “spiritual citizenship”⁴⁰, created “social space” that gave them access to the public sphere⁴¹, and provided them “an emancipatory identity”.⁴² Turning to anti-caste popular religions is what Ronki Ram has called an “alternative Dalit strategy beyond Sanskritization and conversion” in the context of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab.⁴³ In Bengal, too, popular religions such as Kartabhaja, Sahebhdhani, Aul-Baul, Matua, and Balarami, practised primarily by people from the lower echelons of society (as we shall discuss in detail in Chapter One), played an instrumental role in shaping an anti-caste protest consciousness among the poor and the dispossessed masses.

Second, historians and political scientists have tried to understand how the politics of caste in Bengal changed under colonial modernity. They showed interest in exploring two aspects: one, the consolidation of the hegemony of the *bhadralok*; and two, the rise of caste associations and caste-based movements. Partha Chatterjee has shown how the hegemony of the *bhadralok*, in spite of their feeble numerical strength, was cemented in almost all arenas of public life with the advent of European trade, Permanent Settlement of land ownership, introduction of English education and new respectable professions,

³⁸Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

³⁹Sumanta Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002); Sudhir Chakravarti, *Along Deep Lonely Alleys: Baul- Fakir- Dervish of Bengal* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2017).

⁴⁰Kancha Illiah Shepherd and K.R. Karuppusamy, *The Shudras: Vision for a New Path* (India: Penguin Random House, 2021).

⁴¹P. Sanal Mohan, “Creation of Social Space through Prayers among Dalits in Kerala, India”, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2(1) (2016): 40-57.

⁴²G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement Among the Tamils Under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1998).

⁴³Ronki Ram, “Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab”, *Modern Asian Studies* 46 (3) (2012): 639-702.

and due to the scattered demographic profile and dissimilar interests of the middle and lower castes.⁴⁴ Chatterjee borrows the following phrase, once used by English civil servants in 1915, to characterise the Bengali *bhadralok* – “despotism of caste, tempered by matriculation”.⁴⁵ Other scholars have looked at the proliferation of caste associations and the social protests and political movements of middle and lower-caste communities such as the Mahishyas, the Yogis, the Namasudras, and the Rajbanshis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁶ The encounter with colonial modernity and the “ethnographic state” changed caste, in a radical way, from its pre-colonial avatar to “the modernist apparition of India’s traditional self”.⁴⁷ With colonial intervention, community and collective life based on religion and caste were secularised and invested with “political value”, and communities were thus transformed into constituencies.⁴⁸ The governmentalisation of caste under the “colonial state effect” through processes such as census operations enabled people to identify themselves in terms of governmental categories, which in turn, “facilitated lower-caste demands for rights and representation”, and introduced “a (new) politics of caste”.⁴⁹ These changes led to the rise of caste associations across the country as an expression of “modernisation of tradition”.⁵⁰ The activism of caste-associations led the caste-subalterns to “negotiate” with the colonial state⁵¹ in terms of achieving higher social status and respectability, land rights, education,

⁴⁴Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 69-86.

⁴⁵Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 70.

⁴⁶Raymond. L. Owens and Ashis Nandy, “Organizational Growth and Organizational Participation: Voluntary Associations in a West Bengal City”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 9(1) (1975): 19-53; Bose, “Some Aspects of Caste in Bengal”; Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*; Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*; Swaraj Basu, *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, 1910-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003).

⁴⁷Nicholas. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012), 60.

⁴⁸Rao, *The Caste Question*, 4.

⁴⁹Rao, *The Caste Question*, 4-5.

⁵⁰Llyod. I. Rudolph and Susan. H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1967).

⁵¹Uday Chandra, “Flaming Fields and Forest Fires: Agrarian Transformations and the Making of Birsa Munda’s Rebellion”, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 53(1) (2016): 69-98.

government jobs, representation, recognition, and rights. In colonial Bengal, the most successful among the Scheduled Caste movements was the movement of the Namasudras.⁵² This movement provides us a sense of Dalit politics in colonial Bengal. Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in his seminal work on Namasudra politics, wrote, “[t]he history of the Namasudra movement...is in many ways also the history of Scheduled Caste politics in general in Bengal”.⁵³ In the late colonial period, the associational politics of the Namasudras and the rise of a Muslim middle class threatened the dominance of the *bhadralok* in Bengal politics. For instance, one can think of the coalition between the Namasudra leadership and the Krishak Praja Party in the wake of the provincial election of 1937. But engagement with constitutional politics and dominant political parties such as the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, particularly in the years leading to the partition of Bengal in 1947, seriously affected Namasudra politics and finally led to its “integration” into the anti-colonial (Hindu) nationalist politics of the *bhadralok*.⁵⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s proposition that Namasudra politics in colonial Bengal moved “from alienation to integration”, however, has been questioned by other historians such as Sumit Sarkar,⁵⁵ and more recently, Dwaipayan Sen.⁵⁶ These scholars show that the integration of the Namasudras within the *bhadralok*-dominated world of politics was not a seamless and obvious progression. One can, for example, think of the example of Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal and how his politics led him to choose Pakistan over India at the time of Partition.⁵⁷ Here, it must also be mentioned that the activism of the All India

⁵²Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 5.

⁵³Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 5.

⁵⁴Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 173-237. Also see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁵Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

⁵⁶Dwaipayan Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁷Jogendranath Mandal was the leader of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in Bengal who allied with the Muslim League at the time of Partition. He became a minister in the first cabinet of independent Pakistan. However, rising communal violence in East Pakistan compelled Mandal to resign as minister and migrate to India. For details, see Sen, *The Decline of the Caste*

Scheduled Castes Federation under Mandal ensured the election of B.R. Ambedkar, the undisputed leader of Dalits, to the Constituent Assembly of India in 1946 from Bengal.⁵⁸ Subsequently, Bandyopadhyay revised his proposition and described Namasudra politics at the time of Partition as “strategic alliances” between the Dalit leadership and the *bhadralok*-dominated parties.⁵⁹

Third, there is an agreement among scholars across disciplines that the partition of Bengal led to the decline of the Dalit movement and the “mysterious disappearance of caste”⁶⁰ from the postcolonial political discourse in West Bengal.⁶¹ Although caste continued to be a relevant social category in the everyday lives of people and at the level of popular village politics, it disappeared as “an idiom of protest” from the public space and was replaced by the category of refugeehood and class in the aftermath of Partition.⁶² The post-Partition politics of West Bengal thus turned the attention of many scholars towards refugee studies. Studies on the rehabilitation of Dalit migrants documented their struggles and strategies for survival, and showed that the policies of the Indian state vis-à-vis Dalit migrants were different from those for the upper castes, and thus were discriminatory and calculative.⁶³

Question and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal”, In *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, ed. by Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and K.B. Nielsen, (Oxon: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁸Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*, 1.

⁵⁹Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 248.

⁶⁰Partha Chatterjee, “Partition and the Mysterious Disappearance of Caste in Bengal”. In *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, edited by Uday Chandra, Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Geir Heierstad (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 83-102.

⁶¹For more on this see Sarbani Bandyopadhyay, “Caste and Politics in Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(50) (2012): 71-73; Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal”; Ranabir Samaddar, “Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(36) (2013): 77-79.

⁶²Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 248.

⁶³Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and The Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal* (Calcutta: Lumière Books, 1990); Ross Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58 (1) (1999): 104-125; Pradip Kumar Bose, “Refugee, Memory and the State: A Review of Research in Refugee Studies”, *Refugee Watch* 36 (2010): 1-30; Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “Politics of

Finally, political scientists and sociologists have interrogated the invisibilisation of caste from the mainstream public discourse and in electoral politics.⁶⁴ In the politics of postcolonial India, a predominant phenomenon is what Rajni Kothari has called the “politicisation of caste”.⁶⁵ The relationship between caste and politics has been studied by scholars by looking at the anti-caste political Dalit movements in the states of northern, southern and western India.⁶⁶ West Bengal, however, neither witnessed any caste-based movement nor did political parties publicly make caste a tool for electoral mobilisation for the longest time. In fact, what was unique about politics in the state was the absence of organised Dalit resistance and the continued social, cultural, and political dominance of the “resilient bhadralok”.⁶⁷

The main reasons for this uniqueness of West Bengal, as scholars have observed, are the following. One, the partition of Bengal in 1947, as already mentioned, disintegrated the erstwhile organised Dalit assertions such as the Namasudra movement, thus leading to the decline of Dalit politics. Two, the demographic fragmentation of various lower-caste communities across the state and their dissimilar political demands and interests did not

Rehabilitation: Struggle of The Lower Caste Refugees In West Bengal”, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 3(1) (2010): 61-82

⁶⁴Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*; Anjan Ghosh, “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”, *Seminar* 508 (2001): 47-49; Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, “The Resilient Bhadrakok: A Profile of the West Bengal MLAs”, In *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*, eds.

Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 361-92; Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, “Of Control and Factions: The Changing ‘Party- Society’ in Rural West Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(9) (2009): 59-69; Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis: Understanding Political Change in Rural West Bengal”, in *Theorising the Present: Essays for Partha Chatterjee*, eds. Anjan Ghosh, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Janaki Nair (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 226-250; Ayan Guha, “The Caste Question in West Bengal Politics: Continuing Inconsequentiality or Rising Relevance?”, *Contemporary South Asia* (2021): 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2021.1886247>. Accessed on 12 July 2021.

⁶⁵Rajni Kothari, “Introduction”, in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. Rajni Kothari (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1970), 5.

⁶⁶See Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution*; Jeffrey Witsoe, “Territorial Democracy: Caste, Dominance and Electoral Practice in Postcolonial India”, *Political and Legal Anthropological Review* 32(1) (2009): 64-83; Janet A. Contursi, “Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52(2) (1993): 320-339; Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

⁶⁷Tawa Lama-Rewal, “The Resilient Bhadrakok”.

allow Dalits to find a common ground to build cross-caste solidarities.⁶⁸ For instance, as Ranabir Samaddar has noted, the political interests of the Bagdis and the Bauris have little in common with those of the Namasudras.⁶⁹ Three, voices from the margins have been actively silenced by the efforts undertaken by the *bhadralok* and its institutions.⁷⁰ The *bhadralok*'s politics of preserving its caste interests and maintaining the conditions of dominance, as I already mentioned, is to ignore or not talk about caste, and silence it with other markers of inclusion/exclusion such as education and culture.⁷¹ Finally, the *bhadralok* dominance in politics was established through the operations of the institution of the political party. The "general mainstreaming of caste groups and religious minorities" around officially secular parties such as the Congress and the Left, as scholars have noted, did not allow lower-caste communities to use caste as a tool for political mobilisation.⁷² Here, I must mention that all the major political parties in the state such as the Congress, the CPI-M, the TMC, and the BJP are led by city-based upper caste leaders. How did the lower-caste communities then participate in politics?

To explain the politics of the poor in postcolonial societies, Partha Chatterjee makes a sharp distinction between two fields of politics, namely, civil society and "political society".⁷³ The realm of civil society, Chatterjee argues, belongs to a small section of politically and culturally informed elites who associate in this field as rights-bearing individuals. The politics of the bulk of the population, however, takes place in another field that Chatterjee calls political society. In the domain of political society, people enter

⁶⁸Samaddar, "Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?", 77-79.

⁶⁹Samaddar, "Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?", 77-79.

⁷⁰Bandyopadhyay, "Caste and Politics in Bengal", 71-73; Dwaipayan Sen, "An Absent-minded Casteism?" In *The politics of caste in West Bengal*, ed. Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and K.B. Nielsen (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 103-124.

⁷¹Ghosh, "Cast(e) out in West Bengal".

⁷²Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad and K.B. Nielsen (Eds.) (*The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*. Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 3.

⁷³Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of The Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of The World* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 40.

into negotiations with the state to secure their livelihood needs, and access welfare schemes as population groups in exchange for electoral support by moving beyond the legal-bureaucratic rationality of the liberal state and bourgeois civil society.⁷⁴ In other words, the poor and the marginalised people, as Chatterjee notes, are the objects of governmentality where they are provided the basic amenities of livelihood by the government on a temporary and ad-hoc basis.⁷⁵ The politics of Dalits and other minorities, according to Chatterjee's formulation, falls in this field of political society.

As pointed out by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Chatterjee's concept fails to explain the politics of rural West Bengal, particularly since the Left Front rule, since he draws his examples from urban settings.⁷⁶ The Left Front under the leadership of the CPI-M, Bhattacharyya argues, brought fundamental structural changes in the rural politics of the state. On the one hand, it introduced land reforms and a three-tier decentralised local government structure; on the other hand, it replaced the older style of leadership that drew its authority from land or symbolic power, and transformed the political party into the most important institution in rural areas. To explain these changes and the centrality of the party, Bhattacharyya proposed another theoretical tool, namely, "party society".⁷⁷ Party society, as Bhattacharyya shows, "largely transcended caste, religion and ethnicity based organizations" during the prolonged Left Front regime and placed class at the forefront of political mobilisation.⁷⁸

Caste, however, remained "a fundamental organizing principle" in "the uninstitutionalized world of what may be called politics among the people".⁷⁹ Studies of

⁷⁴Chatterjee, *The Politics of The Governed*, 53-78.

⁷⁵Chatterjee, *The Politics of The Governed*, 40-41.

⁷⁶Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 125-126.

⁷⁷Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 126.

⁷⁸ Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions", 59.

⁷⁹Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 83.

Arild Ruud and Dayabati Roy show the continued relevance of caste as a determinant of local hierarchies and power relations.⁸⁰ Despite being an important category at the level of local politics, the caste question was invisibilised from the mainstream political discourse because political parties did not “highlight” the deep rooted social divisions of a caste-ridden society.⁸¹ In other words, the *bhadralok*-led political parties, as I shall elaborate in the thesis, actively suppressed the caste question. However, lower-caste communities have sporadically created, as Ranabir Samaddar notes, “bahujan samaj as the transformative form of political action”, be it at the time of the Naxalbari movement in the late 1960s or during the early days of the Lalgarh movement.⁸²

Since the late 2000s, party society has encountered a crisis.⁸³ On the one hand, the anti-land acquisition movements in Singur and Nandigram seriously damaged the Left Front’s pro-poor image; and on the other hand, Dalits and other minorities such as the Matuas, the Gorkhas, and the Muslims started to mobilise under platforms that are not controlled by the *bhadralok*, and asserted themselves collectively in the state’s politics. The emerging assertions, the thesis argues by discussing the case study of the Matuas, cannot be explained through the concepts of political society or its “modular form”⁸⁴ in rural West Bengal, i.e. party society.

⁸⁰G.K. Lietaen, “Caste, Gender and Class in Panchayats: Case of Bardhaman, West Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 27(29) (1992): 1567-1574; Roy, “Caste and Power”; Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics*; Sukanta Bhattacharyya, “Caste, Class and Politics in West Bengal: Case Study of a Village in Burdwan”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(3) (2003): 242-246; Kenneth Bo Nielsen, “Orchestrating Anti-Dispossession Politics: Caste and Movement Leadership in Rural West Bengal”, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50(5) (2020): 761-784.

⁸¹Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 126.

⁸²Samaddar, “Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?”, 79.

⁸³Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 232-238.

⁸⁴Bhattacharyya calls party society “the modular form of political society in West Bengal’s countryside” (Bhattacharyya 2016, 126).

Scholars such as Suryakant Waghmore and Sanjeeb Mukherjee have contested Chatterjee's concept of political society.⁸⁵ These scholars argue that Dalit politics that revolves around questions of political equality, dignity, recognition, representation, and substantive citizenship does not operate outside the realm of civil society. In his study of Dalit politics in Maharashtra, Waghmore shows that civil society and community-based mass politics are not necessarily antithetical; rather civil society, for Dalits, is a "non-state space of solidarity building" and "collective identity formation".⁸⁶ A similar argument is presented by Mukherjee who illustrates how and why civil society in India is not only the realm of the elite but also the field of politics of the oppressed communities and castes, particularly Dalits.⁸⁷ Moreover, scholars have also pointed out that the concept of political society cannot explain the politics of the subaltern masses that aims at achieving permanent structural reforms rather than relying on temporary solutions to their problems and needs.⁸⁸ Given this theoretical background, the thesis asks the following questions. How can we explain the emerging assertions of the Matuas in the present politics of West Bengal? What is the ideology of Matua politics? What are the organisational activities of the MM? What are the processes of political mobilisation of the Matuas? What are the demands of the Matuas? What is the role of the MM in the state's politics? And finally, what are the political implications of this new politics of caste?

⁸⁵Suryakant Waghmore, *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2013); Sanjeeb Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East, and the Prospects of Political Society", *Economic and Political Weekly* XLV (5) (2010): 61.

⁸⁶Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

⁸⁷Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East", 61.

⁸⁸Nissim Mannathukkaren, "The 'Poverty' of Political Society: Partha Chatterjee and the People's Plan Campaign in Kerala, India", *Third World Quarterly* 31(2) (2010): 295-314.

The Matuas: A Brief Introduction

Before I enter the discussion on Matua politics in West Bengal today, let us first have a brief look at the existing scholarship on this religious community. In his study on the Namasudra movement in colonial Bengal, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay looks at the social and political history of the Matuas. Matuas, he notes, are the followers of a distinct anti-caste popular religion, namely, Matua Dharma, founded in the late nineteenth century by Harichand Thakur (1812-1878) and consolidated by his son Guruchand Thakur (1846-1937). This anti-caste religious tradition became popular among the Namasudras (an ex-untouchable caste who were once called Chandals⁸⁹) in the eastern districts of undivided Bengal. Matuas are therefore almost exclusively Namasudras, although there is evidence that people from other caste groups and religions have become followers of this religious order.⁹⁰ The Matua sect played a fundamental role in shaping the social protests of the

⁸⁹The figure of the 'Chandal', according to *Manusambhita* (The Laws of Manu), is "the worst of the contaminated progeny, the mishmash that issues forth due to the loathsome physical nexus between a Brahmin female and a Sudra male" (Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, "Embracing Feminism", *Economic and Political Weekly* 50(20) (2015): 37). In Bengal, those who were regarded as the Chandals belonged to the *anyaj* castes, that is, the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy. In the 19th-century, however, the colonial administration used 'Chandal' as a generic term for categorizing the 'untouchables' in the Census and official records, which in turn, transformed into a caste name. Some twenty-nine endogamous groups fell in this category. One of the foremost demands of the Namasudra movement in colonial Bengal was the change in name from Chandal to Namasudra. In the census tables of 1891, the Namasudras were entered as 'Namasudra or Chandal'; in 1901 census, they were named 'Namasudra (Chandal)'; and finally, after a series of mass applications and support from local authorities, the derogatory appellation 'Chandal' was omitted and the community was categorized just as 'Namasudra' in the census of 1911 (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 15-20, 83-84). Also see Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015), 40.

⁹⁰The primary sacred text of the Matuas viz. *Sri Sri Harililamrita* (first published in 1916), written by Tarak Chandra Sarkar, mentions the names of the devotees of Harichand Thakur who were Brahmin, Kayastha, Mahishya, Rajbanshi, and Muslim (Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*. (Orakandi: Matua Sahitya Mandir, 1916), 247-248). Eminent Matua writer and researcher Kapil Krishna Thakur also writes about the popularity of Matua Dharma among different castes apart from the Namasudras. See Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Matua Andolan O Banglar Anunnata Samaj* (Kolkata: Nikhil Bharat, 2011), 55-56.

Namasudras, the largest Scheduled Caste⁹¹ group in the province.⁹² The “initial mobilisation” of the Namasudras, as Bandyopadhyay has noted, took place around the “Matua sect” in the districts of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore, and Tippera.⁹³ Matua leaders such as Guruchand Thakur and his grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur were immensely influential in determining the course of Namasudra politics in the early twentieth century Bengal.⁹⁴ After Partition led to the disintegration of the Namasudra movement and the displacement of millions of families from their homeland, multiple attempts were made by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and other Matua leaders such as Mahananda Haldar, as we shall discuss in the thesis, to reunify the Namasudras under the banner of an organisation in India. In 1988, the MM was formally established in Thakurnagar, a refugee-settlement located about 65 kilometres outside Kolkata in the district of North 24 Parganas. Among other historians, Sumit Sarkar has also looked at the sacred texts of the Matuas, along with other Namasudra tracts from the early twentieth century, to reflect on identity formation of the Namasudras and shifts in the politics of the community.⁹⁵ More recently, historian Manoshanto Biswas’s study on “Matua Andolan” has contributed to this existing academic literature on Matua history.⁹⁶ Apart from historians, anthropologist Carola Erika Lorea and literary historian Sipra Mukherjee have

⁹¹The governmental category of ‘Scheduled Castes’ refers to those groups of people who were considered untouchables in the Hindu caste hierarchy and have been historically deprived of equal access to economic, political and cultural resources. The term was first introduced by the colonial government in its Government of India Act 1935 to refer to communities who were earlier categorized as ‘Depressed Classes’. The category prevailed in the Constitution of India after independence. It refers to people belonging to different ex-untouchable communities in different states who are the beneficiaries of affirmative action like reservation in education and government jobs. In colonial Bengal, the Namasudras were the largest Scheduled Caste group who lived mostly in the eastern districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore, and Khulna.

⁹²Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 35-63.

⁹³Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 53.

⁹⁴There were, of course, other stalwart leaders with different political affiliations who were equally influential in the Namasudra movement such as Jogendranath Mandal of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation and Mukunda Behari Mullick of the Bengal Namasudra Association. See Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity* and Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question* for details.

⁹⁵Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

⁹⁶Manoshanto Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolan* (Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2016).

explored the religiosity of Matua Dharma.⁹⁷ The recent political assertions of the Matuas since the late 2000s also started an academic debate on caste and politics in the state in the *Economic and Political Weekly* journal. However, there has been no comprehensive study on the present politics of the Matuas organised under the banner of the MM. This thesis is an attempt to fill this gap. Through a detailed discussion on the current assertions of the Matuas, the thesis also makes a contribution to the existing literature on West Bengal politics, and the larger debates on caste in Indian democracy.

Methodology

The study is predominantly based on ethnography. As a student of political science, I am primarily interested in understanding the role of the MM in the political mobilisation of the Matuas. Therefore, I have explored the MM's organisational activities, the movement of Dalit migrants for legal citizenship rights, the negotiations of the MM with political parties on behalf of the Matuas in exchange for electoral support, the voting behaviour of Matuas, and poll campaign strategies of political parties in Namasudra-populated areas. In short, the thesis investigates how the MM consolidated the Matuas as a politically important community and engaged with the state to press its claims and demands. The process of doing fieldwork also introduced me to the “vernacular codes”⁹⁸ of Matua politics – Matua Dharma, its ideology, the teachings of Harichand-Guruchand, the religious texts, Matua literature, rituals, customs, prayers, songs, and festivals.

⁹⁷Carola Erika Lorea, “Religion, Caste, and Displacement: The Matua Community”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.428>. Accessed on 12 July 2021; Sipra Mukherjee, “In Opposition and Allegiance to Hinduism: Exploring the Bengali Matua Hagiography of Harichand Thakur”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41(2) (2018): 435-451.

⁹⁸Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in India* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008), 3.

The fieldwork presented in the thesis started in 2012 during my M.Phil research and was then conducted between 2014 and 2016. I selected two main locations for my fieldwork: Thakurnagar and Ashokenagar. Both are refugee townships with significant Matua population in the district of North 24 Parganas. I also travelled to other locations such as Bagula, Bongaon, Chakdaha, Gobarganga, Guma, Habra, Siliguri, and Kolkata to attend the meetings of the MM and political parties. Formal interviews were conducted with MM leaders, Matua *dalapatis* (group leaders), common devotees, and leaders and cadres of political parties. Attending Matua festivals and local-level meetings were an important part of the fieldwork. Informal chats and travelling with people were also crucial for my understanding of the field. Doing fieldwork also introduced me to a host of primary sources such as official publications of the MM and its local branches, religious texts, pamphlets, leaflets and posters from the personal collections of my respondents, photographs, caste literature (books and periodicals), publications of political parties and individual leaders, and local newspapers. I also looked at the archives of *The Times of India*. The names of all my respondents, except some past and present office-bearers of the MM, have been changed to pseudonyms to conceal their identities.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is thematically divided into four chapters.

Chapter One looks at the ideology of Matua Dharma and explores the link between caste and popular religion in the context of Dalit politics. To understand the role that ‘the religious’ play in shaping ‘the political’, the chapter discusses the anti-caste thought and teachings of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur through a close reading of selected Matua print literature. Based on the evidence drawn from these popular vernacular literary sources, the chapter shows how Matua Dharma functions as an ideology of protest and

shapes the political consciousness of the Matuas against the caste system, economic discrimination, and social injustice perpetuated by the upper-caste Hindu establishment. Moreover, the chapter shows that Matua Dharma, being a modern popular “religion of the oppressed”, provides the followers “an emancipatory identity” and forms the basis for their political activism to achieve equality, dignity, recognition and a morally and politically just order.⁹⁹

Chapter Two provides a thick description of the organisational structure and functions of the MM to understand the processes of consolidation, identity-formation, and politico-cultural assertions of the Matuas in West Bengal today. The first section of the chapter explores the origin and evolution of the MM, its leadership structure, the organisation’s bureaucracy, and its local networks. In the second section, the chapter examines the different modes and sites of assertions of the Matuas in the public sphere. The chapter shows that the “use of symbolic means”¹⁰⁰ by the Matuas to assert their distinct cultural identity in the domain of literature, community festivals, social events, and local public spaces has, on the one hand, led to the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand as regional icons of Dalit politics; on the other hand, it has resulted in the construction of what I call a Matua political public¹⁰¹ that stands outside and in opposition to the *bhadralok* public.

Chapter Three discusses the MM’s movement for citizenship rights of Bengali Dalit migrants. It tries to understand the relationship between caste, citizenship, and nation in postcolonial India. First, the chapter analyses the changing citizenship laws in India to show how the legal-official definition of the Indian citizen has been increasingly crafted

⁹⁹Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*.

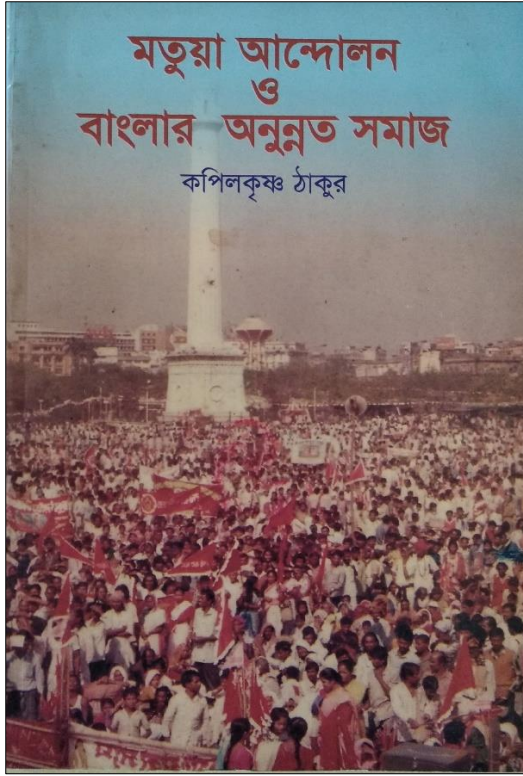
¹⁰⁰Nicolas Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues and the State in Uttar Pradesh", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 40(2) (2006): 175-207.

¹⁰¹I borrow the idea of political public from Badri Narayan. See Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India Uttar Pradesh: 1950-present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

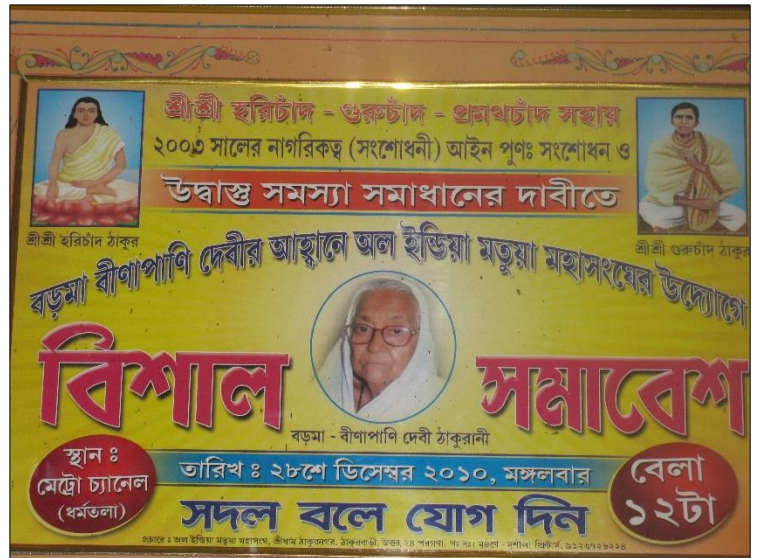
along Hindu majoritarian lines – from *jus soli* (citizenship by birth) to *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by descent). Second, the chapter shows how the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, brought a large section of Dalit migrants under the category of illegal migrants, thereby engendering a permanent sense of fear and uncertainty among these people. Finally, the chapter provides a detailed description of the movement launched by the MM in 2004 to demand unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali Dalit migrants, and tracks the impact of this movement over the years.

Chapter Four shows that the participation of the MM and Matua leaders in party politics have resulted into new practices of representation in the state. These new representative practices, the chapter shows, emerged in the last two decades with the crisis of party society. One can observe this change at two levels: one, the realm of electoral politics; and two, the domain of popular village politics. As the chapter shows, the MM's engagement with political parties has led to new electoral alliances, the nomination of Matua leaders as election candidates, and the emerging salience of the MM as a new mediator in rural politics in addition to the political parties. It has also led to the bifurcation of the MM along partisan lines. More importantly, it has created a space where the MM can now directly engage with the state and its organs through elected representatives from the community.

To sum up, the emerging assertions of the Matuas lead us to rethink the politics of caste in West Bengal today. Caste, as we discussed, has always mattered in the politics of the state. For decades, it was invisibilised by the Bengali *bhadralok* to maintain the status quo in the mainstream public discourse. The long-held myth, as thesis shows, has finally burst, opening up possibilities of democratisation from below.



Photograph of the MM's meeting on 2 March 1994 used as a book cover.



Poster of the MM's meeting on 28 December 2010.



Poster of the MM's meeting in Thakurnagar on 2 February 2019.

Pratibaadi Dharma: Matua as a Religion of Protest

On 21 June 2014, Thakurnagar was in a festive mood. Many Matua devotees gathered in this quaint refugee township in the district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal where the Matua Mahasangha (MM) has its headquarters. It was raining cats and dogs. But the gloomy weather could not dampen people's jubilation. After all, they had come to attend a notable event – the felicitation of the then *sanghadhipati* of the MM, Kapil Krishna Thakur, for being elected as the MP from Bongaon in the 16th parliamentary election. The event was organised at the *nata mandir* on the sprawling *Thakurbari* campus, which is the residence of the Thakur family. The itinerary of the day-long ceremony included musical performances, speeches by Matua dignitaries, the felicitation of Kapil Krishna Thakur and his wife Mamata Bala Thakur, and a film screening. The stage, adorned with the portraits of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, was decorated with flowers and garlands. A big LCD screen at the venue played a video clip of Kapil Krishna Thakur taking oath in parliament on 5 June 2014. For the first time, a Matua leader had taken oath in parliament in the name of Harichand-Guruchand, and the short video clip that was being played in a loop had an immense emotional impact on the audience. The crowd cheered every time the video was played.

Kapil Krishna Thakur was touched by the warm gesture of the devotees. He delivered a long and emotional speech that was later published in a local periodical named *Matua Darpan*.¹⁰² He talked about the religious movement (*dharmandolan*) and the contributions (*karmandolan*) of his forefathers Harichand-Guruchand, and how his father

¹⁰²Santosh Kumar Barui, "Bhalobasar Jharna Dharae Sangsad Sri Kapilkrishna Thakur ke Songbordhona", *Matua Darpan* 15(58) (July-September 2014): 36-39.

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur carried forward their legacy. The focus of his speech was on the centrality of the figure of the ‘devotee’ (*bhakta*) and grassroots preachers (*sadhu-gosai-pagol*) in the Matua religious tradition. He said, “Matua devotees are the living *mandir* of Sri Sri [Harichand] Thakur”.¹⁰³ He reminded his audience of the contributions of eminent devotees such as Tarak Chandra Sarkar, Ashwini Gosai, Bicharan Pagol, Mahananda Haldar, and Gopal Sadhu to substantiate his lecture on the primacy of devotees in the advancement of the Matua movement (*andolan*). It is the devotees, he admitted, who legitimise the authority of the Thakur family, and added that he became an MP because of their overwhelming support. Matua Dharma, Thakur emphasised, was ‘devotee-centric’ (*bhaktakendrik*) and not family-centric (*poribaarkendrik*), and thus, there must not be any hierarchy between the Thakur family and the ordinary devotee. While explaining the anti-hierarchical and egalitarian standpoint of the Matua religious tradition and how the MM should operate based on it, Kapil Krishna Thakur used a politically significant expression to define Matua Dharma. He said:

“It cannot be allowed to keep Matua Mahasangha within the confines of a family, turn the Matuas into a source of income by replicating Brahminical trickery, and convert *Thakurbari* into as a *dham* (pilgrimage) where the Matuas are unfree and without rights. This is against the ideology of Matua Dharma. Matua Dharma is a *religion of protest* (*pratibaadi dharma*) – a religion of equality (*samyabaad-er dharma*). Freedom of speech of the devotees, their freedom of action, and rights shall always be protected here. This is the ideology of Harichand-Guruchand, the ideology of my parents” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Barui, “Bhalobasar Jharna Dharae”, 37.

¹⁰⁴Barui, “Bhalobasar Jharna Dharae”, 38.

Coming from the *sanghadhipati*, these words of acknowledgement and encouragement made the devotees ecstatic. The *nata mandir* echoed with cheers from the audience. The day came to an end with the screening of the film *Jibon Dhuli* in the presence of its director Tanvir Mokammel, a filmmaker from Bangladesh. The film is based on a Namasudra percussionist's life and struggle in East Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971).

The story of this event reveals many aspects of Matua politics in contemporary West Bengal. First, the event raises questions of political representation and identity of the Matuas. The objective of the event was to celebrate not only the electoral victory of Kapil Krishna Thakur strictly as the representative of the people of an administratively delimited constituency, but also his role as the voice of the larger Matua religious community in parliament. Participation in elections for political representation is an important aspect of the present politics of the MM. However, the idea of the 'representative' in this case moves beyond the scope of electoral representation since the 'represented' includes two sets of constituents – one, people in the particular electoral constituency; and two, the Matuas as a community. Second, it brings to the fore the example of an emerging phenomenon – the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand for the consolidation of Matuas. Kapil Krishna Thakur's decision to take oath as an MP in the name of Harichand-Guruchand, and the emotional impact it had on the Matua public, is one such instance. It also provides evidence of an emerging iconography of Dalit politics in the state. Three, the day-long programme, particularly the film screening, shows the cross-border religious-cultural connections and networks of the MM. Finally, and most importantly, the event demonstrates the link between the religious and the political in the realm of emerging Dalit assertions in the state. The politics of the Matuas, as one can derive from Kapil Krishna Thakur's aforementioned speech, is based on the ideology of protest (*pratibaad*) and equality (*samya*) embedded in Matua Dharma. Moreover, Thakur underlined the distinction

between Brahminism and Matua religion in his lecture. Brahminism, according to Thakur, is a form of trickery (*kowshowl*) of the few who earn profits on the basis of a hierarchical system. In contrast, Matua Dharma is a counter-ideology that promotes equal rights and freedom for all.

In this chapter, I explore the principles and practices of Matua Dharma that make it a religion of protest (*pratibaadi dharma*). At the outset, it is important to have an understanding of the realm of the religious in order to better grasp the politics of the Matuas under the aegis of the MM in contemporary West Bengal. The larger question that I seek to address in this chapter is: what is the role of religion in shaping the politics of the subaltern? The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I discuss the scholarly literature on the forms and functions of religion in modern stratified society, and the role of popular religions, in particular, in shaping the politics of the oppressed masses. Specifically, I look at the functional role of popular religions in the context of the Dalit movement in India and try to situate the specific case of Bengal within it. The second section is a detailed discussion on Matua Dharma and how it continues to shape the present politics of the Matuas in West Bengal. Here, I shall try to unpack the meanings of the term 'Matua' and look at the anti-caste ideology, materialistic character, and the pragmatic principles of Matua Dharma through an analysis of the religious teachings of Harichand-Guruchand. These teachings continue to remain relevant and are strategically used by the MM and other outfits to consolidate the Matuas as a socially coherent, religio-culturally distinct, and politically significant Dalit community. The evidence presented in this chapter is derived from the two main sacred texts of the Matuas, namely the *Sri Sri Harilamrita* (first published in 1916) written by Tarak Chandra Sarkar and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (first published in 1943) written by Mahananda Haldar, and my fieldwork observations.

I

Religion: Forms and Functions

Let me begin with the discussion on the forms and functions of religion in modern society and its link to politics. With the advent of modernity, religion in society underwent a major transformation. This happened, as G. Aloysius has observed, because of a twin process: one, a shift in the idea of religion from “transcendental-experiential” and “individual-salvational” to “ethical-instrumental” and “collective-celebrational”; and two, an emerging consciousness among the marginalised masses to voluntarily construct a morally just and egalitarian social world instead of involuntarily accepting what is religiously given and is often exploitative and exclusionary.¹⁰⁵ The conceptual change in the idea of religion led to renewed interest among thinkers and scholars in revisiting the sacred texts. It also led to the rise of missionary and evangelical ventures across continents, and the proliferation of new sects and cults in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁶

The most authoritative theoretical frameworks on the relationship between religion and modern society were provided by three schools of influential thinkers, namely, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895), and Max Weber (1864-1920). Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), examined the social functions of religion. For him, a “*religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those to adhere to them*” (emphasis in original).¹⁰⁷ According to the Durkheimian framework, as scholars have

¹⁰⁵Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁶Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 1.

¹⁰⁷Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 2008), 47.

noted, religion is a product of collective human agency that functions as a cohesive force in society, maintains social order, and lays the foundation of a 'moral community'.¹⁰⁸

Unlike Durkheim, Marx was more critical of the institution of religion. Religion, he argued, is “*a reversed world-consciousness*” and an illusion produced by the state and society that eclipses the possibility of realisation of true human essence, and therefore needs to be abolished to achieve “*real happiness*” of the people (emphasis in original).¹⁰⁹ Religion, for Marx, was an ideology of the established order that functioned in accordance with the conditions of material production and the corresponding social relations.¹¹⁰ However, as scholars have pointed out, Marx also identified the dual character of religion, and noted that religion in society could function both as a tool of “legitimation of existing conditions” and as “a protest against them”.¹¹¹ In the context of the Jewish minority in nineteenth-century Germany, Marx looked at the “religious difference” of the Jews as a “political terrain” from where ““real, practical” political emancipation beyond the contradictions of bourgeois political equality” could be effectively pushed.¹¹² Engels was more interested than Marx in studying the historical role of religion. Like Marx, he also recognised the dual functionality of religion as he examined the role of primitive Christianity and the other historical “rebellious forms of religion”.¹¹³ In other words, both Marx and Engels, in spite of their criticism of religion, did not disregard its positive potential to function as a “vehicle for ‘protest consciousness’” of the poor and the exploited masses.¹¹⁴ The debate on the role of religion in society divided the later Marxists into different camps. While one group

¹⁰⁸Gail Omvedt. “Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism: BR Ambedkar's Sociology of Religion and Indian Society” in *Reconstructing the World: BR Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50.

¹⁰⁹Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 41-42.

¹¹⁰Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), 4-7 and Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 3-8.

¹¹¹Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 6

¹¹²Nicholas Jaoul, “Citizenship in Religious Clothing?: Navayana Buddhism and Dalit Emancipation in Late 1990s Uttar Pradesh”, *Focaal* No.76 (2016): 49.

¹¹³Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 7-9.

¹¹⁴Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 3-8.

of Marxists that included figures such as Lenin¹¹⁵ and Brecht¹¹⁶ subscribed to the crude materialistic interpretation of religion and called for its abolition, the other group with thinkers such as Rosa Luxemburg¹¹⁷ and Ernst Bloch¹¹⁸ paid serious attention to the radical potential of religion in bringing revolutionary change by the poor masses under specific historical conditions.¹¹⁹

Apart from the above two theoretical understandings of religion, a major contribution on the subject was provided by sociologist Max Weber. He looked at religion as a “*force for social-historical change*”.¹²⁰ Michael Löwy noted that in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) Weber argued that “there exists between certain religious forms and the capitalist lifestyle a relationship of *elective affinity*” (emphasis

¹¹⁵Lenin was a staunch atheist. In the text *The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion* (1909), Lenin suggested, “We must combat religion—that is the ABC of all materialism, and consequently of Marxism. But Marxism is not a materialism which has stopped at the ABC. Marxism goes further. It says: We must know how to combat religion, and in order to do so we must explain the source of faith and religion among the masses in a materialist way. The combating of religion cannot be confined to abstract ideological preaching, and it must not be reduced to such preaching. It must be linked up with the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion. Why does religion retain its hold on the backward sections of the town proletariat, on broad sections of the semi-proletariat, and on the mass of the peasantry? Because of the ignorance of the people, replies the bourgeois progressist, the radical or the bourgeois materialist. And so: “Down with religion and long live atheism; the dissemination of atheist views is our chief task!”” (V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works, Volume 15 March 1908-August 1909* trans. and ed. Andrew Rothstein and Bernard Isaacs. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, Digital Reprint 2010), 405).

¹¹⁶The following dialogue in Bertolt Brecht’s play *Joan of the Stockyards* (1932) reflects in his position on religion and god:

“If ever someone comes to tell you
that there exists a God, invisible however,
from whom you can expect help,
hit him hard in the head with a stone
until he dies.” (Quoted in Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 12-13).

¹¹⁷Rosa Luxemburg did not support an “intolerant ‘materialistic’ perspective” towards religion and suggested that the fight for socialism could be carried out “in the name of the true values of original Christianity.” (Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 13)

¹¹⁸Ernst Bloch was the first Marxist thinker who, like Engels, differentiated between the official religion of the Church and the rebellious forms of religion of the people. However, as Löwy noted, Bloch did not consider religion only as “a ‘cloak’ of class interests” (See Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 15).

¹¹⁹For a detailed discussion on the debate on religion among Marxist scholarship, see Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 4-18.

¹²⁰Omvedt, “Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism”, 51.

in original).¹²¹ In his later work, *The Sociology of Religion* (1920), Weber, for the first time, recognised “a distinct category of religion of non-privileged classes and its differential form and function within society”.¹²² The class-specificity of religion – separate, and often, opposing sets of beliefs, practices, and organisations of different classes – was further elaborated upon in the Weberian tradition. For instance, the idea of the ‘sect’ was conceptualised in the context of Christianity in the West by Weber’s students as “protest groups, of generally lower-class individuals and groups” who came together voluntarily and articulated “a variant form of the dominant socio-religious world view, through a particular type of organization, that was seen as more egalitarian, anti-sacerdotal, and democratic in functioning, including enablement of women”.¹²³ The Weberian framework thus brought to the fore the two principal forms of religion in a particular stratified society: (a) the doctrinal religion of the elites, and (b) the popular religions of the subaltern masses. The following discussion shall focus on the latter, that is, the category of popular religion.

Popular Religion and Politics of Resistance

Popular religions have been instrumental in the political expressions and social protests of the subaltern across the world. However, the study of popular religion and its different functions – political, cultural, and moral – in society could not grab the intellectual attention that it deserves. The historians of popular religions and cultures, for instance, have been described by Sumanta Banerjee as “the ragpickers of history” who “build up their resources from the leftovers of historical research”.¹²⁴ Among the few thinkers who took the question of popular religion seriously, the foremost was Antonio Gramsci. He

¹²¹Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 19.

¹²²Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 9. Also see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (London: Beacon Press, 1963).

¹²³Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 9.

¹²⁴Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 1.

classified popular religion as “the incoherent and fragmentary set of religious beliefs and practices that express the concrete historical experience of the subaltern classes” that stands in opposition to the dominant ideology of the elite.¹²⁵ For Gramsci, popular religion is “a component of, and often coincides with *senso comune*”, that is, the common sense of the masses.¹²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin thought of popular religion as “the language of the people” in any society that continually challenges the dominant order and its official religion.¹²⁷ The rebellious and subversive role of religion of the masses was seriously considered by another Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch. For Bloch, religion of the masses was a form of “*utopian* consciousness...one of the richest expressions of the *principle of hope*” (emphasis in original).¹²⁸ In the field of sociology, the Weberian framework influenced later theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu who reflected on the class-specific methods of religious production, ideologies, and practices of different social formations.¹²⁹ Bourdieu noted that on the one hand there lies the domain of “popular religious self-consumption”, while on the other, there are the “specialists who monopolize religious production” through “intentional and institutionalized pedagogical action”.¹³⁰

The emergence of liberation theology and the political movements of the poor and the oppressed people in many Latin American countries augmented academic interest in the study of popular religion. In his work on popular religion and class consciousness in Nicaragua, Roger N. Lancaster described popular religion as “the first building block of all that follows”.¹³¹ He argued that in every stratified society, religion, like culture, “assumes

¹²⁵Rosario Forlenza, “Antonio Gramsci on Religion”, *Journal of Classical Sociology* 21(1) (2019): 10.

¹²⁶Forlenza, “Antonio Gramsci on Religion”, 10.

¹²⁷Roger N. Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua*. (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1988), 30. Also see Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 4.

¹²⁸Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 15.

¹²⁹See Erwan Dianteill, “Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Religion: A Central and Peripheral Concern”, *Theory and Society* 32(5/6) (December 2003): 536.

¹³⁰Dianteill, 536.

¹³¹Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 31.

two major poles based on hierarchical relationships that obtain between elites and the masses”.¹³² The poor and the dispossessed masses adopt “interpretations and meanings of religion from their own point of view, as distinct from the elites with whom they share a general system of meaning” and this gave to innovations in their belief systems and religious practices.¹³³ Similar examples can be found in Brazil where the ideological influence of popular religion, what Löwy has termed “Liberationist Christianity”, was immense in shaping the politics of the poor.¹³⁴ In the Indian context, scholars such as Sumanta Banerjee (2002) and Sudhir Chakravarti (2017) have studied and documented the popular religious traditions of Bengal.¹³⁵ Popular religion, Banerjee has argued, is “the oldest form of logic” that germinates from “a collective rationality which developed primarily from and within the rural community’s consciousness, often independent of the ecclesiastical codified scriptures of the learned clergy”.¹³⁶ He showed how people have historically created their own deities, belief systems, rituals, customs, and practices in times of crises such as outbreak of diseases and epidemics, or death and natural calamities, or to resist the exploitation of the established order.¹³⁷ These popular religions are far removed from the written, rigid and institutionalised doctrinal religions of the elites. In the wake of colonial modernity in Bengal, for instance, more than seventy popular religious traditions and syncretic sects of lower-caste communities flourished in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries that discarded scriptures such as the Vedas, the Quran, and the

¹³²Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 27.

¹³³Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 31-33.

¹³⁴Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 2, 32-80.

¹³⁵See Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form* and Chakravarti, *Along Deep Lonely Alleys*.

¹³⁶Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 2.

¹³⁷In the early 19th century, a goddess called Ola-bibi was invented by people in rural Bengal when the province witnessed the outbreak of cholera. Similarly, the threat of tigers and adverse geographic conditions in the deltaic region of Sunderbans in Bengal had led the local people to create and worship gods such as Bana-bibi and Dakshin Ray. Furthermore, lower-caste communities like the Hadis (an ex-untouchable caste), for example, have created their own religious traditions outside the ambit of Hinduism to resist the oppression and violence of the caste system (for a detailed discussion, see Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 1-30).

Puranas, and their elite keepers, the Brahmins and the Maulavis.¹³⁸ The dialectical interaction of popular and doctrinal religions, therefore, is a key aspect of the cultural struggle between non-hegemonic and hegemonic groups in a given society.¹³⁹ As Aloysius showed in his study on the role of Buddhism among subaltern Tamil groups, a form of popular religion, what he calls “religion of the oppressed”, in a divided society can throw an ideological challenge to the dominant religion of the upper castes and elites in terms of its structure, functions, and world view, and provide the oppressed masses “an emancipatory identity”.¹⁴⁰ Following the above discussion, one can infer that popular religion can function as a counter-ideology for political action and collective resistance of the subaltern masses vis-à-vis the dominant establishment in a given modern society at a particular historical moment.

At this juncture, one must be cautious and keep in mind that most studies on popular religions and the phenomenon of religiously expressed political movements of the poor and the oppressed people across the world have tried to understand subaltern politics through the concept of ‘millenarianism’, meaning “an ideology of social protest in which those who have not fully adapted to the demands of modernity fall back on pre-modern ‘religion’ to express their material and non-material grievances, usually unsuccessfully”.¹⁴¹ Such an approach is a legacy of Weber who acknowledged the class-specificity of religion in society, but was critical of the ‘rationality’ of the religion of the lower classes (the artisans and the peasantry), something he thought was rooted in nature and was economically irrational.¹⁴² However, this has not always been the case. The popular religions of the subaltern masses have functioned as ideologies of their modern ambitions and claims.

¹³⁸Chakravarti, *Along Deep Lonely Alleys*, 18-19. Also see Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*.

¹³⁹Contursi, “Political Theology”, 320-339.

¹⁴⁰Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*.

¹⁴¹Chandra, “Flaming Fields and Forest Fires”, 2.

¹⁴²Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*.

Recent studies have questioned the applicability of the concept of millenarianism in understanding the link between popular religion and subaltern politics, and highlighted the modern secular functions of religion. For instance, Uday Chandra's work on the Birsaites *ulgulan* and Adivasi politics in the Chota Nagpur region (now Jharkhand) has shown how the "theologico-political" movements of the subaltern under colonial rule were organised around modern claims and demands of land, rights, entitlements, recognition, and redistribution vis-à-vis the state, and through the use of a modern method such as petitioning the state.¹⁴³ Similarly in the Latin American countries, as Löwy has shown, liberation theology "fully" assimilated the "modern values of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity, democracy and the separation between Church and State" while simultaneously developing a critique of capitalist modernity.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, we can also think of the example of B. R. Ambedkar, the iconic Dalit leader and a political modernist, who turned to religious means for social emancipation and decided to convert to Buddhism with his followers in October 1956. Ambedkar's ideas on religion were quite akin to the Durkheimian framework. For him, a "modern, rationalistic, equalitarian society needs and can find a religion capable of providing a moral code for its purposes".¹⁴⁵ In the Ambedkarite schema, the moral code provided by religion in modern society, unlike Hinduism, is based on justice.¹⁴⁶ Ambedkar believed that modern values such as liberty and justice can survive only in a society that chooses "Dhamma plus the Magistrate".¹⁴⁷ "Those who want liberty," he wrote, "must therefore have Dhamma."¹⁴⁸ As Nicolas Jaoul has argued, Ambedkar, who was quite critical of the popular religious sects of different

¹⁴³Chandra, "Flaming Fields and Forest Fires", 24.

¹⁴⁴Löwy, *The War of Gods*, 52-55.

¹⁴⁵Omvedt, "Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism", 58.

¹⁴⁶Omvedt, "Confronting Brahmanic Hinduism", 56-57.

¹⁴⁷Valerian Rodrigues, "Introduction" in *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, B.R. Ambedkar, and Valerian Rodrigues (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.

¹⁴⁸Rodrigues, "Introduction", 59.

Dalit communities,¹⁴⁹ took the initiative to introduce Buddhism among his followers as a political experiment alongside his liberal politics because he searched in religion a “more encompassing human perspective” that the dominant bourgeois concept of citizenship in a Hindu majoritarian postcolonial state could not offer.¹⁵⁰ In other words, it is crucial to understand and acknowledge the secular functions of religion in the realm of modern politics instead of uncritically treating them as expressions of a pre-modern society and ethics.

Religion of Protest and Dalit-Bahujan Politics

Let me now enter the discussion on the role of popular religions in shaping the political actions of Dalits and lower-caste communities in modern India. At the outset, it is important to define the characteristics of a modern popular religion of the oppressed, what I shall call a religion of protest, and distinguish it from the other forms of popular religion.

First, popular religions can be either particularistic and localised or universal in terms of their form, functions, and world views.¹⁵¹ For example, the popular religious tradition of worshipping a goddess such as Shitala (the goddess of smallpox) or Ola-bibi (the goddess of cholera) in Bengal for protection from deadly diseases are localised practices with specific concerns. A popular religion of protest, on the other hand, essentially promulgates an “ethically ideal worldview, embodying a social order that is

¹⁴⁹Ambedkar was quite critical of popular Dalit sects and considered them to be the carriers of the “stigma of subalternity”. He chose to embrace Buddhism because it was a religion with a capital ‘R’, an organised world religion of Indian origin that was at par with other world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, and was recognised by Western discourses (Jaoul, “Citizenship in Religious Clothing?”, 46-68). For Ambedkar’s take on the bhakti saints, also see Rodrigues, “Introduction”, 22.)

¹⁵⁰Jaoul, “Citizenship in Religious Clothing?”, 48.

¹⁵¹Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 11.

egalitarian”, non-discriminatory, and morally just.¹⁵² It focuses on equality of all human beings, irrespective of their racial, caste, religious, or gender identity, and stands in opposition to any form of religion that is hierarchical, discriminatory, and, by implication, immoral. A good example of this is the Balarami sect in colonial Bengal that not only professed an ethically just social order but also imbued an ideology of protest among its followers and empowered them to resist the upper castes and the landlords.¹⁵³ The second important feature of a popular religion of protest, if I follow Aloysius’s argument, is that it is a choice and not necessarily a hereditarily given form of social identity.¹⁵⁴ Unlike doctrinal religions, which are ascriptive, one can choose to follow and practise a form of such a popular religion through voluntary commitment. Third, many popular religions that are followed by both elites and the subalterns are centered around a teacher or master (*guru*). Whether such a religion advocates a protest consciousness or simply legitimises the existing conditions of the established order can be identified through its objective, and the class and caste character of its followers. The objective of a religion of protest is always the emancipation of collectivity, and not individual salvation.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, as Sumanta Banerjee’s study shows, a religion of protest can develop around a charismatic individual because of a tendency to humanise the Supreme Being, rather than imitate the doctrinal religious practice of treating “the Supreme Being as something extraneous, and superior to the individual’s body and soul”.¹⁵⁶ One can also differentiate between a religion of protest and popular religious organisations of the elites (such as Ramakrishna Mission, or the newer ones led by godmen such as Rajneesh and Jaggi Vasudev) by thoroughly investigating the material conditions under which the two have been founded, and the caste and class character of their followers. While an upper-caste priest such as

¹⁵²Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 10.

¹⁵³Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 14.

¹⁵⁴Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 10-11.

¹⁵⁵Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 11.

¹⁵⁶Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 11.

Ramakrishna, and the Ramakrishna Mission as an organisation represent a pro-establishment religious tradition of “urban domesticity”,¹⁵⁷ particularly of the upper and middle classes, that legitimises the ideology of the dominant, a religion of protest stands in ideological opposition to the established order and disrupts the existing conditions in an unequal society. Similarly, while religious institutions such as the Osho International Foundation and the Isha Foundation cater to “personal tensions and anxieties” of a cosmopolitan elite, vacillating between the material allurements and associated uncertainty in a globalised economic world order, popular religions such as Matua Dharma and the Kartabhaja sect represent the shared protest consciousness of lower-caste communities against historically perpetrated social injustice and economic exploitation by the upper castes.¹⁵⁸ In short, a religion of protest can be described as “a self-conscious, self-differentiating and self-defining sacralised ideology, set against the dominant, in ethical challenge and superiority” that is universal in terms of its concerns and can promote the modern ambitions of the subaltern masses as well as encourage them to take political action.¹⁵⁹

In modern India, starting from the colonial era to the post-Independence years, popular religious sects, saints, and symbols have played crucial roles in consolidating the social protests and political movements of lower-caste communities. At the social level, the religions of protest provided Dalit-Bahujan communities “spiritual citizenship”, something that had been historically denied to them by the dominant Brahminical establishment through caste-based discriminatory practices such as ban on temple entry.¹⁶⁰ Religious practices and symbols also provided the caste subalterns access to the public

¹⁵⁷Partha Chatterjee, “A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class”, in *Subaltern Studies*, No. 7, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40-68.

¹⁵⁸Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 27.

¹⁵⁹Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 8.

¹⁶⁰Shepherd and Karuppusamy, *The Shudras*.

sphere, and enabled them to make autonomous claims and assertions in a collective fashion. For instance, P. Sanal Mohan's work on the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in colonial Kerala shows how practices such as prayers and religious assemblies introduced by the European missionaries, and later modified by the PRDS, created a "social space" for Dalits.¹⁶¹ Similarly, in the north Indian states, particularly in Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, the Ad Dharm movement, as Mark Juergensmeyer has shown, evolved as a "rebellious religion" that rejected Hinduism because of its hierarchical, discriminatory, and exploitative caste system, and provided its followers the "vision" of an emancipatory social order.¹⁶² At the political level, the "use of symbolic means" — that is, public observance of non-Brahminical religious practices and customs, construction of temples and statues of Dalit religious icons, and the organisation of religious processions or public events such as *melas* — is a key strategy of Dalit assertions in the mainstream public sphere.¹⁶³ Historically, anti-caste religious sects, as Ram has argued in the context of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab, characterise an "alternative agenda" for social mobility and the construction of a "separate Dalit identity"¹⁶⁴ by moving beyond the two

¹⁶¹P. Sanal Mohan, "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 28(1) (2005): 35-63.

¹⁶²Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishers, 2009).

¹⁶³Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means", 175-207.

¹⁶⁴Ram, "Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation", 639-702.

other predominant strategies, viz. sanskritization¹⁶⁵ and conversion¹⁶⁶. The institutionalisation of these religions led to the “deep politicization” of lower-caste communities.¹⁶⁷ It contributed to the process of identity formation of different Dalit-Bahujan communities, both in social and political terms, and enabled them to negotiate with the colonial state to achieve their demands of recognition, equal rights, social justice, and access to governmental benefits. For instance, one can think of the movement of Ad Dharmis across Punjab on the eve of the census of 1931 to get recognition from the colonial administration and de facto autonomy as a separate non-Hindu religious community.¹⁶⁸ Similar instances of religiously expressed movements of Dalit-Bahujan communities to gain social respectability, political recognition and rights, and government benefits include: the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seeking Society) formed in 1873 in

¹⁶⁵Sanskritization, as M.N. Srinivas had suggested, is a “process by which a “low” Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, “twice-born” caste” (Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, 6). It is a prevalent phenomenon among a considerable section of Dalits to achieve upward social mobility. Popular religious organisations such as the Ramakrishna Mission and the Swami Narayan movement in Gujarat, which have “refashioned the Brahminical Hindu traditions...to accommodate the emancipatory aspirations of the masses” (Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 17-18.), had run campaigns amongst the lower-caste communities and provided them the required platform for sanskritization and, thereby, integration into the dominant social order. Scholars have also questioned the process of sanskritization by arguing that it is not necessarily a voluntary action of Dalits, but a “politically engineered” process dictated by the upper-caste establishment (Nicholas Jaoul, “Casting the ‘Sweepers.’: Local Politics of Sanskritisation, Caste and Labour”, in *Cultural Entrenchment of Hindutva: Local Mediations and Forms of Convergence*, eds. Daniela Berti, Nicolas Jaoul, and Pralay Kanungo (India: Routledge, 2011), 273-306.). For a detailed critique of the concept of sanskritization also see Gopal Guru, “Reservations and the Sanskritization of Scheduled Castes - Some Theoretical Aspects”, *Sociological Bulletin*, 33(1-2) (1984): 29-38.

¹⁶⁶Conversion to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism to escape the discrimination and violence of the Hindu caste system has been another strategy for social mobility among Dalits across regions. In Bengal, for instance, a large section of the lower-caste population converted to Islam, and later, to Christianity (Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 30). Since the 1850s, mass conversions to Christianity happened in many lower-caste communities viz. the Mangs and Mahars of Bombay, the Chuhars and Mazahabis of Punjab, the Doms of Benares, Kumaon and Garhwal hills, the hill tribes of the North East region, the Mallas and Madigas of Andhra, among many others (Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 18). The celebrated Dalit leader and icon, B.R. Ambedkar, himself adopted the strategy of mass conversion to Buddhism in a public ceremony held on 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, Maharashtra.

¹⁶⁷Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (India: Penguin Books, 1997).

¹⁶⁸Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, 72-80.

Maharashtra¹⁶⁹, the Satnampanth among the Chamars of the central Indian region of Chhattisgarh¹⁷⁰, the Mahima Dharma and the Munda protest in colonial Orissa¹⁷¹, the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam¹⁷², among many others.¹⁷³ Finally, at the ideological level, popular religion functioned as the motor of consciousness of protest against the dominant Hindu establishment among the followers. This ideological role has been crucial to the cultural and political struggle of Dalits across India. For example, the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, as Janet Contursi has argued, combined the religious discourse of Ambedkar's Dhamma with the political discourse of socialism to produce a "practical political theology" of resistance in its struggle against the dominant upper-caste Hindu order.¹⁷⁴

Here, I must mention that the dialectical relationship between doctrinal and popular religions has often led to the incorporation of the latter within the former due to various reasons. There are innumerable instances of popular beliefs, folk customs, and local ritual practices being either destroyed, or suppressed, or selectively incorporated and systematised within the doctrinal religions of the dominant classes across the world.¹⁷⁵ The structural shift in the form, practices, and world view of Vaishnavism, introduced by Chaitanya in sixteenth-century Bengal, from an anti-caste egalitarian tradition to "a hierarchically ordained replica of the caste-based Brahminical order" under the influence of "the upper-caste and the upper-class... Goswamis" (the six disciples of Chaitanya) is

¹⁶⁹For more on this see Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁷⁰For more on this see Saurabh Dube, "Idioms of Authority and Engendered Agendas: The Satnami Mahasabha, Chhattisgarh, 1925-1950", *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 30(4) (1993): 383-411.

¹⁷¹See Biswamoy Pati, "Religion and Social 'Subversion': Re-examining Colonial Orissa", *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (25) (2010): 43-52.

¹⁷²See Robin Jeffrey, "The Social Origins of a Caste Association, 1875-1905: The Founding of the SNDP Yogam", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 4(1) (1974): 39-59.

¹⁷³Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*, 17.

¹⁷⁴Contursi, "Political Theology", 337.

¹⁷⁵Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 4-5.

one such example.¹⁷⁶ In modern India, broadly speaking, the distinct religious traditions of Dalits were systematically Hinduised through three processes – (a) social campaigns by upper-caste Hindu outfits; (b) political decisions and events supported by caste Hindus; and (c) legal-official actions of the Hindu-dominated postcolonial state. Among the social campaigns, one can think of aggressive drives such as ‘*shuddhi*’ (ritual purification) and ‘*sangathan*’ (organisation) run by the Hindu Mahasabha and the Arya Samaj to Hinduise lower-caste communities from the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, at the political level, a leader such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made serious efforts to keep the Depressed Classes within the Hindu fold. Gandhi sat on a historic fast against the communal award and the demand of Dalits for a separate electorate that led to the signing of the Poona Pact in 1932. Moreover, the Partition of India in 1947 and the Hindu-Muslim communal tension at the time integrated Dalits, particularly those in Bengal and Punjab, within the larger Hindu community and created the Muslims as the ‘Other’. The last tool to erase or engulf the religious difference of Dalits and integrate them as Hindus in postcolonial India has been the legal means. For instance, Joel Lee’s research on Dalits and politics of religion in Uttar Pradesh has shown how the religious tradition of Lal Beg among sanitation workers in the north Indian region of Awadh in the 20th century gradually disappeared through legal-official techniques of the modern Indian state. The enactment of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, for example, unequivocally mentioned that a person who is not a Hindu cannot be a member of a Scheduled Caste, and thus, cannot be a beneficiary of affirmative action and government benefits.¹⁷⁸ This law eventually led the Lal Begis, as Lee has argued, to give up their distinct religious

¹⁷⁶Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 5-6.

¹⁷⁷Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 193.

¹⁷⁸Joel Lee, “Jagdish, Son of Ahmad: Dalit Religion and Nominative Politics in Lucknow”, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 11 (2015): 41. <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3919>. Accessed August 5, 2021.

tradition and adopt a Hinduised identity, Valmiki, in the enumerative operations of the state such as census to get government benefits as Scheduled Castes in a Hindu majoritarian postcolonial state.¹⁷⁹ A similar example is Article 25(2)(b) of the Indian Constitution that undermined its secular character by showing concerns about the “social welfare and reform” of one religion, Hinduism.¹⁸⁰ The real objective of this Article, as Pritam Singh has shown, is “to prevent the exodus of Dalits from the Hindu fold” and to consolidate the Hindu identity in Indian society and politics.¹⁸¹

The interaction of the organised Dalit sects with the dominant Hindu establishment has also been a matter of instrumental politics and strategic bargaining. In the realm of politics, it is not impossible to think that, under certain political conditions, two ideologically antagonistic forces can make ad-hoc adjustments at a given point of time for successful negotiations on other mutually beneficial political and material interests. The electoral alliances of Dalit-Bahujan political and religious outfits with the right-wing, upper-caste-led Hindutva forces in postcolonial Indian politics show this phenomenon where two ideologically opposed camps have joined hands, mostly temporarily, to achieve political power, representation, and other material interests.¹⁸² In spite of integration or strategic alliances with the dominant establishment due to political compulsion, popular religion nonetheless continues to survive as protest consciousness of the masses like dormant volcanoes, takes newer forms with changing times, and erupts as the ideological basis for political action against the established order and its religion whenever necessary. The case study of the politics of the Matuas in contemporary West Bengal, as I shall show

¹⁷⁹Lee, “Jagdish, Son of Ahmad”.

¹⁸⁰Pritam Singh, “Hindu Bias in India’s ‘Secular’ Constitution: Probing Flaws in The Instruments of Governance”, *Third World Quarterly* 26(6) (2005): 915.

¹⁸¹Singh, “Hindu Bias in India’s ‘Secular’ Constitution”, 915.

¹⁸²The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), for instance, entered into an electoral alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Uttar Pradesh in 1995.

in the following section and chapters, demonstrates this continued relevance of popular religion in shaping the politics of the subaltern.

II

In colonial Bengal, as some of the examples cited above reveal, a considerable number of popular religions emerged from the lower echelons of society. One of the most politically important traditions is Matua Dharma that emerged as a protest consciousness, particularly among the Namasudras in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Unlike the religiously expressed movements of Dalit-Bahujan communities in the north, south, and western India, the Matua theologico-political movement (*Matua Andolan*) in Bengal has remained little-known in the mainstream public discourse, and has received inadequate academic attention. Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay examined the religious life and social protests of the Matuas in considerable detail but only as a part of the larger Namasudra movement in colonial Bengal.¹⁸³ He showed that the Matua sect and its leaders such as Guruchand Thakur and P.R. Thakur played an instrumental role in the mobilisation of the Namasudras in colonial Bengal. In spite of consciously staying away from upper-caste dominated anti-colonial nationalist politics for decades, the Namasudras, according to Bandyopadhyay, finally moved towards integration into movements led by the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Communists amidst an environment of political turmoil marked by communal polarisation, an agrarian uprising such as the Tebhaga movement, and the partition of Bengal. The political climate in the years before Partition, Bandyopadhyay noted, paved the way for “strategic alliances” between Namasudra leaders, including Matua leader P.R. Thakur, and the upper-caste Hindu political forces.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*.

¹⁸⁴Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 248.

However, as Debesh Roy's fascinating novel *Barishaler Jogen Mandal*¹⁸⁵ and Dwaipayan Sen's recent academic monograph on Jogendranath Mandal (leader of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation)¹⁸⁶ show, there was also a sharp difference between the political standpoints of a leader such as Mandal and Matua leaders during this period. Historian Sumit Sarkar has also shown that the shift in the politics of the Namasudras during the transfer of power was full of tensions and not at all seamless¹⁸⁷. Sarkar noted that alternative forms of religious life of the subordinated castes, such as the Matua sect, neither underwent "total integration" nor could build up "a distinct domain" free from upper-caste influence, but was "marked by complicated, shifting and selective appropriations".¹⁸⁸

After Partition, the Matuas resurfaced as a politically important and electorally salient community in West Bengal only in the mid-2000s. The re-emergence of organised Matua politics in postcolonial West Bengal drew fresh academic attention. It led to an academic debate in the *Economic and Political Weekly* journal on whether the assertions of the Matuas had finally ruptured the silence and invisibility of caste in West Bengal, and more recently, works of scholars such as Manoshanto Biswas¹⁸⁹, Sipra Mukherjee¹⁹⁰, and Carola Erika Lorea¹⁹¹ show the growing interest in studying the history, literature, and community-building processes of the Matuas. This emerging scholarship, however, has seldom considered a critical question: what is the impetus behind the consolidation and emerging political assertions of the Matuas under the banner of the MM? To put it differently, what is the ideology of Matua politics? This reminds us of the speech by Kapil

¹⁸⁵Debesh Roy, *Barishaler Jogen Mandal* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 2010).

¹⁸⁶See Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Question*.

¹⁸⁷Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015).

¹⁸⁸Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 78-79.

¹⁸⁹See Biswas, *Banglar Matua Andolan*.

¹⁹⁰Mukherjee, "In Opposition and Allegiance to Hinduism", 435-451.

¹⁹¹See Lorea, "Religion, Caste, and Displacement".

Krishna Thakur, the former *sangbadhipati* of the MM, that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Thakur categorically mentioned to his audience that Matua Dharma is a religion of protest (*pratibaadi dharma*) and the organisational politics of the Matuas must stick to the ideology of Harichand-Guruchand. In the following discussion, I shall explore this ideology of protest embedded in the principles and the practices of this popular religion that continues to shape the politics of the community.

Unpacking the ‘Matua’ identity

Let me start by explaining the term ‘Matua’. There are three predominant interpretations of the term that I came across during the course of this research: one, the popular explanation that is primarily transmitted orally; two, the textual interpretation of its origin; and three, the organisational definition. The popular understanding of the word ‘Matua’ connects it to the Bangla word ‘*matoara*’ (meaning, intoxicated/maddened). When I enquired about the meaning of the word, most of my respondents readily said Matua means someone who is ‘maddened in the name of Harichand’ (*Hari naam-e matoara*). This explanation also finds mention in the sacred text, the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*¹⁹² as well as the autobiography of P.R. Thakur titled *Atmacharit Ba Purbasmriti*¹⁹³.

The second interpretation of the term is found in the main sacred text of the Matuas, namely the *Sri Sri Harililamrita*. The author narrates an episode from the life of Harichand Thakur to explain the origin of the term ‘Matua’ and the fame that it acquired rapidly.¹⁹⁴ The story goes as follows. Once Harichand Thakur visited a disciple’s house

¹⁹²Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (Sixth edition) (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 2012), 126.

¹⁹³Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, *Atmacharit Ba Purbasmriti* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 1995), 84.

¹⁹⁴Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 66-67.

with his followers near his village in Orakandi (now in Bangladesh). Many devotees and other villagers, both men and women across castes, came to see him preach his ideas, and attend the *sabha* (meeting). The devotees started singing devotional songs, and the women ululated. At this moment, three Brahmins came to the *sabha*, and looked for Harichand. The devotees pointed to Harichand, and asked the Brahmins to touch his feet. While one of them readily followed the instruction, the other two hesitated because Harichand was, after all, an ‘Untouchable’. Among the Brahmins who did not bow, one looked unwell. A devotee once again asked the ailing Brahmin boy to touch Harichand’s feet. When he faltered, the devotee held his chin and forced him down to the floor. He also rubbed the dust from Harichand’s feet on the Brahmin boy’s forehead. To everyone’s surprise, the Brahmin was miraculously cured. The Brahmin immediately accepted that Harichand was not an ordinary person, and the three of them left after some time. However, other Brahmins and the upper castes present at the venue got furious. They accused Harichand and his followers of heresy for their disrespect towards the rules (*vidhi*), the gods, and the Brahmins (*deva-dmija*). Harichand and his devotees were thus labelled as the followers of a different faith (*aalahida path*) and ostracised. The upper castes started mocking (*upabasa*) the devotees of Harichand as “*Haribola moto*” (people who always chant Hari).¹⁹⁵ The term ‘Matua’ thus originated from this ridicule, and spread rapidly across villages. When Harichand came to know about this nomenclature, describes Sarkar, he turned the ridicule upside down and made it into the community identity of his followers (*bhinno sampradaya mora ‘Matua’ akhyaan*).¹⁹⁶ This act of protest gave birth to the collective Matua identity. According to the textual interpretation, the Matuas therefore are “a distinct community” (*bhinno sampradaya*) separate from Hindus. The textual narrative also shows that the Matua

¹⁹⁵Chakravarti mentions ‘Haribola’ as a syncretic sect that emerged in the nineteenth century (Chakravarti, *Along Deep Lonely Alleys*, 18).

¹⁹⁶Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 66-67.

identity germinated as an amalgamation of two forms of religion¹⁹⁷ – “*panthik*” and “*quamik*”.¹⁹⁸ On the one hand, the term ‘Matua’ means the followers of the “lineage of a particular spiritual authority” (*panth*), namely Harichand Thakur, and on the other hand, it simultaneously refers to “a large, unified community” (*quam* in Urdu and Hindi; *sampradaya* in Bangla) that emerged outside the Hindu identity.¹⁹⁹

The third official definition of the term ‘Matua’ as a religion is provided by the MM in its publications, for example, the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*. Every issue of this periodical carries the following definition on its cover page:

“MATUA is a socio-economic Religion with spiritual outlook based on the uplift of the downtrodden class including ideal family life and for their mass salvation in the way of eradicating the barriers of casteism and untouchability, social and economic disparities.”

The above definition firmly establishes Matua as a religion of protest (*pratibaadi dharma*). It points out the distinctiveness of Matua Dharma and its differences with Hinduism, the doctrinal religion of the upper-caste elites, in terms of its form, objectives and world view. Through this definition, the MM situates the Matua ‘Religion’ at par with other world religions, something that is evident from the use of capital ‘R’ in the spelling of religion. It also shows that Matua as a religion is not merely focused on spiritualism, rather it is deeply rooted in the larger concerns of a hierarchical stratified society and the economic relations among people. The objectives of the Matua religion, as the definition explains, are to eradicate “the barriers of casteism and untouchability” and “social and economic

¹⁹⁷According to Mark Juergensmeyer religions in India have taken three major forms, viz. “*dharmic*” (a dharma with “customs and codes of social obligation and spiritual behavior such as those entailed by caste or ritual); “*panthik*” (that is, reverence towards “a lineage of spiritual authority” or *panth*); and “*quamik*” (that is, *quam* or “a large, unified community”) (Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, 2-3).

¹⁹⁸Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, 2-3.

¹⁹⁹Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*, 2-3.

disparities”. Moreover, the definition draws a sharp distinction between Matua Dharma and Hinduism. Unlike Hinduism that advocates asceticism and austerity, the Matua religion promotes “ideal family life” and the “mass salvation” of a collectivity – “the downtrodden class”. In short, the definition highlights the materialistic form of Matua Dharma, its function as an ideology of protest against social and economic inequalities, and its world view of a just, egalitarian social order.

Matua as a Religion of Protest: Principles, Practices and Politics

At this point, it is important to understand the principles, practices and politics of Matua Dharma that make it a religion of protest (*pratibaadi dharma*). The ideology of Harichand-Guruchand that laid the foundation of Matua politics is enshrined in the two sacred texts: the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*. These two texts are hagiographies of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur respectively that narrate their life stories and teachings. They are published by the MM in India and its counterpart, the Sri Sri Hari-Guruchand Matua Mission (SSHGMM), in Orakandi. Both the texts hold immense significance among the Matuas as the authoritative accounts of their community’s history. The texts are written in rhyming verses for the ease of oral transmission and remembering. The authors blend myths with historical facts, theology with politics, and imaginations with pragmatism to narrate the contributions of Harichand-Guruchand to the upliftment of the oppressed in Bengal. In other words, the texts represent what Badri Narayan calls “mythohistory” or “people’s history of Dalits” that are written, circulated, and consumed to reinvent alternative narratives of the community’s past as “expressions of self-consciousness”.²⁰⁰ Moreover, as I observed during fieldwork, physical copies of

²⁰⁰Badri Narayan, "Demarginalisation and History: Dalit Re-Invention of The Past", *South Asia Research* 28(2) (2008): 172-173. Historian Saurabh Dube has shown how religious myths played a crucial role in the “ordering of historical consciousness” of Dalits and in the process of

these texts are worshipped and often kept next to idols or photographs of Harichand-Guruchand in a household shrine. Members of a Matua family generally read sections of these texts daily. The consumption of these texts also happens indirectly. Selected couplets or passages from them are regularly quoted by Matua preachers, writers, activists and politicians, and are used in posters, leaflets and banners for various purposes – religious, social, and political. In short, these two texts and their interpretations by different actors – the MM, individual devotees, Dalit writers and activists, and political parties – function as the manifestos for the religious life, social actions, and political assertions and choices of the Matuas.

Let us now discuss the key teachings of Harichand-Guruchand upheld in these two texts. First, the core of Matua Dharma lies in its opposition to the Hindu caste system. The anti-caste ideology of Harichand and Guruchand has been documented in the aforementioned texts in different ways. One, the portrayal of Harichand-Guruchand as *avatars*, who were born in an ‘Untouchable’ family for the purpose of liberating ‘the Dalits, the fallen, and the oppressed’ (*dalit-patit-nipirito manush*) from the oppressions of the Brahminical order, is central to the anti-caste standpoint of this popular religious tradition. In the *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, for instance, Harichand Thakur is regarded as the incarnation of Hindu god Krishna and Vaishnava preacher Chaitanya. He has also been compared to Buddha. However, according to this text, what distinguishes Harichand from the previous Hindu *avatars* is that, unlike them, he was born in a poor Dalit family. A true *avatar*, writes Sarkar, must take birth in the lowest social order in order to liberate the people of that stratum (“*nich hoye koribo nicher uddhar, ati nimne na namile kaise avatar*”).²⁰¹ Harichand’s birth in the lowest rank of the caste order thus qualifies him as *purnabramha* (the absolute god)

formation their distinct community identity around a popular religion (Saurabh Dube, “Myths, Symbols and Community: Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh”, in *Subaltern Studies*, No. 7, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 133.

²⁰¹Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 15.

and the ultimate liberator of the oppressed. Guruchand, who is revered as *Rajarshi* (a person who has the qualities of both king and saint) and also *Shivavatar* (*avatar* of Hindu god Shiva), was entrusted by his father to carry forward the latter's legacy. There are multiple tales of miracles (*lila*) performed by Harichand and Guruchand, like the one I mentioned above on curing an ailing Brahmin. Writing alternative histories and creating myths about Dalit heroes who fought against oppression and injustice by "both opposing and weaving together stories in religious Brahminical popular texts" are important strategies of the Dalit movement for "demarginalisation".²⁰² Two, there are many stories of dissent and irreverence of Harichand-Guruchand towards Brahmins and landlords in these two texts.²⁰³ These narratives of defiance and rebellion continue to inspire and shape the religious, social and political consciousness of the Matuas. For example, they do not follow Brahminical rituals, customs and practices during marriage or death ceremonies, and do not use the services of a Brahmin in any religious or social event. Three, both the hagiographies record the various episodes of Harichand and Guruchand's lives where they impart their sermons. A famous episode, for example, is that of Harichand Thakur's encounter with one Dasharath Biswas who later became his ardent devotee.²⁰⁴ In this story, Harichand clearly tells Dasharath that he does not believe in scriptures and hymns (*tantra-mantra*), the practices of purity-pollution (*shouchachar*), and can eat even the leftovers of a dog as sacrament (*prasad*). Another similar example, mentioned in the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, is a dialogue between Guruchand Thakur and the wife of Australian missionary C.S. Mead about accepting food and water from a Christian and a foreigner.²⁰⁵ Mrs. Mead asks Guruchand whether he, being a Hindu, will accept food and water from her. Guruchand, in response, firmly tells her that the Matuas treat all human beings as equal and do not

²⁰²Narayan, "Demarginalisation and History", 183.

²⁰³See for example Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 45-48.

²⁰⁴Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 103-105.

²⁰⁵Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 200-201.

discriminate on the basis of a person's caste, religion or gender. This interaction not only demonstrates Guruchand's complete disregard for upper-caste Hindu customs, but also shows how he drew a sharp distinction between the two identities, Matua and Hindu. These instances from the sacred texts have historically shaped the anti-caste ideology of the Matuas and constructed their distinct non-Hindu identity.

Second, the gods and the religious practices of the Matuas are the markers of their difference with doctrinal religions such as Hinduism and Islam. Unlike the dominant practice of imagining god as an extraterrestrial transcendent Being, the Matua tradition humanises the figure of god and worships Dalit heroes who fought against injustice and oppression as deities. The main gods of the Matuas are Harichand Thakur and his partner, Shanti Mata, and Guruchand Thakur and his spouse, Satyabhama Debi. A Matua temple, what is called a *Harimandir*, usually consists of the idols or photographs of Harichand Thakur and Shanti Mata who are worshipped in a non-Brahminical style. Moreover, the Matuas also worship the direct disciples of Harichand. The main Matua prayer (*bandana*), for example, includes the names of a few notable devotees such as Hiranman, Golokchandra, Srilochon, Dasharath, and Mrityunjoy along with Harichand and Guruchand.²⁰⁶ This practice of worshipping the disciple alongside the master establishes the non-hierarchical relationship between the two in the Matua religious tradition, and shows how a democratic value such as equality (*samya*) is entrenched in the religious practices of the community.

Third, the teachings of Harichand and Guruchand are rooted in the materialistic concerns of the oppressed classes. Harichand, according to the religious texts, prioritised work over worship. One of his most important instructions was *Haath-e Kaam, Mukhe*

²⁰⁶Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 1.

Naam (meaning, work while you pray).²⁰⁷ Unlike the tenets of Hinduism that promote asceticism, initiation (*diksha*) and pilgrimage (*tirtha parjatan*), Harichand envisioned Matua Dharma as a *garbasta dharma* (household religion) that allows a follower-practitioner to lead an ideal family life.²⁰⁸ Like his father, Guruchand was also a pragmatic man. He believed, as Mahananda Haldar writes in the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, that the lack of education among the Namasudras was solely responsible for their social and economic backwardness.²⁰⁹ Therefore, Guruchand's clear instruction to his followers was to get educated, take up white-collar professions such as government jobs, and acquire political power. Let me cite one example. There is a section in the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* titled 'Nikhil Banga Namasudra Sammelan or Khulna Conference' that was held in 1907. This was the time of the anti-colonial Swadeshi movement led by the upper-caste Hindu leadership. In this conference, Guruchand asserted that, instead of non-cooperation with the colonial state, the Namasudras should aspire towards *bhog* (enjoyment as opposed to *tyag* or sacrifice), demand *vidya* (education) and *dhan* (property), and should want to become judges and magistrates.²¹⁰ Moreover, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's study shows, Guruchand made two more significant contributions to the Namasudras movement. One, he played a crucial role in changing the name of the community from the derogatory tag 'Chandala' to 'Namasudra', a more respectable identity, in the Census of 1911.²¹¹ After consultation with the Australian missionary, C.S. Mead, Guruchand asked his people to send mass applications to the Census Commissioner, E.A. Gait, to place this demand of changing the community's name in governmental categorisation. While the acceptance of the demand and the success of this process led to social respectability for the Namasudras, it is also seen by the Matuas as a political lesson on building strategic alliances and negotiating with

²⁰⁷Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 8.

²⁰⁸Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 8.

²⁰⁹Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 130-131.

²¹⁰Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 442.

²¹¹Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 83-84.

the state. Two, Guruchand stressed on the need of the Namasudras to achieve political power through participation in institutional politics.²¹² This crucial advice never lost its relevance. During fieldwork, I came across a popular teaching of Guruchand – *je jatir raja nei, shhey jati taja nei* (people without a leader are weak). This couplet was repeatedly used by many respondents to explain the MM's engagement with party-politics, and the participation of Matua leaders in elections were important for the political representation of the community in elected offices. These pragmatic instructions enshrined in the religious texts of the Matuas thus show the modern character of Matua Dharma, reveal its solid foundation in the real materialistic concerns of the oppressed masses, and demonstrate its ability to function as a “practical political theology” that set the democratic values and secular ambitions of the subaltern at a given historical moment.²¹³

Fourth, the category of Matua is a universal identity and not restricted to any caste or class. It is not purely an ascriptive identity, but a choice. The objective of Matua Dharma, as already mentioned, is to establish a non-hierarchical, just and egalitarian social order. Anyone who believes in these ideals can *become* a Matua regardless of the person's caste, class, religion, or gender identity. Although the Matua religious tradition became, and continues to be, popular mostly among the Namasudras, there are examples in both the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* where the authors mention that people from different castes such as Teli, Mali, Mahishya, Kumbhakar, Tanti, Malakar, Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya, as well as Muslims, became Matuas.²¹⁴ Here, I must also mention that, like any cultural struggle between popular and doctrinal religions, there is also a dialectical tension between the ‘Matua’ and ‘Hindu’ identities. While the Matua identity is ontologically distinct and separate from what is known as Hindu, the former on many

²¹²Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 151.

²¹³Contursi, “Political Theology”, 337.

²¹⁴See for example Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, 248; Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 126, 201.

occasions got subsumed within the larger Hindu identity, particularly in the wake of communal tension and riots between Hindus and Muslims in parts of eastern Bengal in the late colonial period. In the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, for example, there is a description of a communal riot between Hindus and Muslims in a village called Padmabila (now in Bangladesh).²¹⁵ The author depicted the Matuas as Hindus in this story, and described Guruchand as a strong advocate of communal harmony. During this riot, writes Haldar, Guruchand categorically told his followers that Hindus and Muslims share the same language, aspirations and occupations, and thus they must not fight each other.²¹⁶ However, Guruchand was not a believer of non-violence and asked the Namasudras to retaliate only if they were physically attacked by a mob.

Finally, Matua leaders such as Guruchand and P.R. Thakur emphasised the constitution of an autonomous organisation of the Matuas, and instructed them to unite under its banner. A much-cherished message of Guruchand in the Matua public circles is – ‘*jar dol nei, tar bol nei*’ (meaning, people who do not group together remain powerless). The formation of voluntary associations, what Rudolph and Rudolph termed as “paracomunities”, has been an integral part of subaltern politics that enabled members of different lower-caste groups “to pursue social mobility, political power, and economic advantage”.²¹⁷ The politics of the Matuas is not an exception to this larger phenomenon of subaltern politics. In 1932, an autonomous organisation of the Matuas, namely, the Sri Sri Harichand Mission, was established in Orakandi to propagate Matua Dharma.²¹⁸ This organisation metamorphosed into what we know as the Matua Mahasangha in India, established in 1988 by Guruchand’s grandson P.R. Thakur. Over the years, the MM has politically consolidated the Matuas, led their movement to achieve citizenship rights, and

²¹⁵Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 444–450.

²¹⁶Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 450.

²¹⁷Rudolph and Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*, 29.

²¹⁸Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 546.

negotiated with political parties and the government on behalf of the community for recognition, representation, and a fair share in the welfare schemes and the development agenda of the state.

To sum up, what is then the role of religion in shaping the politics of the subaltern? The above discussion shows that there have always been two major forms of religion in modern stratified society: one, the doctrinal religion of the elites; and two, the popular religion of the masses. While the former operates as the ideology of dominance of the established order, the latter functions as the counter-ideology of resistance of the oppressed and the marginalised people. In the context of Indian politics, it is not difficult to point out the role played by the dominant religion, Hinduism, as the ideology of the political elite. The “Hindu bias” in the Indian Constitution is a prime example of the ideological influence of the dominant religion.²¹⁹ There are more blatant instances of this ideological dominance of Hindus in Indian politics from recent times. The Supreme Court’s 2019 judgement on the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, and prime minister Narendra Modi’s subsequent participation in the *bhoomipujan* (foundation stone laying ceremony) are just two examples. Moreover, as discussed above, the Hindu majoritarian establishment has also taken active measures to selectively reform the dominant religion and incorporate ‘the little traditions’ within itself (for example, the case of the Lal Begis), through various political and legal means, in order to perpetuate its dominance.

This Hindu bias is also a feature of the Indian communists. Although the communists officially considered religion and caste as pre-modern categories, and therefore vestigial tools of politics, the social origins of “*madhyabitta* (middle-class)

²¹⁹Singh, "Hindu Bias in India's 'Secular' Constitution".

Marxism” in the early-twentieth century²²⁰ or the functioning of the mainstream Left in village politics²²¹ reveal the upper-caste Hindu character of the mainstream communist politics. Dalit leader Kanshi Ram, for instance, used a metaphor – “green snakes in green grass” – to describe the upper-caste Hindu character of the communists in India because it is difficult to identify them.²²²

In contrast, the most scathing attacks on Hinduism came from the Dalit movement and leaders such as E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and Ambedkar. In 1927, for example, Ambedkar publicly burned the *Manusmriti*, a foundational text of the Hindu caste system, as a mark of rejection of the Hindu *shastras* (scriptures). However, much before Ambedkar took this initiative, protests against the caste system through the rejection of Hindu scriptures, customs, rituals and practices, as I discussed above, had been done by different popular religions of Dalits and other lower-caste communities. Many of these popular religions of the oppressed and the marginalised people, as the example of the Matuas shows, were extremely materialist in terms of their objectives. These little traditions continue to function as counter-ideologies of resistance against the ideology of the dominant and the established order. At the theological level, a popular religion such as Matua Dharma, which originated from the lowest order of a stratified society structured by caste, functions as a vehicle of protest consciousness based on an anti-Brahminical standpoint and a universal world view. At the social level, it provides the followers a moral code for a coherent society that is based on the democratic principles of equality, freedom, and justice; something Hinduism failed to provide because of its caste system.²²³ Finally, at

²²⁰Rajarshi Dasgupta, "Rhyming Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal", *Studies in History* 21(1) (2005): 96.

²²¹Roy, "Caste and Power", 947-974.

²²²Nigam, "Secularism, Modernity, Nation", 4262.

²²³Ambedkar argued that Hindus could never act as a community because of caste and the practice of untouchability. As a religion, Hinduism, thus failed to provide the moral code for social cohesion (Rodrigues, "Introduction", 22.)

the political level, the objective of Matua Dharma is ‘mass salvation’ and upliftment of the ‘downtrodden people’ by ‘eradicating social and economic disparities’. On the one hand, it provides an emancipatory identity to Dalits around which they construct their distinct community (*sampradaya*); and on the other hand, it shapes their modern ambitions such as getting education, jobs, recognition and representation, and encourages them to achieve them through engagement in organisational activism and politics. However, the organisational politics of the MM has also led to dynasticism and an evolving unequal relationship between the Thakur family and the common devotees. This is evident from the speech by Kapil Krishna Thakur that I mentioned at the beginning. The overwhelming concentration of power and authority in the hands of the Thakur family over the years, in practice, undermined the role of the devotees, transforming the latter as mere followers sans agency. The family-centric functioning of the MM thus compelled Kapil Krishna Thakur to emphasise the centrality of the devotees in Matua Dharma. The idioms of protest and equality entrenched in the Matua religious tradition, as Thakur’s speech shows, not only function as an ideology of resistance against Brahminical religion and the established order, but also acts as a consciousness for maintaining the internal democracy of the MM and reforming the organisational politics of the Matuas whenever necessary. The next chapter discusses the practical manifestations of these aspects of Matua Dharma by exploring the organisational politics of the Matuas under the banner of the MM in contemporary West Bengal.

The Making of the Matua Political Public

The year 1907 holds remarkable significance in the history of the Namasudras. That year, a Namasudra delegation met Sir Lancelot Hare, the Lieutenant Governor of eastern Bengal, with a set of demands regarding access to education and government jobs.²²⁴ At the time, these two sectors, the markers of social prestige, were exclusively dominated by the traditionally privileged upper castes i.e. the *bhadralok*. Equal access to these areas was therefore important for the Namasudras to gain social respectability. The Namasudra delegation that met the Lieutenant Governor was led by Guruchand Thakur. The meeting was a success. Following it, Guruchand's son Shashi Bhusan Thakur, and a few others such as Tarini Charan Bala and Kumud Behari Mullick were recruited by the colonial government.²²⁵ For the first time, people from the Namasudra community were thus appointed to government jobs.

The popular version of this much-cherished milestone appears in the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*.²²⁶ In a section titled '*Mahatma Shashi Bhusan-er Chakuri Prapti*' (Mahatma Shashi Bhusan gets a job), the author, Mahananda Haldar, provides the following description of the meeting. Guruchand's son Shashi Bhusan was looking for a government job but could not find one for being a Namasudra. He was heartbroken and lamented to his father about it. The kind-hearted Guruchand (*dayal thakur*) immediately called his friend C.S. Mead, an Australian missionary, and requested him to find a solution. Thereafter, Mead met the *Laat Sahab* (colonial officer), who was visiting Faridpur at that time, and

²²⁴Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Social Mobility in Colonial India: The Namasudras", in *Caste in History*, ed. Ishita Banerjee-Dube (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 188.

²²⁵Bandyopadhyay, "Social Mobility in Colonial India", 188.

²²⁶Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, 229.

apprised him of the situation. Soon after the meeting, Shashi Bhusan was appointed as a sub-registrar in Jalpaiguri. It was a liberating moment for the Namasudras. Halder concludes: '*Joy joy dhvani uthe juri sarbodesh, e jatir dukkha-ratri eto din-e shesh*' (Sounds of cheers rise all over the land, the night of *dukkha* for this community finally comes to an end).

Hundred years later, in 2007, the Matuas residing in the town of Ashokenagar, a refugee-settlement in the district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal, decided to celebrate the centenary of this historic episode. In the winter, the Ashokenagar Block Matua Mahasangha (ABMM) organised a three-day *utsab* from 23-25 November 2007. The venue for the event was a playground at the Ashrafabad government colony, a Namasudra-dominated neighbourhood adjacent to the local railway station. The itinerary on the first two days included *mangalghat sthapan* (laying of holy pitcher), reading sessions of the *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, and welcoming the numerous Matua *dals* that had come from places near and far to attend the festival. The main event was on the final day, 25 November. The devotees gathered at the venue in the morning. They were soon joined by the central leadership of the MM, including its religious head Binapani Debi, the wife of P.R. Thakur. Binapani Debi, who was reverently called *Baroma* (Elder Mother), was made to sit on a decorated horse-driven chariot and the devotees organised a procession in Ashokenagar and Habra, an adjacent town. They carried the Matua *nishaan* (flags) and festoons, and danced to the tunes of *danka* and *kashee* (traditional musical instruments). After the massive roadshow, Binapani Debi formally inaugurated the *utsab*. The schedule for the rest of the day included community lunch followed by a reading session of the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, a panel discussion, a press conference, and a musical performance of *kobigaan*²²⁷ in the evening.

²²⁷*Kobigaan* ('songs of poets') is "a popular performance genre in the format of verse-duelling" (Priyanka Basu, "Becoming 'Folk': Religion, Protest and Cultural Communism in the Kabigana of Ramesh Sil and Gumani Dewan", *South Asian History and Culture* 8(3) (2017): 1). It has been an integral part of the Matua religious tradition. The sub-genre of Matua *kobigaan* is both religious and political in terms of its content that directly addresses questions of caste, untouchability, discrimination, and liberation. These performances are mostly held at Matua festivals.

The organisers also decided to launch a periodical to mark the event, and titled it *Rajagribe Satabarsha* (Hundred Years in Government). A description of how this festival was conceptualised, written by the former secretaries of the ABMM in the first issue of this periodical, is as follows:

“We, the followers of Matua Dharma, remain spellbound when we think of Sri Sri Guruchand’s ideas on education. In 1907, it was because of him that Sri Sri Shashi Bhusan Thakur became the first person from the backward castes to get a government job ... those of us who got educated and have established ourselves in government sector and in the ‘civil society’ are entirely indebted to Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur. We must acknowledge this debt. In 1907, Shashi Bhusan got his job, it is 2007 now, hundred years have passed by. It is possible to express our gratitude towards Thakur by commemorating the event through a centenary year celebration.”²²⁸

The aforementioned festival gives us an idea of the activities of a local unit of the MM, and its relationship with the central organisation and leadership. It also shows the link between historical memory and political consciousness, embedded in the texts and practices of a Dalit community. Most importantly, the event reveals the emerging modes of assertions of the Matuas in the public sphere through the use of religious symbols and practices such as projection of religious figures as political icons, occupying the streets by holding processions, organising mass events, and publishing their own community literature. In other words, what we are witnessing is the construction of what I shall call a ‘Matua political public’ in contemporary West Bengal.²²⁹

²²⁸“Sadharan Sampadak-er Subhechha Barta”, *Rajagribe Satabarsha* (Ashokenagar Block Matua Mahasangha, First Year, 2010).

²²⁹I borrow this idea of ‘political public’ from Badri Narayan. In his study on Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh, Narayan shows how a ‘Dalit political public’ takes shape through the cultural and political practices of Dalits and their organisations (Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India Uttar Pradesh*).

In this chapter, I shall discuss the making of the Matua political public by exploring the organisation of the Matuas, namely the MM, its structure, objectives, and functions at the grassroots as well as its interactions with other Dalit organisations such as literary groups and refugee outfits. This political public, I argue following Badri Narayan, is heterogenous in character, politically aware, and engages in democratic struggle through various channels for “an appropriate share in the state’s development project and power”.²³⁰ In spite of internal tensions and fissures, the Matua political public stands united in terms of its larger goals of achieving recognition, dignity, development, and power. On the one hand, it puts up a resistance vis-à-vis the mainstream establishment historically dominated by the upper-caste *bhadralok*, and functions as a counter-public; on the other hand, the different modes of symbolic assertions of the Matuas have successfully turned Harichand-Guruchand into the regional icons of Dalit politics in West Bengal.

Before entering the discussion on the MM and its organisational activism, let us first briefly look at how the Dalit movement in India, irrespective of its internal tensions, has strategically used religious symbols, practices, and icons as important tools for the political mobilisation of its support base, the development of a distinct community identity, and to make assertions in the public sphere. This shall help us situate the case of the Matuas in the larger context of Dalit politics in India.

Religion and Dalit Assertions in the Public Sphere

The use of religious symbols, participation in religious congregations, and deification of personalities have been an integral part of politics in India.²³¹ The Dalit movement is

²³⁰Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India Uttar Pradesh*, xix-xxvii.

²³¹Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means"; K.N. Panikkar, "Religious Symbols and Political Mobilization: The Agitation for a Mandir at Ayodhya", *Social Scientist* 21 (7/8) (1993): 63-78;

not an exception to this larger phenomenon. Religious symbols, images, texts, objects, spaces, and icons have been instrumental to the political expressions of Dalits and lower-caste communities in specific regional contexts. Since the colonial period, different caste associations, religious organisations, and political parties of Dalits have periodically used what Nicholas Jaoul calls “symbolic means” to frame their political claims and demands vis-à-vis the state as well as to control and occupy the public sphere.²³² These practices can be located broadly in the following three areas: one, the domain of literature; two, mass events; and three, the political agenda of Dalits for the official commemoration of their religious and cultural icons by the state.

Historically speaking, the role of non-Brahminical religious texts has been crucial in shaping the anti-caste consciousness and distinct community-identity of Dalits in India. For example, one can think of a text such as the *Shunya Purana*, an eleventh-century religious scripture written by Ramai Pandit, that revolves around the rites and rituals of a non-Brahminical god called Dharma worshipped by the lower castes in Bengal.²³³ According to this text, the reason behind the origin of Dharma was to “stop the exploitation and ill-treatment of the lower castes by Brahmins”.²³⁴ Similarly, in the colonial period, the popular religious texts continued to be symbols of protest against the Brahminical establishment, and acted as tools of anti-caste ideology. In colonial Tamil Nadu, for example, Pandit C. Iyothée Thass made literature an important tool for political assertions, and launched a magazine called *Dravida Pandian* to construct a distinct Tamil-

Raminder Kaur, “Martial Imagery in Western India: The Changing Face of Ganapati since the 1890s”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25(1) (2002): 69-96; Shahid Amin, “Gandhi as Mahatma”, in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288-342; Anastasia Piliavsky, “Introduction”, in *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*, ed. Anastasia Piliavsky (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1-38.

²³²Jaoul, “Learning the Use of Symbolic Means”.

²³³Rita Banerjee, “Marginalization and Subversive Religious Rites: Worship of Dharmathakur in West Bengal”, in *Rethinking Social Exclusion in India: Castes, Communities and the State*, ed. Minoru Mio and Abhijit Dasgupta (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 111-122.

²³⁴Banerjee, “Marginalization and Subversive Religious Rites”, 113.

Buddhist identity among Dalits.²³⁵ Moreover, organisations such as the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha and the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha took active initiatives to promote journals, magazines, libraries, and free reading rooms.²³⁶ Literature continued to be one of the most important domains of Dalit public assertions in postcolonial India. In the 1970s, the activism of the Dalit Panthers and the Bharatiya Dalit Panthers (BDS) in Maharashtra gave birth to a new distinct genre of Dalit literature. In fact, the term ‘Dalit’ was popularised by this new literary movement in the 1970s. The Dalit Panthers juxtaposed the ideologies of Buddhism and socialism to construct its political manifesto for a just egalitarian social order. Later, the BDS, formed in 1977, based its politics on the ideologies of Buddhism and socialism that “developed historically through the teachings of B. R. Ambedkar and the poetry and political manifesto of the Dalit Panthers”.²³⁷ Over the years, the genre of Dalit literature proliferated in other parts of India creating a vast repertoire of Dalit writings and testimonios that represent the politics of “speaking caste on its own terms” in the public sphere.²³⁸

In India, mass events such as public processions, *melas*, and *utsavs* have been the important sites of political consolidation, and community-building processes.²³⁹ Dalits have also strategically used the space of mass events to make their own cultural and political assertions. In his study on Dalit processions in Uttar Pradesh, Nicholas Jaoul shows how religious processions during the colonial period became “a vehicle for popular expression” in the vernacular public sphere with “some degree of autonomy from the more

²³⁵Meena Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India: With Specific Reference to Pandit C. Iyothee Thass and the Tamilan Weekly", *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 1(2) (2008): 125-146.

²³⁶Kandasamy, "Dalits and the Press in India", 133.

²³⁷Contursi, "Political Theology", 321.

²³⁸Sharmila Rege, "Introduction" in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*, ed. Sharmila Rege (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), 33. For more details, see K. Satyanarayana and Susie J. Tharu, "Introduction", in *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing*, eds. K. Satyanarayana and Susie J. Tharu (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013), 7-21.

²³⁹Sandria B. Freitag, "Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a "Hindu" Community", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22(4) (1980): 597-625.

conventional, institutional ('habermasian') public sphere of the English-speaking elite".²⁴⁰ Dalits in north India, he argues, imitated "such processions in order to substantiate their claim to form a separate minority and demand a place for themselves in urban society".²⁴¹ In the Allahabad Kumbh Mela in 1928, for instance, "Untouchable saints were carried on an elephant", an honour formerly reserved for "men of honour and orthodox Hindu deities", and this act turned them into "symbols of 'Untouchable' rebellion and identity".²⁴² The practice of organising processions continues to remain an effective mode of Dalit political assertion in the public sphere in different parts of India.²⁴³ Every year Dalits across India organise and participate in mass events to celebrate important occasions such as Ambedkar Jayanti (the birthday of B.R. Ambedkar), Mahaparinirvan Divas (death anniversary of Ambedkar), Bauddh Diksha (mass conversion to Buddhism under Ambedkar's leadership), and Bauddh Jayanti (Buddha's birthday). In north India, in particular, large processions hit the streets on the eve of Ravidas Jayanti to celebrate the birth anniversary of Sant Ravidas, "the most popular saint" of Dalits.²⁴⁴ In addition to these mass events, the phenomenon of deification of Dalit icons also takes place in the quotidian practices of Dalits. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, as Manuela Ciotti observes, portraits of Ambedkar and Sant Ravidas are kept next to each other in the same shrine of a temple, a site of everyday sociality.²⁴⁵

Apart from processions, another important site for Dalit cultural assertions is the

²⁴⁰Nicholas Jaoul, "Dalit Processions: Street Politics and Democratization in India", in *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa*, ed. Julia C. Strauss and Donal B. Cruise O'Brien (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 174.

²⁴¹Jaoul, "Dalit Processions", 174.

²⁴²Jaoul, "Dalit Processions", 177.

²⁴³Jaoul, "Dalit Processions", 174-194.

²⁴⁴Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, "From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar", *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(23) (2007): 2177.

²⁴⁵Manuela Ciotti, *Retro-Modern India: Forging the Low-Caste Self* (India: Routledge, 2012), 146-169.

Dalit *mela*.²⁴⁶ In western India, popular participation of lower castes can be traced back to the *tamashas* (folk theatre) performed in *jalsas* (public celebrations) during the Satyashodhak Mela in Maharashtra in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴⁷ These performances, based on religious themes drawn from “the ballads, songs, *abhangs* and poems of the Satyashodhak leaders, especially [Jyotirao] Phule”, showcased the tyranny of the upper castes and focused on the non-Brahmin hero.²⁴⁸ *Melas* organised by Dalits to commemorate their own political icons — such as the Kanslila mela and the Dasashees mela (Sasaram, Bihar), the Salhes mela (Darbhanga, Bihar), the Chuharmal mela (Patna, Bihar), the Shahuji mela (Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh) and the Ravana Mela (Pukhrayan, Uttar Pradesh) — continue to be a thriving space for identity formation and creation of “Bahujan consciousness”.²⁴⁹ According to Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the significance of Dalit *melas* is four-fold: (a) the act of remembrance and keeping alive the memories of local Dalit icons; (b) symbolic representation of the struggles of Dalit heroes in liberating the downtrodden community; (c) call for social change; and (d) mobilisation of the masses.²⁵⁰ After first coming to power in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP started organising Ravana Melas across the state. Ravana is the anti-hero of the epic *Ramayana* based on the life of Hindu god Rama. Large section of Dalits, however, consider Ravana to be a “virtuous Dravidian king” as they deified him as a hero in these *melas*, while Rama was portrayed as an “oppressor”.²⁵¹ These occasions are spaces of Dalit sociality that provide people the opportunity to communicate and build political solidarity, as well as sites of contestations among different political actors to take control of such events. These

²⁴⁶Sarah Beth, “Taking to The Streets: Dalit Mela and the Public Performance of Dalit Cultural Identity”. *Contemporary South Asia* 14(4) (2005): 397-410; Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contested Fables Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse* (Shimla: IIAS, 2001).

²⁴⁷Sharmila Rege, “Understanding Popular Culture: The Satyashodhak and Ganesh Mela in Maharashtra”, *Sociological Bulletin* 49(2) (2000): 193-210.

²⁴⁸Rege, “Understanding Popular Culture”, 200.

²⁴⁹Narayan, *Documenting Dissent*, 90.

²⁵⁰Narayan, *Documenting Dissent*, 90.

²⁵¹Jaoul, “Dalit Processions”, 185-186.

events also provide a space for “public debate” through speeches, distribution of Dalit print literature and other organisational materials such as leaflets, and attempts to break the upper-caste hegemony over the street.²⁵² As Sarah Beth argues, Dalits use the space of the *mela* to make “a dual claim to a separate cultural identity that constitutes a self-contained counter-public sphere and, at the same time, to a position as equal citizens of the nation deserving of a place in the mainstream public sphere”.²⁵³

Finally, Dalits have time and again demanded the official commemoration and recognition of their religious and political icons by the state through various means such as construction and protection of public statues, naming of educational and other governmental institutions after these icons, issuing of postage stamps, declaration of holidays on important dates, print literature, advertisements, and other media campaigns. These are key strategies to control and make a distinct communitarian cultural assertion in the public sphere. Looking at the politics behind the construction of Ambedkar statues both at the national and village levels, Nicholas Jaoul has shown that the use of “symbolic means” has “profound political implications, promoting ideals of citizenship and nationhood among the politically destitute where the state has partially failed”.²⁵⁴ Moreover, as Gopal Guru has shown, the projection of Ambedkar as the national Dalit icon in the 1990s established a “new cultural solidarity of dalits” across regions.²⁵⁵ Apart from stalwart leaders such as Ambedkar, Periyar, and Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, one can also find instances of political deification of regional Dalit women and religious saints. For example, in popular Dalit literature women such as “Jhalkari Bai of the kori caste, Uda Devi, a pasi, Avanti Bai, a lodhi, Mahabiri Devi, a bhangi and Asha Devi, a gurjari”, who

²⁵²Beth, “Taking to The Streets”, 398.

²⁵³Beth, “Taking to The Streets”, 398.

²⁵⁴Jaoul, “Learning the Use of Symbolic Means”, 176.

²⁵⁵Gopal Guru, “Understanding Violence Against Dalits in Marathwada”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (9) (1994): 469.

were denied recognition in the upper-caste historiography, have been iconised as Dalit “viranganas (heroic women)”.²⁵⁶ These women became symbols of Dalit resistance against injustice, oppression and exploitation, and also helped shape the image of contemporary Dalit women leaders such as Mayawati, the current BSP supremo.²⁵⁷ Furthermore, the BSP government of Uttar Pradesh publicised “Dalit saints and gurus” such as Buddha, Sant Kabir, and Sant Ravidas through the construction and renovation of statues and temples, advertisements in newspapers and magazines on important occasions, and other similar initiatives.²⁵⁸ The practice of commemorating Dalit icons has often led to violent contestations between Dalits and the upper castes over the control of the public space. Statues of Dalit icons such as Ambedkar, for instance, have been periodically desecrated²⁵⁹ and there are numerous instances of clashes between upper-caste mobs and Dalits. These claims and contestations over occupying public spaces shape the Dalit counter-public that is politico-culturally different from and stands in opposition to the dominant upper-caste Hindu public.

Compared to the rest of India, the picture of West Bengal has been quite different when it comes to the question of autonomous assertions of Dalits in the public sphere and in the mainstream politics of the state. The hegemony of the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok* in all avenues of public life either did not allow the political initiatives of Dalits to proliferate or did not get recognition, and consciously undermined the existing assertions of Dalits in the public sphere. The cultural practices and political activities of Dalits remained largely invisible amidst the *bhadralok*-controlled public sphere in the postcolonial politics of the state. For example, let us take the example of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya

²⁵⁶Charu Gupta, “Dalit 'Viranganas' and Reinvention of 1857”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(19) (2007): 1739-1745.

²⁵⁷Gupta, “Dalit 'Viranganas' and Reinvention of 1857”, 1743.

²⁵⁸Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India Uttar Pradesh*, 132.

²⁵⁹Pramod K. Nayar, “Desecration and the Politics of ‘Image Pollution’: Ambedkar Statues and the ‘Sculptural Encounter’ in India”, *Celebrity Studies* 11(1) (2020): 116-124.

Sanstha (BDSS). This literary group of Bengali Dalit writers, which was formed in the early 1990s in Calcutta and is still very active, remained largely outside the mainstream public discourse for a long time. This was evident when a leading academic journal, in 2007, published an essay titled “Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?”.²⁶⁰ This essay revealed that even though there exists a vast body of Dalit writings in Bangla, “the collective reluctance in mainstream discourse to recognise as literature any writing that is done outside the upper caste literary establishment” completely eclipsed the genre of Bangla Dalit literature.²⁶¹ In other words, the assertions of Dalits in the public sphere continued to remain on the margins in West Bengal.

The situation has changed. The organisational politics of the Matuas under the banner of the MM over the last two decades, as the example of the ABMM’s *utsab* that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter shows, has led to the emergence of a Matua political public. This emerging political public has not only ruptured the hitherto silence on the caste question in West Bengal and put up a resistance to the mainstream establishment; it has also successfully negotiated with the state in terms of its demands and claimed the rightful place of the Matuas and their icons, Harichand-Guruchand, in the public sphere. To understand this changing politics of caste, it is therefore necessary to explore the politics of the MM – its organisational structure, objectives, functions, and activism at the grassroots level.

The Organisation: Matua Mahasangha

Let me begin with the origin and evolution of the Matua Mahasangha. An organisation of the Matuas was first established in 1932 under the supervision of

²⁶⁰Manoranjan Byapari and Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(41) (2007): 4116–4120.

²⁶¹Byapari and Mukherjee, “Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?”, 4116.

Guruchand Thakur. Initially, the organisation was called the Sri Sri Harichand Mission, and a year later, in 1933, it was renamed the Matua Mahasangha.²⁶² Guruchand's grandson P.R. Thakur became the first *sanghadhipati* of the MM. After the partition of Bengal in 1947, and the subsequent exodus of Namasudra refugees to India, the organisational politics of the Matuas faced a setback. A couple of years after Partition, a rift developed between P.R. Thakur and Mahananda Haldar, the then secretary of the organisation. Haldar, along with a few others such as Mahendranath Mandal (Talukder), Gosai Sarat Thakur, Kasiram Thakur and Sasadhar Gain, formed a separate organisation called the Harichand Seba Sangha in 1965.²⁶³ The two organisations functioned separately for over a decade. In 1980, under the initiative of Matua leader Susil Kumar Biswas, they merged to form the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha.²⁶⁴ Six years later, the working committee of the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha renamed the organisation again as the Matua Mahasangha.²⁶⁵ Finally, in 1988, the organisation took its current form and was formally registered as the Matua Mahasangha with its headquarters in Thakurnagar.²⁶⁶

The MM, according to its Constitution, is a “religious philanthropic institution (*dharmiyo seba-mulok protisthan*) ... of the Matuas, for the Matuas and by the Matuas”.²⁶⁷ The aim and objectives of the MM, as enshrined in its Constitution, are fundamentally based on the teachings of Harichand-Guruchand documented in two texts, namely, the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*. For instance, at the very beginning, the Constitution cites the following couplet from the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* to lay down the objectives of the MM:

²⁶²Debdas Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 2008), 106-107.

²⁶³Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism*, 112-113.

²⁶⁴Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism*, 113.

²⁶⁵Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism*, 113.

²⁶⁶Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism*, 113.

²⁶⁷*Matua Mahasangha-er Sanbidhan Ba Gathantantra*, Second Edition (Matua Mahasangha, Thakurnagar 18 March 2004), 2.

“The *dalit patit*, the illiterate people,

Live on this earth in great suffering”²⁶⁸

Drawing from this verse, the text sets the objectives of the MM as: “to end the suffering (*dukkha*) of the Dalit and the fallen (*patit*), to give education to the uneducated (*vidyabin der vidyadaan*), to provide wealth to the poor (*dhanbin der dhan daan*), and to lend strength to the weak (*durbal ke shaktidaan*)”.²⁶⁹ It further suggests that the ultimate objective of the MM is to achieve “liberation (*mukti*)” of the downtrodden masses by “eradicating religion, caste or nation-based discriminations”, promoting fraternity, and establishing “*sukkeho sanatan dharma* (a subtle eternal religion)”.²⁷⁰ Moreover, there is a categorical emphasis in the MM Constitution to consider sacred texts such as *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, *Sri Sri HariGuruchand Charitra Sudha*, *Sri Sri Mahasankirtan* and *Sri Sri Hari Sangeet* as the “authoritative documents (*pramanya dali*)” of the Matuas.²⁷¹ In other words, the Constitution illustrates how the consciousness of protest and the materialist ideology of Harichand-Guruchand form the basis of the organisational activism of the MM.

Structurally, the MM is a modern bureaucratic organisation in a sense what Rudolph and Rudolph calls a “voluntary association”.²⁷² On the one hand, it has “offices, membership, incipient bureaucratisation, publications and a quasi-legislative process expressed through conferences, delegates and resolutions”; and on the other hand, there is a shared solidarity among its members that prevents the dilution of their commitment and sense of identification vis-à-vis the organisation.²⁷³ However, unlike a modern voluntary association, the topmost leadership of the MM draws its legitimacy from heredity. The members of the Thakur family are regarded as the inheritors of the virtuous

²⁶⁸Matua Mahasangha-er Sanbidhan Ba Gathantantra, 2.

²⁶⁹Matua Mahasangha-er Sanbidhan Ba Gathantantra, 2.

²⁷⁰Matua Mahasangha-er Sanbidhan Ba Gathantantra, 2.

²⁷¹Matua Mahasangha-er Sanbidhan Ba Gathantantra, 26.

²⁷²Rudolph and Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*, 33-34.

²⁷³Rudolph and Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition*, 35.

and divine qualities of Harichand-Shanti Mata and Guruchand-Satyabhama Debi. The chief advisor (*pradhan upodeshta*) and the *sangbadhipati* of the MM, therefore, have always been members of the Thakur family.

The Constitution codifies the structure and functions of the MM as well as puts forth the rights and duties of the Matuas. The bureaucratic structure of the MM is given in Table I. The powers and functions of the structural divisions of the MM are thoroughly laid down in the Constitution²⁷⁴. The chief advisor, who is the religious head of the organisation and holds the topmost office, is always someone from the Thakur family, the torchbearer of the legacy of Harichand-Guruchand. The *sangbadhipati* is also chosen from the Thakur family by the chief advisor. These two positions constitute the top echelon of the MM and they exercise ultimate executive authority over the functioning of the organisation. The next layer at the top is the Central Executive Committee (CEC), the highest decision-making body of the MM. The chief advisor and the *sangbadhipati* are part of the CEC, and they appoint the president (*sabhapati*), the general secretary (*sadharan sampadake*) and other members of the CEC. The CEC is freshly constituted, or its existing members are shuffled, every year in the annual meeting of the MM, usually held during *Rashpurnima* (an auspicious day in the Vaishnavite tradition). This annual meeting is attended by the central leadership, local-level leaders, and large numbers of devotees. The MM publishes its report (*pratibedan*) at this event. It includes the message of the general secretary, important resolutions that are taken, the activities of its organisational wings, and the details of its finances over a span of one year. The event creates a space for the interaction between the local and the central leadership, and facilitates the exchange of ideas and suggestions vis-à-vis the functioning of the organisation.

²⁷⁴Matua Mahasangha-er Sangbidhan Ba Gathantantra, 7-24.

The CEC heads all the aforementioned divisions of the MM, and handles its finances. The functions of the structural divisions are as follows. First, the religious division is a body of selected Matua preachers (*bhakta-sadhu-gosai-pagol*) responsible for the propagation of Matua Dharma across India. Next is the Education and Cultural Division that is in charge of creating awareness regarding the ideas of Harichand-Guruchand on education, and establishing schools, colleges and students' hostels. The Social Welfare and Philanthropy Division looks after the distribution of aid to people during natural calamities and also sets up institutions such as orphanages and free healthcare centres. The fourth unit is the Socio-Economic and Politico-Economic Division that is primarily responsible for building a network of Matuas who have excelled in their professions – business, agriculture, government jobs, medical services, literature, and education. The next unit is a body of young volunteers called the Youth Welfare Division. The Women's Division is one of the most active units of the MM. It was set up in 1990 as a permanent wing of the organisation under the patronage of Binapani Debi and is called the Shanti Satyabhama Nirban Committee. The last three divisions viz. the All India Branch Committee, the local mandir committee, and the *shakha* (organisational branch) are in charge of expanding the organisational network at the district, block and *anchal* (an administrative zone) levels. Moreover, apart from the MM head office in Thakurnagar, another important branch of the organisation is the Aasthi Dham in Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. Some of the important functions of the local branches of the MM are – enrollment of new members, establishment of *Harimandir* in Matua-populated neighbourhoods, organisation of mass events such as *melas* and *utsavs*, publication of Matua literature, and undertaking social welfare initiatives at the grassroots level such as free distribution of books to students, providing clothes to the needy during winter, setting up free health check-ups, and blood donation camps.

Apart from these divisions, the most important grassroots units of the MM are the Matua *dals*. These small groups of devotees led by Matua group leaders (*dalapatis*) are the building blocks of the organisation. One becomes a member of the MM primarily by joining a *dal*. A person (*dalapati*) can form a *dal* if ten more people join him or her. In other words, the minimum number of members required to form a *dal* is eleven. There is no upper limit on the number of members. The main function of these *dals* is to participate in local *utsavs* and attend religious meetings organised by individual devotees to preach Matua Dharma. The *dals* are attached to the block or *anchal*-level branches of the MM, and are officially registered at the central level. New *dals* are registered at the MM headquarters in Thakurnagar all year round. The MM also enrolls new *dals* during its annual festival, namely the Matua Dharma Mahamela, and at the annual meeting of the CEC during *Rashpurnima*. An important component of the annual meeting is the *gosai sammelan* (preachers' meeting) in which Matua preachers (*dalapati-sadhu-gosai-pagol*) raise issues regarding the MM's activities and membership fees, and place other collective requirements before the CEC. A Matua *dal* can be easily identified as they always carry the symbols of their community identity – festoon, flag (*nishaan*), and traditional musical instruments (*danka* and *kashi*). Both the festoon and the flag are red in colour with white borders. These two colours, red and white, according to the Matua tradition, represent two qualities (*gunas*) viz. *satya* and *raja*. Matua *dalapatis* also carry a stick called *shota* and devotees wear black bead necklaces. These are the other important markers of the Matua identity. Apart from enrollment in a *dal*, membership of the organisation is also given to individual families. A *dalapati* or the head of a family fills up a form to register as a *dal* or a family unit respectively, and then is issued identity cards from the head office. The identity card mentions the number of members in a *dal* or a family unit, and functions as an important document of social identity for Matuas.

The organisation acquires funds through membership fees collected by Matua *dalapatis* as well as its family units. There is a meticulous system of fund collection. Every family unit is supposed to pay a certain amount as decided by the CEC. Half of this amount is deposited at the MM headquarters by *dalapatis*, and the other half is retained by a *dal* to meet its own expenses such as buying *danka* and *kashi*, making festoons and *nishaans*, and transport fare to attend festivals. There is a second method of donation. Every such Matua family is instructed to create a *Shanti-Hari mangalghat* (pitcher) at their home and put a handful of rice in it every day. After one month, the family can sell the accumulated rice in the market and pay the due donation to the MM. This practice of regular payment of membership fees creates a sense of attachment between the devotees and the organisation, thereby augmenting the engagement of the former in the activities of the latter. In other words, this system motivates devotees to get involved in the programmes of their *dals* and those undertaken by the local branch of the MM such as *melas* and *utsavs*. The allegiance of devotees towards their organisation also provides the local MM units the required strength at political events such as meetings and rallies. Apart from these modes of fundraising, the MM and its local branches also get donations from individual devotees, and, more recently, from different political parties as well as from the local area development funds of MLAs and MPs.

The Making of the Matua Political Public

The above discussion on the structure and objectives of the MM shows how the politics of the organisation revolves around the community's icons Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. The use of symbolic means, and the political deification of the Matua preceptors as regional Dalit icons are therefore central to the mobilisation and consolidation of the Matuas as a political public. One of the earliest demands of the MM,

for example, was to declare the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur a national holiday. The processes that led to the emerging iconicity of Harichand-Guruchand and the shaping of the Matua political public, as I observed during my fieldwork, can be broadly categorised into four heads: one, Matua literature (*Matua sabitya*); two, the practice of non-Brahminical rituals during familial and social events; three, Matua festivals; and four, demands for the official commemoration of the two Matua preceptors at the popular and official-institutional levels.

Matua Literature

The Matuas have a vibrant literary culture that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The early Matua literary works included *kathakata* (storytelling in large gatherings), *jatra* (folk theatre) and *kobigaan* (rhymed couplets) that were presented orally before an audience.²⁷⁵ Later, these verses and compositions were documented in print by Matua devotees. The emergence of newer texts such as the *Sri Sri Harililamritra* (1916) and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (1943), and magazines such as *Ananta Bijoy* and *Thakur* in the early twentieth century led to the birth of *Matua sabitya*. This genre of vernacular Matua print literature proliferated over time. Currently, there is a vast body of Matua literature that can be categorised under four heads: one, sacred texts of the Matuas; two, literature published by the Matua Mahasangha and its local branches; three, works of independent Dalit writers; and four, publications of political parties and other social-religious outfits. A salient feature of Matua literature is the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand as Dalit icons. This is done in multiple ways, viz.: (a) remembrance through narrations of their life histories, contributions, and miracles; (b) reproduction of their anti-caste ideology and pragmatic teachings in the form of short, crisp and catchy verses excerpted from sacred Matua texts;

²⁷⁵Byapari and Mukherjee, "Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?", 4118.

(c) introduction of *Hari Saal*, a Matua calendar, that begins on the birth year of Harichand Thakur; (d) practice of beginning any piece of writing with phrases that eulogise them; (e) use of their images in book covers, periodicals, leaflets, pamphlets, and posters; and (f) comparing them with other Dalit icons such as Ambedkar and Buddha to assert regional specificity.

The most important texts of the Matuas are the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these two texts form the ideological backbone of Matua Dharma. Through a detailed narration of their life stories, miracles, and teachings, the texts establish Harichand and Guruchand Thakur as *avatars* who were born to liberate Dalits from the discriminatory caste system and the oppression of Brahmins and landlords. A principal way of establishing the divine authority of Harichand-Guruchand is the focus on miracles. For instance, there are many instances in the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* where Harichand miraculously revives the dead back to life, cures diseases with his touch, and turns an uncultivable land into a fertile one. There are a few other sacred texts of the Matuas such as the *Sri Sri HariGuruchand Charitra Sudha* (written by Bicharan Pagal) and the *Sri Sri HariGuruchand Bhakta Charit* (written by Gouranga Sadhu Thakur). In addition to these texts, the MM also publishes a wide range of print literature such as *Dwadosh Ajna*, a booklet on Matua rituals, an anthology of songs, books, and the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, the quarterly magazine of the organisation. Devotees contribute essays, commentaries, stories, and poems to the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika* that, thematically speaking, centre around the legends of Harichand-Guruchand. The magazine also updates readers about the MM's activities, the donations it has received, and important social and religious events. An interesting section of this magazine is a dedicated column titled '*Bhakta jodi daake tare Hari ki aar thakte pare*' (Can Hari rest if a devotee calls him). It documents selected instances of donations received from devotees after their prayers are fulfilled, often miraculously, because of the blessings of Harichand-Guruchand. One such

incident, among many others, is where a person donated a gold ornament for the idols of Harichand and Shanti Mata at the *Harimandir* in Thakurnagar after his differently abled son was cured.²⁷⁶ These practices and stories create and sustain the spiritual authority of Harichand-Shanti Mata as gods that never fail to answer the prayers of devotees, and keep the reputation of *Thakurbari* as a hallowed site intact.

The vast corpus of popular Matua print literature that is published and consumed at the grassroots, however, has proliferated under the initiatives of local units of the MM, and individual devotees. Among the most important are Matua periodicals such as *Matua Darpan*, *Matua Bandhab*, *Sri Hari Jugadisha*, *Rajagribe Satabarsha*, *Hari Sevak* and *Matua Andolan*. The publication of these periodicals creates a Matua sociality by involving and bringing together the Matuas residing in a particular area in the exercise of publication. The entire process of publishing, from seeking contributions from authors to proofreading and distribution, is overseen by local Matua leaders. The publication cost is generally recovered through individual donations as well as advertisements given by local Matua traders. This process contributes to the making of a Dalit literary culture outside the dominant upper-caste establishment. Firstly, while on the one hand, the writings published in these periodicals focus on preaching the Matua religious tradition by recurrently referring to the teachings of Harichand-Guruchand; on the other hand, they create a literary space for the discussion of political issues that concern the community. The writings connect them to the idiom of protest inherent in Matua Dharma. These local publications, for example, played a crucial role in educating Matuas about the implications of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, for Dalit refugees, and mobilised support for the demand of their unconditional citizenship. Secondly, a salient feature of these writings

²⁷⁶Rabindranath Haldar, “*Bhakta Jodi Daake Tare Hari ki Aar Thakte Pare*”, in *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, ed. Swapan Kumar Biswas (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 20 June 2010), 21-22.

is the practice of beginning these pieces with phrases such as *Om Shanti Hari Sabay* or *Sri Sri Hari Guruchand Bharsa*. Upholding the name of Dalit religious figures as gods distinguishes Matua literature from similar practices of invoking the names of gods at the beginning of a piece of writing (such as a letter) present in Hindu and other south Asian literary cultures. Thirdly, these periodicals, along with other print material such as books, leaflets and posters, repeatedly use the images of Harichand, Shanti Mata, Guruchand, and Satyabhama Debi on their covers. The circulation of these images shapes the emerging iconography of the Matua deities. Fourthly, these periodicals educate their readership about the distinct history of the community as we saw in the case of the periodical called *Rajagribe Satabarsha*, published by the ABMM, to celebrate the centenary of the recruitment of Namasudras to government jobs. Finally, along with the Hindu and Gregorian calendars, all these periodicals follow the Matua calendar, *Hari Saal*, that starts with the birth year of Harichand Thakur.

Matua literature has also flourished outside the patronage of the MM and its local units. Periodicals such as *Jagaran* and *Dalit Mirror*, and books such as *Matua Andolan O Banglar Onunnata Samaj* (2011) by Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Matua Dharma Prasange* (2010) edited by Kalyani Thakur, and *Matua Ek Mukti Sena* (2014) by Manoranjan Byapari are a few examples of this branch of Matua literature. These writings of independent Dalit writers and Ambedkarite activists project Harichand-Guruchand as “religious rebels” (for example, *bidrohi Harichand*) and situate these two religious icons within the larger Dalit political circles, and highlight their regional specificity²⁷⁷. In *Matua Andolan O Banglar Onunnata Samaj*, the author compares the Matua theologico-political movement with the

²⁷⁷I borrow the term ‘religious rebel’ from Mark Juergensmeyer (Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab*). I came across many Matua writings where Harichand Thakur has been depicted as a rebel (*bidrohi*). For instance, see Prahlad Ray, “Sri Sri Harililamrita Prasange”, in *Thakur Harichand Manab Purus: Adhatya Purus*, ed. Santosh Kumar Barui (Published by Manmatha Ranjan Mandal, 2011), 46-47.

SNDP movement under Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala.²⁷⁸ In another essay titled *Muktir Rajniti: Aage Rajarshi Guruchand, Pore Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Politics of Liberation: First Rajarshi Guruchand, Then Babasaheb Ambedkar) in the edited volume, *Matua Dharma Prasange*, author Amal Kumar Mandal compares Guruchand Thakur and Ambedkar.²⁷⁹ In another text titled *Matua ra Hindu Noy: Dalit Oikyer Sandhane* (1999), author D.L. Biswas Thakur draws a similar comparison between Ambedkar and Guruchand, which is as follows:

“We all celebrate Ambedkar’s birthday
But where did we get the strength for celebration
The strength was given by Baba Guruchand
And his birthday has only been forgotten by us
First, Baba Guruchand, and then Babasaab
There will be no benefit if this principle isn’t followed.”²⁸⁰

More recently, political parties and other outfits such as refugee organisations have contributed to the growing corpus of Matua literature. In 2009, for example, Forward Bloc leader Haripada Biswas published a booklet titled *Life History of Hari-Guru Chand Thakur, their Philosophy and Activities in brief* (Biswas 2009). Moreover, the images of Harichand-Guruchand are regularly used by other political parties such as the TMC, the BJP, the INC,

²⁷⁸Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Matua Andolan O Banglar Anunnata Samaj* (Kolkata: Nikhil Bharat Prakashani, 2011), 39.

²⁷⁹Amal Kumar Mandal, “*Muktir Rajniti: Aage Rajarshi Guruchand, Pore Babasaheb Ambedkar*”, In *Matua Dharma Prasange: A Collection of Bengali Essays*, ed. Kalyani Thakur (Kolkata: Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, January 2010), 103-131.

²⁸⁰ The original verses are as follows:

Ambedkar janmodin pali mora sob e
Palibar shakti labh pailam kobe
Shei shakti diye gelo Baba Guruchand
Tar janmodin mora bhule dei baad
Aage Baba Guruchand pore Babasaab
Ei niti na manile boibena labh (D.L. Biswas Thakur, *Matua ra Hindu Noy: Dalit Oikyer Sandhane* (Kolkata: Harichand Mission, 1999), 1.

the BSP, and others in their leaflets, posters, and banners. These images, alongside that of other Dalit icons and leaders such as Buddha, Ambedkar, and Savitribai and Jotirao Phule contribute to the emerging iconography of Matua politics.

Practice of Non-Brahminical Rituals in Matua Social Events

The expression of the protest consciousness of the Matuas in practice lies in their rejection of Brahminical rituals, customs, and practices during familial and social events such as *annaprāsana* (first rice-eating ceremony of a newborn child), and marriage and death ceremonies. The MM actively promotes the non-observance of Brahminical rituals in the following ways. There is a separate text titled *Matua Dharmadarśhamante Bibidho Kriya Kormer Bidhan* published by the MM that encodes the distinct prayers and rituals of the Matuas. These rituals are not performed by a Brahmin but there are references to Hindu deities such as Ganga and Shiva. During familial or social events, devotees themselves can perform the rituals or can invite a Matua preacher (*sadhu-gosai-pagol*) to do the same. Usually, local Matua *dals* visit and perform in these events. A distinct non-Hindu practice among the Matuas can be observed in their treatment of the dead. Apart from the dominant practice of cremation, there is also the practice of burying the dead among the Matuas. Moreover, every issue of the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika* publishes selected instances of marriages (*vivaha*) and death ceremonies (*shraddhanusthan*) that were performed as per Matua rituals. These cases are published in the official periodical of the MM to set examples, and promote the rejection of Brahminical rituals and customs among the Matuas as well as to assert their cultural distinctiveness in the public sphere. s

Matua Dharma Mahamela and Matua *Utsabs*

The third important site of Matua sociality is the space of Matua *utsabs* and *melas*. The organisation of festivals and participation in them are directives given to devotees in the MM Constitution. Festivals are therefore regularly held by Matua families, and by local MM branches. The annual festival of the Matuas, namely the Matua Dharma Mahamela, is held in Thakurnagar, usually in March. Spaces of mass events such as Dalit *melas*, as already discussed, are sites of political socialisation and communication, public remembrance of community icons, political contestations, and symbolic assertion of a distinct cultural identity. The space of the Matua *utsab* is such a site of Dalit sociality. During my fieldwork, I got the opportunity to attend multiple Matua festivals in Ashokenagar, Thakurnagar, Gobardanga, and other refugee-settlements in the district of North 24 Parganas. It is almost certain, as I observed, that if someone attends one Matua festival, the next invitation (verbally and/or in the form of a leaflet with details) will come at the same venue from members of another visiting Matua *dal* or local unit. The Matua festivals are characteristically quite similar. During the day, the major events include reading sessions (*paath*) of the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, public processions with huge images of Harichand Thakur-Shanti Mata, traditional dance, and community feast. The festival organisers usually set up health camps, blood donation drives, free book distributions, and similar social welfare activities at the festival venue. In the evening, panel discussions by local Matua leaders and eminent personalities (Matua scholars, writers and government officers) and musical sessions of *kobigaan* are usually organised.

The biggest Matua festival is the Matua Dharma Mahamela that celebrates the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur. The *mela* is more than hundred years old and was called Baruni Mela when it first started in Orakandi, the birthplace of Harichand. Baruni is the daughter of the sea whose time of birth, as per Matua mythology, coincided with that of Harichand. After the revival of the MM in India, the organisation restarted this annual

public festival. The leadership changed the name of the *mela* from Baruni Mela to Matua Dharma Mahamela. According to Matua writer Debdas Pande, the Matua leadership changed the name because it wanted to commemorate Harichand and not Baruni.²⁸¹ The name change was also an assertion of the community identity of the Matuas as a distinct religious group. Thousands of devotees from different parts of India and Bangladesh attend this week-long festival. The devotees arrive at the venue in small Matua *dal*, led by their *dalapatis* and carrying their units' flags and festoons. Matua women associated with the Shanti-Satyabhama Nirban Committee attend the festival in separate groups. The devotees chant 'Hari Bol' and dance frenetically while marching towards their pilgrimage, *Thakurbari*, during the festival. This traditional Matua song and dance performance in the streets represents the separate cultural identity of the Matuas in the public sphere. The main activities during the festival include bathing in a holy pond called *Kamanasagar* (sea of wishes), day-long prayers, community dining, dance and musical performances, and speeches by Matua leaders, intellectuals and activists. The devotees also get a chance to meet each other, and interact with the community leaders as well as the members of the Thakur family. Different Dalit literary and political outfits, refugee organisations, and local traders set up stalls at the *mela* ground next to the main temple. These stalls offer a wide range of items for sale such as Matua literature, calendars, posters, and framed photographs of Harichand-Shanti Mata, Guruchand-Satyabhama Debi, Ambedkar and Buddha, music CDs of Matua songs, printed t-shirts with images of Matua icons, bead necklaces, handicrafts, and other consumer and food items.

Over the last decade, the Matua Dharma Mahamela has developed into a space for political contestations among different political actors who aim to display their engagement and enthusiasm during the celebrations. All the mainstream political parties have started

²⁸¹Pande, *An Approach to Matuaism*, 124.

to get involved in the organisational activities of the *mela* through various initiatives. For instance, the holy pond at *Thakurbari* was renovated, and permanent toilets and drinking water facilities were installed at the *mela* venue using local area development funds of the then TMC legislators. The road that connects the *mela* venue with the Thakurnagar railway station along the railway track was also made *pakka* (concrete) when the railways ministry was headed by TMC leaders such as Mamata Banerjee, Dinesh Trivedi and Mukul Roy between 2009 and 2012. After coming to power in 2011, the TMC government in the state started sponsoring the gates of the *mela*. These gates feature the images of Harichand-Guruchand and Binapani Debi along with the chief minister's photograph. The *mela* is attended by local political leaders across parties who try to use this space to win over the Matua electorate. The political parties also set up stalls of drinking water and *sherbet* for visitors. These stalls are also sites for political campaigns as local workers of different political parties distribute leaflets and talk to people when they arrive at the festival. Political leaders such as local councilors and village leaders show similar enthusiasm at smaller Matua festivals organised at the local level. In short, the involvement of political parties in the *mela*, on the one hand, shows their interest in appropriating the space and mobilising the Matuas in their support; on the other hand, such political engagement instills a sense of pride and power among the Matuas who realise their strength as an emerging political public.

Politics of Official Commemoration

The final important component of the cultural assertions of the Matuas is their demand for the official commemoration of Harichand-Guruchand, and the recognition of their contributions by the state. Political symbols, as we discussed, play a major role in determining the relationship between the state and its citizens. In West Bengal, public

icons have been predominantly upper-caste personalities while Dalit icons such as Harichand and Guruchand Thakur have remained on the margins. However, the MM's present politics has put a dent in this hegemony of the *bhadralok* in the mainstream public sphere.

One of the earliest demands of the MM was the declaration of a national holiday on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur. This demand was raised at the MM's meeting in Calcutta in 1994 that I mentioned in the Introduction. The way the meeting was reported in the mainstream media reflected the attitude of the *bhadralok* establishment towards a Dalit cultural initiative. The report not only mocked the gathering of the Matuas but also made a conscious effort to completely invisibilise it by labelling it as irrational. The MM, however, pursued the demand of official commemoration of their icons, and sixteen years later, it was fulfilled in a different way. In June 2010, the Backward Classes Welfare Department of the Left Front government in West Bengal instituted an annual award to acknowledge the contributions of people who work for the social and economic development of the Scheduled Castes in the state. Interestingly, the award was called the Thakur Harichand Guruchand Purashkar. As per the government notification, it was introduced to commemorate "Thakur Harichand and Guruchand" for playing "a frontline role in the socio-economic progress of the Scheduled Castes in the 19th century".²⁸² This was the first instance of state recognition of Matua deities in independent India.²⁸³ On 21 September 2010, the then chief minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, bestowed the award upon Kapil Krishna Thakur, the former *sanghadhipati* of the MM. On the eve of the award ceremony, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee

²⁸²Notification No. 2172-BCW/6M-02/2010 dated 21.06.2010, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. See link: https://anagrasarkalyan.gov.in/order_file/05_36_39187.pdf. Accessed December 12, 2020.

²⁸³ "Sri Sri Harichand-Guruchand Thakur Sarkari College-er Shilanyash Upolokkhye Sanghadhipati Kapil Krishna Thakur-er Bhason", in *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, ed. Swapan Kumar Biswas (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, April 1, 2011), 12.

said:

“We have been thinking of instituting an award like this one for long. I am happy that our plans have come true. Those who fought for the uplift of the downtrodden are Sri Chaitanya Deb, Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore and also Thakur Harichand and Thakur Guruchand. But history didn’t recognise the role of the last two like the others.”²⁸⁴

The institution of the award and conferring it on the MM leader a year before the 2011 state assembly election connected these decisions to the electoral politics of an emerging Matua vote bank. On the one hand, it revealed the changing political scenario in the state and the growing salience of the Matuas in the realm of politics; on the other hand, it demonstrated the emergence of a new Dalit iconography in public discourse. During the award ceremony, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee admitted that public icons in the state were figures such as ‘Sri Chaitanya Deb, Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore’ and the contributions of Dalit icons such as Harichand and Guruchand Thakur had not been recognised.

The new iconography of Harichand-Guruchand can be observed at two levels: one, the popular-informal initiatives of the local branches of the MM and individual devotees at the grassroots level; and two, at the formal-institutional level through official recognition of these icons in response to the demands of the MM. At the local level, the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand through the occupation of public spaces is primarily done through the construction of temples of Harichand and Shanti Mata (*Harimandir*). The MM categorically instructs its local branches to build *Harimandir* in Matua-populated areas.

²⁸⁴ The Telegraph. “Letter question after Matua meeting Baroma skips event”. *The Telegraph*. September 22, 2010. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/letter-question-after-matua-meeting-baroma-skips-event/cid/482415>. Accessed April 5, 2021.

Every Matua neighbourhood has a *Harimandir*. These temples are spaces for everyday neighbourhood *addas* (gossip sessions) and occasional meetings. Local Matuas also use the space of the *Harimandir* more innovatively to expand its influence in a particular neighbourhood. In Ashokenagar, for instance, the MM block committee built a community hall in 2010 within the local *Harimandir* premises. They also set up a public library in one portion of the hall. This new building was named Guruchand Bhavan.

Apart from *Harimandirs*, the iconography of Harichand-Guruchand has also emerged at other sites of everyday public socialisation such as local clubs, schools, bus stops, market shops and hotels. Let me talk about three such public spaces of quotidian interaction. The first is a local club in Thakurnagar that I visited during fieldwork. This club is a one room set-up where the neighbourhood boys play carrom and cards, watch television, or simply relax. What was interesting was the wall paintings in the club. The paintings showcased the major events from the life of Harichand Thakur. It resembled a permanent art exhibition. The artwork was made to educate and remind visitors at an everyday level about the anti-caste ideology of Harichand, and his contributions to the empowerment of Dalits. The second example is that of the staff room in a local government school in Thakurnagar. One of my respondents took me to the school staff room. After entering, I immediately noticed a portrait of Harichand Thakur on a wall right next to the images of mainstream public icons such as Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Subhash Chandra Bose. The third example is a bus stop near the Ashrafabad Government Colony in Ashokenagar that was renovated by the local MLA. After the renovation, a new backdrop fixed at the bus stop had two images on it; one of Harichand Thakur, the other of chief minister Mamata Banerjee. Apart from these sites, I have come across local shops and commercial establishments that are named after Harichand-Guruchand and other Matua icons such as Shanti Mata, Satyabhama Debi, and Binapani Debi. The use of these everyday spaces of public interaction to project Matua icons as

Dalit heroes and assert the distinct cultural identity of the community is an important aspect of the emerging Matua political public. Over the last decade, the MM has also organised special events at the local level to mark important occasions such as a *manab sanhati rathayatra* (human solidarity procession) in September 2012 on the eve of Harichand Thakur's two-hundredth birth anniversary²⁸⁵, and the centenary of the publication of the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* in 2016.

A more recent phenomenon is the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand as Dalit icons in the formal-official domain of politics. Since its inception, the MM has demanded the official recognition of Matua deities through the establishment of educational institutions in their names, the declaration of a national holiday, official recognition of Matua Dharma as an 'independent-autonomous religion' (*swadhin-swatantra dharma*)²⁸⁶, and other similar means. These demands and the state's responses to them have been instrumental in the mobilisation of the Matuas as a political public. Let us take one example. In the early 2000s, the MM demanded that a government college be set up in Helencha (Bagdah), a Matua-populated block in the district of North 24 Parganas.²⁸⁷ The local Matuas wanted the college to be named after Harichand-Guruchand. The MM leadership held meetings with its followers, mobilised support for the cause, identified land for the college, and entered a dialogue with the local administration about their demand. An official committee was formed soon after, and the decision to establish a new college was taken in 2005. But contrary to the expectations of the local Matuas, the college was named 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya'. The decision to name the college

²⁸⁵Rasamoy Gain, "Manab Sanhati Rath Yatra-e Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha". *Nabadisha Patrika*. Vol. 1, Issue 2. October 1-31, 2012.

²⁸⁶This demand was raised in 2014 when the MM leadership sat on a hunger strike with a list of demands. Apart from the principal demand of unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali refugees, the official recognition of Matua Dharma was the second-most important demand of the MM.

²⁸⁷*Matua Mahasangher 20-tama Barshik Sammelan Kendriya Karyanirbahee Committee-r Pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, November 4, 2006), 14.

after Ambedkar, by going against the popular demand of the locals, infuriated the Matuas. The anger was directed at the ruling Left Front government. A former office-bearer of the MM, during our interview, called the Left Front's decision a '*koushawl*' (trick) to undermine the efforts of the Matuas to set up the college. He said:

“I tried to convince them that Ambedkar is someone from among us. So are Harichand and Guruchand. There are already hundreds of schools, colleges, and so many things in the memory of Ambedkar. But there is not a single one in the name of Hari-Guruchand. Let us at least build this college commemorating them...The LF was determined to not name the college after Hari-Guruchand under any circumstances at that point of time. And they didn't. But they only had to pay the price which they realised later.”²⁸⁸

After this episode, Matua leaders campaigned against the Left Front and instructed the local *dals* to ensure the Left candidate's defeat in Bongaon by-election in 2007. In this election, the organised electoral behaviour of the Matuas was noticed for the first time. Soon, leaders of all the mainstream political parties started visiting *Thakurbari* to seek the blessings of Binapani Debi, particularly before elections. One of the ways to reach out to the MM leadership and win over the Matua electorate was the commemoration of their icons Harichand-Guruchand by the government. In 2009, Mamata Banerjee, the then railways minister, laid the foundation stone of a stadium in Bongaon that was named after Guruchand Thakur. Before the state assembly elections in 2011, the Left Front government instituted the Thakur Harichand Guruchand Purashkar and also allotted some land in Rajarhat near Kolkata to establish the Sri Sri Harichand Guruchand Thakur Research Foundation. In 2018, the TMC government addressed a long-term demand of the MM and established the 'Harichand Guruchand University' to commemorate the

²⁸⁸Interview with Sunirmal Biswas on November 12, 2014 in Chakdaha, Nadia, West Bengal.

Matua preceptors. The website of the university mentions:

“Sri Sri Harichand Thakur and his son Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur are the saviours cum pathfinder to the Dalit communities in the greater undivided Bengal presidency. They are remembered for their phenomenal contribution for uplifting the untouchables in Bengal. In the memory of such legends and to honour the deliberation of the Matua community to get enlightened through knowledge, Hon’ble Chief Minister of West Bengal, Smt. Mamata Banerjee on 11th January of 2019 laid the foundation stone of Harichand Guruchand University at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. This University has been instituted with a dedicated vision of bridging a pool of opportunities in higher education vis-à-vis envisaging scholastic work in social and cultural issues of Matua community.”²⁸⁹

The TMC government also decided to include a chapter on Matua history in the state-run school curricula. These steps of recognition taken by the successive state governments formalised a new Dalit iconography in the politics of West Bengal. The officialisation of Matua icons Harichand-Guruchand brought the hitherto marginalised Matuas closer to the state, and provided them a distinct cultural recognition and social dignity in the public sphere as well as a share in the development projects of the state.

The above discussion demonstrates that the MM’s organisational politics over three decades has brought significant changes in the political landscape of West Bengal. One, the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand as regional Dalit icons, both at the informal-popular and formal-official levels, has led to a new Dalit iconography. Two, the Matuas have reconsolidated their community identity in the post-Partition years through

²⁸⁹See link: <https://harichandguruchanduniversity.com/> (Accessed 10 July 2021).

the “symbolic appropriation of public spaces” by using literary activism, regular organisation of mass events, and the formulation of demands for a distinct cultural recognition.²⁹⁰ Three, the organised assertions of the Matuas also gave them a new reputation of an electorally salient community. Finally, the claims and demands of the Matuas and the responses of the establishment are reshaping the relationship between the community and the state, and bringing them closer to each other. To put it differently, the symbolic assertions of the Matuas in contemporary West Bengal, which are continuous and evolving, have led to the consolidation of the community as a political public and have challenged the hegemonic control of the *bhadralok* in the vernacular public sphere. In a Matua festival that I attended in 2016, a prominent Matua activist thus emphatically said that those (the upper castes) who ridiculed the Matuas as “*danka party*” some years ago could no longer do the same because of the organised assertions of the community under the MM.²⁹¹ In addition to the use of symbolic means to control and occupy the public sphere, the politics of the Matuas gained momentum in the last two decades because of their participation in a political movement demanding citizenship rights for Dalit refugees from Bangladesh. After the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, in parliament threatened the citizenship status of many refugees, this movement took shape under the banner of the MM. The next chapter explores the movement of Dalit refugees for citizenship rights in India and the politics around it.

²⁹⁰Jaoul, "Learning the Use of Symbolic Means", 203.

²⁹¹Speech by Utpal Bala on January 16, 2016, at the ABMM annual festival.

Table I: The Structure of the Matua Mahasangha								
<i>Pradhan upadeshta</i> Religious Head			<i>Sanghadhipati</i> Organisational Head					
Central Executive Committee								
1`	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Religious Division	Education and Cultural Division	Social Welfare and Philanthropy Division	Socio-Economic and Politico-Economic Division	Youth Welfare Division	Women's Division	All India Branch Committee	Local Mandir Committee	Shakha or Family Sangha
Source: <i>Matua Mahasangher Sanvidhan ba Gathantrantra</i> (2004), 7.								



The MM's headquarters in Thakurnagar.



The *natamandir* at the MM's headquarters.



The central office of the MM.



The *Harimandir* at the MM's headquarters.



A book stall at a local Matua *utsab*.



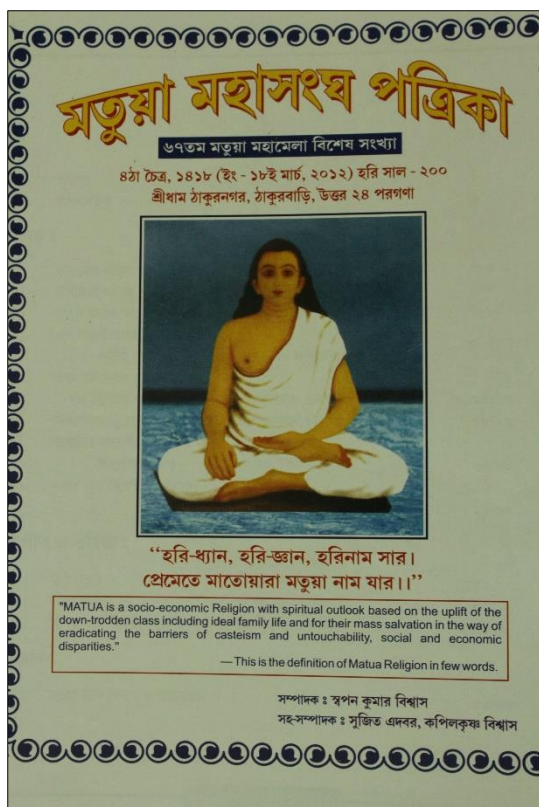
A local bus stop in Ashokenagar with images of Harichand Thakur, Shanti Mata and Guruchand Thakur.



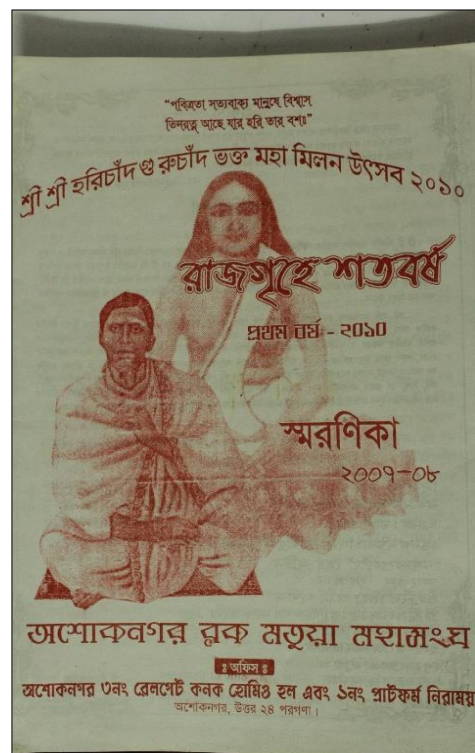
A local club in Thakurnagar with wall paintings depicting the life of Harichand Thakur.



From right to left: Portraits of Rabindranath Tagore, Harichand Thakur and Swami Vivekananda at a local school in Thakurnagar.



The *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*.



Rajagrihe Satabarsha, a local periodical.



Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetana Mancha, a Dalit organisation's stall at the Matua Dharma Mahamela.



A Matua *dal* arriving at the Matua Dharma Mahamela.



Panel discussion at the local Matua *utsab*.



A *kabigaan* performance at a local Matua *utsab*.



Images of Matua icons and chief minister Mamata Banerjee on a gate leading to the Matua Dharma Mahamela in 2013.



Community lunch at the Matua Dharma Mahamela in 2013.

Matua Mahasangha and the Politics of Dalit Migrants

“First we will pass the Citizenship Amendment bill and ensure that all the *refugees* from the neighbouring nations get the Indian citizenship. After that NRC will be made and we will detect and deport every *infiltrator* from our motherland.” – Amit Shah at an election rally in Bongaon, West Bengal, on 1 May 2019, (emphasis added).²⁹²

The questions of citizenship and illegal migration are burning issues in India today. Two major moves by the BJP-led government under the prime ministership of Narendra Modi have fundamentally transformed the idea of citizenship in India. The first is the preparation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, and the announcement of the possibility of conducting a similar exercise across the country.²⁹³ The NRC is a citizenship verification project of the central government that aims at detection and subsequent disenfranchisement of ‘illegal migrants.’ For inclusion in the NRC, as the Assam experiment shows, a person needs to prove herself or himself to be a legitimate Indian citizen by producing required documentary proof.²⁹⁴ The publication of the NRC in Assam, prepared under the supervision of the Supreme Court, on 31 August 2019 led

²⁹²Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, “Who is linking Citizenship Act to NRC? Here are five times Amit Shah did so”, *Scroll.in*, December 20, 2019. <https://scroll.in/article/947436/who-is-linking-citizenship-act-to-nrc-here-are-five-times-amit-shah-did-so>. Accessed July 26, 2021.

²⁹³Nazimuddin Siddique, “Inside Assam’s Detention Camps: How the Current Citizenship Crisis Disenfranchises Indians”, *EPW Engage* 55(7) (2020). <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/inside-assams-detention-camps-how-current>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

²⁹⁴Business Standard, “What is NRC”, *Business Standard*. <https://www.business-standard.com/about/what-is-nrc>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

to the exclusion of more than 19 lakh people residing in the state.²⁹⁵ These people have been categorised as ‘foreigners’ and many have been sent to detention camps. What is important to note is that the majority of the people excluded from this list belong to the minority communities, i.e. Muslims and lower-caste Hindus.²⁹⁶ The NRC in Assam had its repercussions in the neighbouring state of West Bengal, where one of the earliest protests against it was staged by the Matuas after the first draft was published in July 2019.²⁹⁷ A section of the MM leadership claimed that nearly six lakh Matuas were excluded from the draft NRC in Assam, and faced “an uncertain future” due to the “coercive action by the Centre”.²⁹⁸ This sense of fear and uncertainty, however, as we shall see, is not something new when it comes to the question of citizenship rights of Dalit migrants.

The second move is the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, (CAA)²⁹⁹ on 12 December 2019. This new law makes two crucial changes vis-à-vis citizenship in India. One, the CAA excludes migrants belonging to six religions (namely, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian) who entered India on or before 31 December 2014 from neighbouring three Muslim-majority countries (viz. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) from the category of ‘illegal migrants’, and promises to grant them Indian citizenship. Two, it reduces for these migrants the number of years required

²⁹⁵Scroll Staff, “Assam: Final NRC status of over 3 crore applicants published online”, *Scroll.in*, September 14, 2019. <https://scroll.in/latest/937340/assam-final-nrc-status-of-over-3-crore-applicants-publishedonline>. Accessed April 5, 2020.

²⁹⁶Dharmesh Ambedkar, “NRC and CAA are as anti-Dalit as anti-Muslim”, *Roundtable India*, December 23, 2019. https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9779:nrc-and-caa-are-as-anti-dalit-as-anti-muslim&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132. Accessed April 5, 2020.

²⁹⁷Staff Reporter, “West Bengal witnesses protests against NRC”, *The Hindu*, August 1, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/west-bengal-witnesses-protests-againstnrc/article24574853.ece>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

²⁹⁸Staff Reporter, “West Bengal witnesses protests against NRC”.

²⁹⁹See Ministry of Law and Justice, THE CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2019, *The Gazette of India*, December 12, 2019. <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>. Accessed March 31, 2020.

to acquire Indian citizenship by naturalisation from eleven to five years. With the enactment of this new law, the religion of a person, for the first time, has become a criterion for acquiring Indian citizenship. Moreover, the conspicuous absence of Muslim and Tamil migrants (such as Rohingyas from Myanmar, and Tamils from Sri Lanka) in the CAA has raised concerns about the non-secular nature of the law. Opposition parties and activists have legally challenged the constitutionality of the CAA for its communal and Hindu majoritarian character, and its fate now depends on the decision of the judiciary.³⁰⁰ The CAA sparked nationwide mass protests.³⁰¹ The BJP, however, maintained its firm position on the CAA and defended it as a law that is going to provide citizenship to “persecuted minorities” from the Muslim-majority neighbouring countries. To defend the CAA, the then BJP working president J.P. Nadda said in 2019:

“The opposition parties and those Dalit leaders opposing the CAA should know that a majority of Hindu migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are Dalits. Most of those came to India belong to castes like matua and namashudhra.”³⁰²

Nadda’s statement is particularly interesting as it further complicates the picture by invoking the question of caste vis-à-vis the citizenship question. This statement, when read together with Amit Shah’s words at the election campaign in the border constituency of

³⁰⁰Mihir Desai, “CAA–NRC–NPR and Its Discontents”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 55(7) (2020): 25-30.

³⁰¹The anti-CAA protests, as H. Srikanth has noted, can be categorised under three heads: one, objection to the CAA but support for the NRC among the indigenous people in north-eastern states such as Assam; two, opposition to both the CAA and the NRC by Muslims; and three, protests against the communalisation of citizenship by the secular-liberal outfits. See H. Srikanth, “Three Streams in the Anti-CAA Movement”, *The India Forum*, January 21, 2020.

<https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/three-streams-anti-caa-movement>. Accessed April 5, 2020.

³⁰²HT Correspondent, “Those against CAA are ‘anti-Dalits’: JP Nadda slams opposition”, *Hindustan Times*, December 29, 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/those-opposing-caa-are-anti-dalits-cong-misleading-minorities-nadda/story-fAGxIsTZhwrblPZNUeteAO.html>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

Bongaon mentioned at the outset, encapsulates the changing politics of citizenship in India. One, it demonstrates how CAA-NRC, endorsed by the Hindu majoritarian establishment, functions as a double-edged weapon of the state to create suspicions about the migrant and threaten to disenfranchise sections of the population from national membership. Two, it reflects the political manoeuvring of the citizenship question by the ruling regime to integrate Dalit migrants within the Hindu fold. Three, it shows how social antagonisms between Dalits and Muslims, i.e. between the “internal” and the “external Other” of Hinduism³⁰³, are cultivated by the dominant Hindu establishment through the construction of the ‘refugee/infiltrator’ binary around the figure of the migrant.

This chapter tries to understand this changing politics of citizenship through a discussion on the movement of Dalit migrants in West Bengal for citizenship rights under the banner of the MM. Because of this movement, started after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, the Matuas have grabbed national political limelight over the years as a politically salient Dalit community. This is evident in the aforementioned statement of J.P. Nadda. In other words, the movement for citizenship rights, as we shall discuss, has played a crucial role in shaping the present political salience of the Matuas, and the formation of what I have called the Matua political public. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I shall discuss the conceptualisation of citizenship in India and show how the category of the migrant has always been a suspect figure in the legal and political discourse. The second section discusses the post-Partition exodus of the Namasudras to show how their identity as migrants, combined with their rank in the caste hierarchy, have doubly excluded them from proper rehabilitation and access to resources in India. In the final section, I shall discuss in detail Dalit migrants’ movement for citizenship under the banner of the MM, its origin

³⁰³Dilip M. Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2011), 2.

and evolution over the years, the modes of negotiations with the state, and the impact of the movement in the contemporary political landscape of West Bengal.

Caste, Religion and Migration

Let us begin with the question of citizenship of migrants in the domain of law. As Valerian Rodrigues has shown, “citizenship has been quite central to India’s nationalist imagination”.³⁰⁴ Migrants, particularly if they are non-Hindu or lower-caste Hindus, have never been trusted candidates for citizenship in this imagination. Despite the inclusive nature of constitutional arrangements in India to accommodate ‘ex-untouchable’ communities, caste continues to play a vital role in the conferment or denial of genuine citizenship for Dalits.

During the making of the Constitution of India, the Interim Committee on Fundamental Rights headed by Vallabhbhai Patel advocated an idea of citizenship based on “birth or domicile reflecting territorial belongingness (*jus soli*) to the nation” in 1947.³⁰⁵ However, the massive transfer of population in Bengal and Punjab following Partition soon complicated the picture. The partition of India, as Kanika Gauba has argued, directly influenced the framing of provisions on citizenship as enshrined in Article 5-11 of Part II of the Constitution.³⁰⁶ Instead of laying down a permanent law of citizenship, the Constituent Assembly thus left the task to future parliaments. Gauba has argued that the “flawed memory” of Partition epistemologically aligned citizenship with religious affinity, and in turn, “irrevocably unnaturalised the migrant, whose patriotism would be constantly

³⁰⁴Valerian Rodrigues, “Citizenship and the Indian Constitution”, in *Politics and Ethics of the Indian Constitution*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167.

³⁰⁵Kanika Gauba, “Forgetting Partition: Constitutional Amnesia and Nationalism”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 51(39) (2016): 41.

³⁰⁶Gauba, “Forgetting Partition”, 41.

questioned”.³⁰⁷ This connection between religion and citizenship did not lead to a simple Hindu/Muslim binary that made the Hindu migrant a natural Indian citizen and the Muslim a non-natural Indian citizen. Rather, contestations over citizenship across India have complicated the category of Hindu migrant, and showed that it is not only the religion but also the caste of the migrant that determines his or her eligibility for unconditional inclusion into the nation. The Assam NRC provides the most recent example where, apart from Muslims, predominantly lower-caste Hindus such as Namasudras were excluded from the NRC. A similar example is the case of Bhils in Rajasthan who, after migrating from Pakistan in successive phases, continued to reside in India as “stateless, statusless and invisible” people for decades without getting citizenship or equal access to government documents and resources because of their lower rank in the caste hierarchy.³⁰⁸ The suspicion around the figure of the migrant in India therefore germinates not only from his or her religious affinity but also from his or her rank in the Hindu caste order. The Indian citizen, as Hugo Gorringer has argued, has “an upper caste hue”³⁰⁹ that makes caste Hindus real and natural members of the nation whereas non-Hindus and Dalits have been systematically unnaturalised. The Citizenship Act, 1955, (or the Principal Act) and later amendments to it, as scholars have shown, led to a shift in the idea of Indian citizenship from birth to descent and blood ties.³¹⁰ Niraja Gopal Jayal has argued that “an ultimately progressive settlement in favour of *jus soli* could not eliminate the ever-present threat of encroachment from *jus sanguinis*” (citizenship by descent and blood ties).³¹¹ This shift in the

³⁰⁷Gauba, “Forgetting Partition”, 43.

³⁰⁸Divya Sharma, “The People of Kali Beri Settlement: Pakistani Migrant Struggles in India”, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 59 (2016). <http://berkeleyjournal.org/2016/01/the-people-of-kali-beri-settlement-pakistani-migrant-struggles-in-india/>. Accessed April 4, 2021. Also see Natasha Raheja, “Neither Here nor There: Pakistani Hindu Refugee Claims at the Interface of the International and South Asian Refugee Regimes”, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31(3) (2018): 334-352.

³⁰⁹Hugo Gorringer, “The Caste of the Nation: Untouchability and Citizenship in South India”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 42 (1) (2008): 130.

³¹⁰See Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013); Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India*.

³¹¹Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents*, 81.

idea of citizenship from *jus soli* to *jus sanguinis* was evident from the increasing focus on illegal migration in the citizenship laws.

The question of illegal migration caught national political attention in the 1980s when the indigenous Assamese population launched a movement to oust Bengali-speaking non-Assamese migrants.³¹² The East Bengali Muslim peasantry settled in Assam under the patronage of the colonial government,³¹³ and Bengali Hindus largely migrated after Partition in successive waves due to religious tensions, social ties, and economic reasons.³¹⁴ The increasing presence of East Bengali migrants in Assam gave rise to the indigenous population's demands to stop the immigration of Bengalis irrespective of their religion or caste. This social tension led to repeated instances of violence. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the Congress-led central government and the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) de-escalated the situation, albeit temporarily. What needs to be noted is that the Bengali immigrants who have been the targets of political violence in Assam over the years have mostly been either Bengali Muslims, as witnessed during the Nellie massacre in 1983, or lower-caste Hindus, as evidenced by the 2018 attacks on Namasudras.³¹⁵ The Assam Accord set 'cut-off dates' for entry into India, and aimed at detecting and deporting the migrants who crossed the border after 25 March 1971.³¹⁶ Furthermore, in 1983, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act was passed to identify, confirm, and

³¹²For a detailed discussion on the Assam movement in 1980s, please see the following debate: Anandita Kar, Shreedhar Manek and Kieran Lobo (Curated by), "The Curious Case of Citizenship in Assam: A Look at the 1980s Agitation", *EPW Engage*. <https://www.epw.in/engage/discussion/citizenship-in-assam-1980-agitation-nrc>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

³¹³Arupjyoti Saikia, "The Historical Geography of the Assam Violence", *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(41) (2012): 15-18.

³¹⁴Sanjib Baruah, "Partition and the Politics of Citizenship in Assam", in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (Delhi: Zubaan, 2015).

³¹⁵PTI, "Gunmen Came in Two Groups to Attack, Says Lone Survivor of Assam Killings", *NDTV*. November 2, 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/gunmen-came-in-two-groups-to-attack-says-lone-survivor-of-assam-killings-by-suspected-ulfa-terrorist-1941894>. Accessed January 31, 2019.

³¹⁶Baruah, "Partition and the Politics of Citizenship in Assam", 90.

deport illegal migrants from Bangladesh. This Act was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2005 in *Sarbananda Sonowal vs. Union of India & Anr* for being ‘unconstitutional’.³¹⁷ However, the judiciary kept the suspicion around illegal migrants alive by connecting them to questions of “external aggression and internal disturbance” that might threaten national security.³¹⁸ Moreover, a new category called “D (doubtful) voters” was also introduced in the electoral rolls of Assam in 1997 to label those whose citizenship was undetermined.³¹⁹ The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 1986, made a further special provision for Assam, emphasising the principle of *jus sanguinis* and thus making birth an insufficient criterion to acquire citizenship.³²⁰

The suspicion around the illegal migrant was further augmented after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, by the BJP-led NDA government.³²¹ Under this law, two categories entered the legal discourse of Indian citizenship: (a) Overseas Citizen of India (OCI), and (b) illegal migrants.³²² While the category of the OCI, as Anupama Roy has noted, aimed to include the Hindu diaspora that was seen as having a strong bond with its “*punya bhumi*”, this move was accompanied by “a corresponding trajectory of disenfranchisement, dispossession, and illegality of the migrant.”³²³ Effectively, the OCI category allowed the selective incorporation of Hindus who are “the prosperous members of the Indian diaspora”.³²⁴ This excluded lower-caste Hindu migrants

³¹⁷V.S. Ramadevi and S.K. Mendiratta, *How India Votes: Election Laws, Practice and Procedure* (India: Lexis Nexis, 2014), 279.

³¹⁸Cited in Gauba, “Forgetting Partition”, 43.

³¹⁹Ramadevi and Mendiratta, *How India Votes*, 279.

³²⁰See Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India*, 138.

³²¹Ministry of Law and Justice, The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003 dated January 7, 2004, *The Gazette of India*. January 8, 2004.

https://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2004/E_7_2011_119.pdf. Accessed July 27, 2021.

³²²The category of OCI was further addressed in the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2005. Also see Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India*, 136.

³²³Roy, *Mapping Citizenship in India*, 136–9.

³²⁴Jayal, *Citizenship and its Discontents*, 22.

such as Namasudras and Bhils who, unlike the affluent Hindu diaspora, lacked the necessary paperwork to receive Indian citizenship. As per section 2(1)(b) of the 2003 Act, an illegal migrant means a person who has entered India without valid documents or has continued to stay beyond the permitted period. The MM primarily objected to this clause of the law as it places emphasis on documents.³²⁵ The Act also restricted the acquisition of citizenship by birth. It emphasised that a person would be eligible for citizenship only if his or her parents were legal citizens at the time of his or her birth. The 2003 Act threatened the citizenship status of a considerable number of Namasudras who, unlike their upper-caste Hindu counterparts, migrated to India after 1971. Moreover, many people born in India feared the threat of disenfranchisement because their parents' citizenship status came under legal scrutiny under the provisions of the 2003 Act. In short, the 2003 Act created fear and uncertainty among Dalit migrants by introducing a cut-off date for entry into India and by putting emphasis on descent and production of documents as proofs of citizenship.

Quite interestingly, the political position of the BJP-led NDA government on containing illegal immigration was shared by the Left Front government in the state at the time.³²⁶ For instance, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then chief minister, said:

“...on the question of dealing with illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh, our state government is in agreement with the government of India that whenever such infiltration is detected, the foreign nationals should be pushed back forthwith.”³²⁷

In spite of ideological and political differences, the agreement between the mainstream political parties – the Left, the BJP, and the TMC (then an ally of the BJP) on the question

³²⁵*Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, Published and circulated by Mamata Bala Thakur, M.P. and Sanghadhipati (Thakurnagar: Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha, 2016), 4-5.

³²⁶Sumanta Banerjee, “Bengal Left: From Pink to Saffron?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38(9) (2003): 864-865.

³²⁷Banerjee, “Bengal Left”, 864.

of cross-border migration reflected the overwhelming upper-caste dominance across the political spectrum. Such an upper-caste consensus on the legal definition of citizenship, crafted along Hindu majoritarian lines, shows how Dalit migrants have been systematically marginalised and made to live under a perpetual threat of disenfranchisement and periodic administrative harassment.

Dalit Migrants, Unequal Rehabilitation and The Burden of Documents

The dominant image of a migrant in West Bengal largely revolved around the “traumatic and nostalgic memories of a lost homeland in East Bengal” of the upper-caste Bengali Hindu fleeing from “East Pakistan to Calcutta”.³²⁸ Those who migrated in the later waves, often through informal means such as broker-assisted channels and without valid documents, and faced the threat of disenfranchisement due to the amendments in the citizenship laws remained largely invisible in the mainstream discourse. Unlike upper-caste Hindus and Muslims, Dalits, as Anupama Rao has argued, “found themselves as a territorially dispersed minority with *nowhere else to go*” after Partition.³²⁹ Dalit migrants were thus described as the “worst victims of the partition” by Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal.³³⁰ Even P.R. Thakur who, unlike Mandal, advocated for the integration of Dalits into India at the time of Partition, named his house ‘The Exile’ after migrating and settling down in Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas district.

The caste of the migrant acted as a crucial factor if one looks at the rehabilitation of migrants in the post-Partition decades. Unlike the upper-caste migrants who resettled

³²⁸Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, “I Am Not a Refugee”: Rethinking Partition Migration”, *Modern Asian Studies* 37(3) (2003): 556-559.

³²⁹Rao, *The Caste Question*, 159.

³³⁰Dwaipayan Sen, “How the Dalits of Bengal Became the ‘Worst Victims’ of Partition”, *The Wire*. August 10, 2017. <https://thewire.in/history/partition-dalits-bengal>. Accessed January 31, 2019.

in and around Calcutta, most Dalit migrants, as scholars have shown, were rehabilitated either in camps or were sent off to remote, inhospitable areas in Odisha, Bihar, Dandakaranya (in central India), the Andaman Islands, and elsewhere.³³¹ The response of the Indian state vis-à-vis the needs of Dalit migrants after Partition was thus “a matter of calculation, discrimination and discretion”.³³² This discriminatory rehabilitation of Dalit migrants and stories of their survival came up during conversations with my respondents in the field. Kamal Biswas, a prominent Matua leader, provided an account of the rehabilitation of Dalit refugees outside West Bengal during our interview. He said:

“People were forced to resettle in different parts of India. Namasudras in large numbers were transported to [the] Andamans. They are scattered over Havelock, Little Andaman, Neil Island and elsewhere. Initially, we could not relate to the culture and language there. But we survived. And today, you will not find a single island in Andaman where there is no *Harimandir*.”³³³

The presence of *Harimandirs* in different remote parts of India, according to Biswas, is not only the evidence of Matua settlements but also testifies to the discriminatory rehabilitation policies of the Indian state vis-à-vis Dalit migrants who were resettled in far-flung unknown places. These policies also limited the possibilities of political consolidation of Dalit migrants such as the Namasudras in the postcolonial years. Moreover, the CPI-M-led Left Front, which had initially opposed the Congress’s policies and mobilised migrants under the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), reversed its political standpoint after coming to power in West Bengal in 1977.³³⁴ In 1979, for instance,

³³¹Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves”, 106; Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 255.

³³²Bose, “Refugee, Memory and the State”, 21.

³³³Interview with Kamal Biswas, November 11, 2012, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

³³⁴Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves”.

hundreds of Namasudras were brutally massacred by the police at Marichjhanpi in the Sundarbans when they tried to return to West Bengal from Dandakaranya and other areas.³³⁵

The rehabilitation policies of the government also led to the constant internal migration of Dalit migrants. During my fieldwork, most people shared stories of shuttling between one place and another such as refugee camps, relatives' homes in refugee colonies, and from one state to the other. Unsurprisingly, this continuous physical displacement of Dalit migrants from one place to another led to the loss or misplacement of official documents that served as proofs of their identity. In many cases, Dalit migrant settlements that came up on land vested with the government were attacked and demolished. Hiren Bala, a Matua *dalapati*, recalled such an incident during our interview. In the 1980s, when A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury was the railways minister, a Namasudra settlement adjacent to Barasat railway station in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district was burnt to ashes overnight.³³⁶ As noted earlier, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, exacerbated the government's suspicion of migrants and they were often required to produce their identity documents to state officials. In her ethnographic study in coastal Odisha, Vasudha Chhotray shows how Namasudra refugee families who settled there but did not possess identity documents were marked as 'infiltrators' after the Act was passed.³³⁷

The bureaucratic harassment of Namasudra refugees, post-2003, unfolded in many forms. Jatin Biswas, a construction worker who travels across India for work, recounted

³³⁵Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves"; Also see Jhuma Sen, "Reconstructing Marichjhanpi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives", in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015), 102–27.

³³⁶Interview with Hiren Bala, November 15, 2014, at Guma, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

³³⁷Vasudha Chhotray, "Nullification of Citizenship: Negotiating Authority Without Identity Documents in Coastal Odisha, India", *Contemporary South Asia* 26 (2) (2017): 175-190.

an incident of police intimidation.³³⁸ Biswas, as a child, migrated with his family to India from East Pakistan in 1963. They initially settled in a camp near the India-East Pakistan border, then were sent to Dandakaranya. Afterwards, he moved to a relative's home on the outskirts of Calcutta, and finally settled in Thakurnagar. On one occasion, the local police summoned him and accused him of being an illegal migrant and providing shelter to an acquaintance who, according to the police, was also an illegal migrant. While recounting his story, Biswas showed me his father's 'Relief Eligibility Certificate' that he has carefully preserved for decades as it is the only proof of his valid refugee identity. In spite of possessing other necessary documents such as a ration card, a voter identity card, and a caste certificate, the Relief Eligibility Certificate, Biswas said, was important because it was the proof that his family had migrated before 1971. This faded certificate, pasted on a paperboard to keep its torn pieces together, was issued to his father by the Ministry of Labour, Employment & Rehabilitation, Government of India, after the family arrived in India in the early 1960s. It states: 'Certified that I am satisfied, on the basis of the above information and further enquiries made by me that the family referred to herein has migrated from East Pakistan to India after 31st December, 1963'; and was signed by a former gazetted officer of Basirhat sub-division. This certificate emboldened Biswas to successfully confront the accusations made by the local police, and was followed by intervention from the local MM leadership as well as TMC leaders.

Apart from such instances of police harassment, Dalit migrants also encountered administrative hassles, particularly after the passage of the 2003 Act. They have been suspected to be 'Bangladeshis' and 'infiltrators' during visits to government offices for paperwork such as registration in the electoral roll, passport application, buying and

³³⁸Interview with Jatin Biswas, April 23, 2016, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

registration of land, and application for caste certificate. For instance, on 27 July 2015, a local Dalit organisation called the Namasudra Bikash Parishad (NBP) sent a mass deputation to the divisional commissioner of Jalpaiguri Division alleging that Namasudra refugees had been asked to produce official documents, issued on or before 1950, as proofs of citizenship when they applied for caste certificates to the sub-divisional officer.³³⁹ The MM too has raised similar concerns over the years. In a booklet published on the eve of a rally on 11 January 2016 in Kolkata, the MM listed a series of incidents of Namasudra migrants getting arrested or heckled by the administration on the suspicion of being ‘Bangladeshis.’³⁴⁰ The MM claimed that there were many instances where Dalit migrants faced bureaucratic obstacles during the renewal of their passports, while buying land, or even while opening bank accounts.³⁴¹ These examples show how the actions of the Indian state — be it the discriminatory rehabilitation policies in the aftermath of Partition or changes in the citizenship laws, or administrative harassment by the state agencies — have consciously kept Dalit migrants on the margins of the nation.

The Communal Card: ‘Refugee versus Infiltrator’

Citizenship in India, as discussed earlier, was epistemologically aligned to religion in the aftermath of Partition. On the one hand, there is the figure of the unhyphenated natural citizen (for example, an upper-caste Hindu); on the other hand, there is the hyphenated, non-natural citizen (such as Muslims and Dalits) who could not fully become part of the nation.³⁴² The latter category, i.e. the hyphenated citizen, is further divided along religious

³³⁹All India Namasudra Bikash Parishad. *Deputation to the Hon’ble Chief Minister, West Bengal through Divisional Commissioner, Jalpaiguri Division, W.B* dated July 27, 2015.

³⁴⁰*Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, 7-9.

³⁴¹*Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, 8.

³⁴²Gyanendra Pandey, “Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India”, in *The Gyanendra Pandey Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152.

lines into lower-caste Hindus and non-Hindus; what Dilip Menon has categorised as the “internal” and the “external Other” of Hinduism.³⁴³ A salient feature of Hindu majoritarian politics is the production and reproduction of social and political antagonisms between lower-caste Hindus and non-Hindus. This is done primarily for three reasons: one, to fracture the possibility of a political alliance between lower-caste Hindus (such as Dalits and Adivasis) and Muslims; two, to consolidate the Hindu community by bringing back within its fold the Dalits and Adivasis who converted to other religions or practise a distinct non-Hindu tradition; and three, to reap electoral benefits through vote polarisation.

Such politicisation of the figure of the migrant gave birth to a communal binary – refugee versus infiltrator (*sharanarathi banam onuprobeshkari*). It has been designed particularly by the BJP and its allies such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to instigate social antagonisms at the grassroots, particularly in the states bordering Bangladesh. I came across these two terms, *sharanarathi* and *onuprobeshkari*, innumerable times in the field during personal interactions, at public meetings, and in the movement literature. According to this binary, a migrant who has come to India, even if through illegal channels, can be either a refugee (*sharanarathi*) or an infiltrator (*onuprobeshkari*) depending on his or her religious identity. While the former refers to East Bengali Hindu migrants who migrated to India due to fear of religious persecution, the latter denotes Muslim migrants, the ‘infiltrators’. It is this division that Amit Shah drew when he explained the CAA-NRC twin project of the BJP government in his election campaign before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

The refugee/infiltrator binary, however, is not new. In the 1990s, communalising the migrant became one of the key electoral strategies of the BJP and its allies to mobilise

³⁴³See Menon, *The Blindness of Insight* for details.

Hindu votes in states such as Assam and West Bengal.³⁴⁴ Such actions did not remain confined to the politics of the BJP. Other political parties such as the Congress, the Left and the TMC have kept the suspicion around the migrant intact and used the question of illegal migration from Bangladesh as a strategy of electoral mobilisation, particularly in border states such as Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. In 1992, for instance, the Congress-led government launched “Operation Push-back” in which many migrants from Bangladesh were deported from Delhi and Maharashtra for being ‘illegal migrants’.³⁴⁵ Similarly, in February 2003, the then chief minister of Tripura, Manik Sarkar, as Sumanta Banerjee has noted, “literally echoed [Lal Krishna] Advani's paranoid fears about every Bangladeshi being an ISI agent”.³⁴⁶ In 2005, Mamata Banerjee, the TMC supremo, “rushed to the well and started crying, tore and threw papers” at the deputy speaker of the Lok Sabha to get him to allow a debate on “illegal immigration from Bangladesh”.³⁴⁷

The refugee/infiltrator debate continues to be an effective electoral strategy for the BJP. During the 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign in Krishnanagar in the border district of Nadia, Narendra Modi asserted: “There are two types of people who have come in – infiltrators and refugees. Those who are refugees are our family.”³⁴⁸ In its 2014 election manifesto, the BJP stated that “India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus”, and it promised to change the law to give Indian citizenship to Hindu refugees if it was voted into power.³⁴⁹ The CAA, 2019, is the culmination of this promise. It is also important

³⁴⁴Gillan, “Refugees or Infiltrators?”, 73-95.

³⁴⁵Gillan, “Refugees or Infiltrators?”, 80–81.

³⁴⁶Banerjee, “Bengal Left”, 864.

³⁴⁷HT Correspondent, “2005 and now: Mamata Banerjee’s u-turn on Bangladeshi immigrants”, *Hindustan Times*, August 2, 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/2005-and-now-mamata-banerjee-s-u-turn-on-bangladeshi-immigrants/story-6b8nRIst7BjZs4QWSXi0jN.html>. Accessed July 27, 2021.

³⁴⁸The Hindu, “Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’ would have to go back: Modi”, *The Hindu*, May 7, 2014. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/loksabha2014/bangladeshi-infiltrators-would-have-to-go-backmodi/article5986165.ece>. Accessed January 31, 2019.

³⁴⁹BJP Manifesto 2014, 40.

to note the use of the term ‘family’ (*paribar*) by Modi to understand how social antagonisms and conditions of inclusion/exclusion are manufactured and manoeuvred in the realm of citizenship politics. However, despite the rhetoric of claiming that the Namasudras are part of the larger Hindu family, Namasudra migrants continue to live under the perpetual threat of disenfranchisement, and have to struggle to achieve substantive citizenship. In a hostile political environment where political parties dominated by the upper castes share a unanimous standpoint on the issue of migration from Bangladesh, particularly after the 2003 Act came into force, the Namasudras have pressed their claims collectively through new autonomous political channels such as the MM. For those who do not belong to the traditionally privileged groups, as Suryakant Waghmore has argued, caste functions “not only as a source of inequality but as a resource for mobilisation against inequalities”.³⁵⁰

The Movement of Dalit migrants

The 2003 Act and the subsequent incidents of harassment of Dalit migrants by state agencies led to localised resistances of the people against the law. Refugee organisations such as the Udbastu Kalyan Sangha and the Joint Action Committee for Bangali Refugees (JACBR) decided to launch a bigger movement. At this juncture, the MM formally entered the realm of politics. A prominent refugee leader, during our interview, said that the decision to organise the movement under the banner of the MM was taken because of the organisation’s “network” (*sangathan*) and “religious appeal” (*dharmiyo abeg*).³⁵¹ “*Ora* [the Thakurs] *dakle manush ashe*” (people come if the Thakurs give a call), he added. The MM, unlike smaller refugee organisations, commands considerable influence over the Namasudra community and thus the organisation became the obvious choice for leading the movement for citizenship rights. More importantly, the Thakur family is the most

³⁵⁰Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

³⁵¹Interview with Anil Ranjan Biswas, October 25, 2013, in Madhyamgram, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

trusted leadership among the Matuas. Smaller refugee organisations were therefore happy to mobilise behind the MM.

On 15 December 2004, the MM in collaboration with the Udbastu Kalyan Sangha organised a hunger strike in Thakurnagar to demand the “citizenship and rehabilitation of refugees (*udbastu-der nagarikatta o punorbashan*)”. Twenty-one people, including the ex-general secretary of the MM and other Matua preachers, participated in the hunger strike. The MM described the 2003 Act as a ‘draconian law’ (*kala kanoon*). On the fifth day of the strike, a confrontation occurred between the people and the police. According to the MM’s version of this episode, which I gathered from oral and written sources, a huge police contingent reached *Thakurbari*, the holy site of the Matuas and the hunger strike venue, in the evening.³⁵² A leader from the stage announced that the police had arrived to disrupt the strike and break the spirit of the movement. Soon, word of a possible police attack on the protesters spread in and around Thakurnagar. Hundreds of people gathered at the venue within a few hours. They carried their *danka*, *kashi* and *nishaans* – the markers of Matua identity. People also collected stones from an adjacent railway track to retaliate in case of a police intervention. The unanticipated and sudden response of the Matuas made the police retreat. Finally, on the seventh day, Ramdas Athwale, an MP and the leader of the Republican Party of India, visited Thakurnagar as the representative of the central government and promised to address the demand of the Matuas. A few months later, in March 2005, a delegation of the MM met Manmohan Singh, the then prime minister, with the demand to repeal the 2003 Act and provide citizenship to Dalit refugees from Bangladesh. Since the mid-2000s, the MM had also started to mobilise the Matuas through its local branches to behave as an organised electorate. Through regular campaigns at

³⁵²Interview with Sukumar Pande, November 12, 2014, at Chakdaha, Nadia, West Bengal; also see *Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, 12-13.

Matua *utsavs*, public meetings, and print literature, the MM and its local units raised the citizenship question of Dalit migrants, their struggle over the decades, the new threat posed by the 2003 Act, and the need to build organised autonomous resistance.³⁵³ Such mobilisations provided the MM the necessary credibility to negotiate with political parties and the government on behalf of Dalit migrants. In short, the MM emerged as a new representative organisation of Dalits in the rural politics of West Bengal. In its new political avatar, the MM started to draw the attention of, and engaged with, the state and its organs, and political parties on the issue of citizenship rights, in the following three ways.

First, since the enactment of the 2003 law, the MM has organised regular mass protests. For instance, the MM organised a huge public rally in Kolkata on 28 December 2010, a few months before the 2011 state assembly election. This event was attended by the representatives of all the mainstream political parties, namely Manas Bhuiya (INC), Tathagata Roy (BJP), Gautam Deb (CPI-M), Haripada Biswas (Forward Bloc), and Mukul Roy and Gobinda Naskar (TMC). In the presence of these leaders, the then religious head of the MM, Binapani Debi, made her organisation's stand on the citizenship issue clear. She said,

“We did not want partition. Yet we had to leave behind our homes and possessions and become refugees in this country to save our life and dignity. We toiled here in this land to reap a golden harvest. We have made this country our own. I heard that we shall again become refugees under the new citizenship law of 2003. The government in that country did not jail us, but here the government is dragging us to jail.

³⁵³See *Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, 14.

We all have to join hands and resist it. We won't tolerate this injustice. The law must be amended if needed. We have to fight against this law by putting aside all political differences. Oh, Matua devotees! Harichand-Guruchand is with you – you will be victorious. I can sacrifice my life, but won't tolerate this injustice. You join me in this fight. I appeal to all political parties of Bengal to support this movement of the Bengalis.”³⁵⁴

The claim over Indian citizenship was further asserted by the then *sangbadhipati* of the MM, Kapil Krishna Thakur. Referring to his father P.R. Thakur, Kapil Krishna said, unlike caste Hindus and Muslims who are outsiders, Dalits were the “original inhabitants” of this country.³⁵⁵ This pre-election meeting provided the MM fresh political mileage by bringing the leaders of major political parties on the same stage and making them empathise with the demand of the Matuas vis-à-vis their citizenship rights. It established the MM as an unavoidable political actor in rural politics capable of influencing electoral results in the Namasudra-populated constituencies in border districts such as North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, and Malda.

In November 2014, the MM — in collaboration with refugee organisations such as the JACBR, the Association for the Refugee in India (ARI), the Purba Banga Dharmio Sankhalaghu Udbastu Kalyan Parishad, the Bangiya Lokokobi Sanstha, and the Bangla Bachao Nagarik Mancho — organised another hunger strike in Thakurnagar. This time the MM placed a six-point list of demands before the central government – (a)

³⁵⁴“Udbastu Nagarikatta-r Dabite 28-e December 2010 Matua Mahasangha-er Daake Kolkata-r Samabeshe Baroma Binapani Debi-r Bhason”, In *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, ed. Swapan Kumar Biswas (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, April 1, 2011), 4.

³⁵⁵“Udbastu Nagarikatta-r Dabite 28-e December 2010 Matua Mahasangha-er Daake Kolkata-r Samabeshe Baroma Binapani Debi-r Bhason”, 6.

unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali refugees and the removal of the 25 March 1971 cut-off date; (b) recognition of Matua Dharma as an autonomous and independent religion; (c) government holiday on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur, and the inclusion of the life and contributions of Guruchand Thakur in educational curricula; (d) enquiry into the Marichjhanpi massacre and assistance to affected families; (e) measures to contain attacks on minorities in Bangladesh; and (f) distribution of caste certificates, and the right to education in mother tongue for Bengali refugees settled outside West Bengal. Apart from the main venue of the hunger strike, the Matuas staged parallel demonstrations in Kolkata and other parts of the state. A Matua woman tried to immolate herself in support for the MM's demands.³⁵⁶ The strike was withdrawn on the sixth day after BJP leader Krishnamurti Bhandi visited *Thakurbari* on 2 December 2014 as the representative of the prime minister and gave assurances on his behalf about looking into their demands. While this protest brought to the fore how the demand for unconditional citizenship rights has been strategically blended with the other communitarian demands of the Matuas over the years, the 2014 hunger strike marked a clear shift in the political position of the MM compared to the hunger strike of 2004. The banners and posters used in the 2014 hunger strike clearly defined the category of Bengali refugees along religious identities. The term 'Bengali refugees', as used in this protest, included people belonging to only four religions viz. "Matua-Hindu-Buddhist-Christian". While such framing distinguishes Matua as a non-Hindu religious tradition, the explicit exclusion of Muslims from the definition of Bengali refugees reveals the communal turn in the politics of the MM. Unsurprisingly, the reframing of the demands of the MM, with an emphasis on a definition of Bengali

³⁵⁶Sanjib Chakrabarty, "Matua women tries to set herself on fire", *Times of India*, December 1, 2014. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Matua-woman-tries-to-set-herself-on-fire/articleshow/45328751.cms>. Accessed July 29, 2021.

migrants, coincided with the rise of the BJP on the national political stage, and the return of the refugee/infiltrator debate in the politics of West Bengal.

Second, in addition to organising regular protests, Dalit migrants engaged with the state through formal-official means viz. petitioning courts, sending representations to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), and periodically submitting deputations to the authorities concerned. Between 2005 and 2015, joint delegations of the MM and the JACBR have met the prime minister thrice. Apart from the MM, the role of refugee organisations such as the JACBR, the ARI, and others has been crucial in pursuing these legal means of engagement with the state. For instance, the JACBR and the ARI have corresponded with the MHA and the Parliamentary Standing Committee for Home Affairs over the last decade on the citizenship question of Bengali migrants. Moreover, JACBR leaders in collaboration with the Solidarity Committee for Bengali Refugees, the All India Namasudra Kalyan Parisad, and the Citizens Rights Preservation Committee, Assam, have also approached the Supreme Court to resolve the problems of Bengali refugees.³⁵⁷ These refugee organisations work closely with the MM. In December 2015, the MM held a national convention at the Constitution Club in New Delhi to raise the demands of citizenship, Scheduled Caste certificates, and land rights for Dalit migrants.³⁵⁸ Twelve refugee organisations participated in the convention. It is important to note that these petitions, deputations, and delegations provide “fear of religious persecution”³⁵⁹ as the main official reason behind migration of lower-caste Hindus from Bangladesh to India, thereby aligning the citizenship question with religion.

³⁵⁷Refugee's Problem in India, “PIL Writ Petition Drafted by Sukriti Ranjan Biswas”, *Refugeesproblemindia.blogspot.com*, October 29, 2016. <https://refugeesproblemindia.blogspot.com/>. Accessed July 29, 2021.

³⁵⁸*Deshantarita Matua-der Nagarikatter Sangram*, 15-16.

³⁵⁹ For example, see Refugee's Problem in India, “PIL Writ Petition Drafted by Sukriti Ranjan Biswas”.

This emphasis on Hindu identification of Dalit migrants by the refugee organisations, while engaging with the state, is done largely for strategic reasons. In the context of Pakistani Hindu migrants in Rajasthan, Natasha Raheja has argued that “the Indian state’s emphasis that suffering be narrated chiefly in terms of religious persecution obscures other forms of marginalization that Pakistani Hindus face, such as caste and economic oppression”.³⁶⁰ The Indian state, as Raheja shows, does not integrate lower-caste Hindu migrants simply because of their Hindu identification; rather, refuge is extended to them “on the basis of their persecuted religious minority status”.³⁶¹ In my field, as conversations with Matua refugee families revealed, there are a host of reasons, apart from the fear of persecution, behind their decision to migrate from Bangladesh to India. These include familial ties, marriages across borders, religious networks, educational opportunities, and economic reasons. I also came across instances where some members of a family migrated to India for education or jobs, while other members continued to live in Bangladesh. In spite of having multiple reasons for migration, fear of persecution is the official reason cited by Dalit migrants, as the language used in the petitions and deputations reveal, precisely because of the Indian state’s policies vis-à-vis granting them citizenship. Such techniques of the Indian state to integrate Dalit migrants such as the Matuas, on the one hand, undermine their cultural assertions and demand for recognition as a distinct non-Hindu religious tradition; and on the other hand, they intensify social antagonisms and lead to the communalisation of the citizenship question at the grassroots. In other words, constitutional and legal provisions such as the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, and more recently, the CAA, 2019, have been the tools of the upper-caste Hindu majoritarian establishment to crush oppositional religious consciousnesses of Dalits, and integrate them into the Hindu fold.

³⁶⁰Raheja, “Neither Here nor There”, 10.

³⁶¹Raheja, “Neither Here nor There”, 10.

Finally, the MM took active interest in electoral politics. Since the late 2000s, the MM leadership has engaged with party politics to secure the political and cultural demands of the Matuas. The organisation claims to have the network to influence election results in almost seventy assembly constituencies in West Bengal.³⁶² The MM's involvement in electoral politics, which I shall discuss in detail in the next chapter, compelled the upper-caste-dominated political parties to reach out to the organisation's central leadership. Since 2011, members of the Thakur family and other prominent Matua leaders have been offered nominations by political parties such as the TMC, the BJP, and the Left to contest elections at various levels: local, state, and national. Such political engagement of the MM in party politics led to a "real deepening of democracy".³⁶³ Dalit migrants could now make their claims and negotiate with the state from a platform not controlled by the caste Hindus. It bolstered a sense of security among Dalit migrants vis-a-vis the legal threat of disenfranchisement and bureaucratic harassment. For example, in 2011, Manjul Krishna Thakur, the youngest son of P.R. Thakur and Binapani Debi, contested the West Bengal assembly election on a TMC ticket from Gaighata and won the seat comfortably. He was appointed the minister of state for Refugee Rehabilitation and Relief in the TMC government. I met Thakur on two occasions. In our first brief meeting in November 2012, when I asked him about the citizenship issue of Dalit migrants, Thakur promptly replied,

³⁶²Raktima Bose, "Why the Matuas matter", *The Hindu*, March 31, 2011. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Why-the-Matuas-matter/article14967574.ece>.

Accessed July 27, 2021; This is a contested claim. Since there is no official count, some media reports claimed that the MM is influential in six parliamentary constituencies. See Ravik Bhattacharjee, "Matua community – Why are they important for Trinamool and BJP?", *The Indian Express*, February 6, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/this-word-means-matua-community-5567348/>. Accessed July 27, 2021. As I gathered from the field, the MM has a significant support base and has its branches in almost all the districts of West Bengal that border Bangladesh such as North and 24 Parganas, Nadia, Malda, and Jalpaiguri.

³⁶³Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 20.

“There is no problem on the issue these days. Earlier there were arrests and all, which has now been absolutely stopped. We cannot change the law; it’s a central government issue. As of now there is no problem.”³⁶⁴

The approach of the state administration vis-à-vis the citizenship question of Dalit migrants was clear from Thakur’s response. Since citizenship is a matter of the central government, the state government under the TMC addressed it by limiting bureaucratic harassment, such as arrests of Dalit migrants, in exchange for electoral support of the Matuas. Later, in 2016, I met Thakur once again after he quit the TMC. When I asked him about his contributions as a minister, Thakur said he had done whatever was possible, citing examples such as issuing *pattas* (land ownership deeds) to refugee families, sanctioning a project to build a shelter home for refugees in Bonhooghly near Kolkata, and similar steps.³⁶⁵ However, he reiterated that only the central government could solve the problem of the refugees and therefore the movement of the MM must go on.³⁶⁶ In other words, active participation in party politics provided the Matua leadership the opportunity to occupy positions of power. It opened up possibilities of the MM’s close engagement with the state in terms of its demands. On the one hand, the Matuas continued to press the central government on their demand for citizenship rights; and on the other hand, they successfully negotiated with the state government about their demands of land rights, issuance of caste certificates and ration cards, enrolment in voters’ list, and proper official rehabilitation. Participation in electoral politics also led to the representation of the

³⁶⁴Interview with Manjul Krishna Thakur on November 13, 2012, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

³⁶⁵Interview with Manjul Krishna Thakur on April 23, 2016, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

³⁶⁶Interview with Manjul Krishna Thakur on April 23, 2016, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

Matuas' demand at national-level politics. Members of the Thakur family such as Mamata Bala Thakur and Shantanu Thakur became MPs from Bongaon in 2015 and 2019 respectively, and raised the citizenship demand of Dalit migrants in parliament. This resulted in a new political camaraderie between New Delhi and Thakurnagar. Before the 2019 Lok Sabha election, MM leader Shantanu Thakur organised a Matua meeting in Thakurnagar that prime minister Narendra Modi attended as the chief guest. Modi visited the MM headquarters, took blessings from Binapani Debi, and addressed the rally. In his speech, he raised the issue of persecuted religious minorities from the neighbouring countries, and promised the Matuas that the Citizenship Amendment Bill (that became the CAA after both chambers of parliament passed it) floated by the BJP would address their long-standing demand.³⁶⁷ The promise of the CAA thus provided the BJP considerable support from the Matua and other Namasudra migrants. The Matuas, as is evident from J.P. Nadda's statement, became an example used by the BJP at the national level when discussing the beneficiaries of their citizenship policy. However, there is also opposition to the CAA among sections of the Matuas who argue that the cut-off date in the new law, in its current form, does not meet their demand for "unconditional citizenship rights".³⁶⁸

The movement of the Matuas, as the above discussion shows, gave them unprecedented visibility in the political landscape of West Bengal as well as at the national stage. It consolidated them as an electorally salient community represented by an organisation that is outside the control of the upper castes. Rather, the upper-caste-

³⁶⁷See link: DD News, *Prime Minister Narendra Modi address a public rally at Thakurnagar in West Bengal*, YouTube. February 2, 2019, Video, 29.26 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1n67QMr19I>. Accessed July 29, 2021.

³⁶⁸Praskanva Sinharay, "A State of Fear, Confusion and Hope: CAA and Bengali Dalit Refugees in India", *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, September 7, 2020. <https://polarjournal.org/2020/09/07/a-state-of-fear-confusion-and-hope-caa-and-bengali-dalit-refugees-in-india/>. Accessed July 26, 2021.

dominated political parties were compelled to build political rapport with the MM and clear their position vis-à-vis the claims and demands of the Matuas. In other words, the political assertions of the MM through various means – regular protests, networking with refugee organisations, periodic petitioning and participation in party-politics – have resulted in the recognition and partial fulfilment of their demands by the state. This is evident in the changes in the citizenship law. In addition to the cultural assertions of the Matuas that we discussed in the previous chapter, the MM’s movement and its partially successful negotiations with the state played a crucial role in the formation of the Matua political public.

However, the passage of the CAA and other changes in the legal framework of Indian citizenship such as The Passport (Entry to India) Amendment Rules, 2015, and the Foreigners (Amendment) Order, 2015, communalised the citizenship question.³⁶⁹ These changes, as Niraja Gopal Jayal has argued, led to the cementing of the idea of a “faith-based citizenship”.³⁷⁰ On the one hand, the changes in the law create the idea of favoured minorities and antagonise lower-caste Hindus and Muslims at the grassroots; on the other hand, the possibilities of citizenship verification projects such as the NRC perpetuate a sense of fear and uncertainty among all minorities living on the margins of the nation, irrespective of their religion. The migration of people and goods across national boundaries under the conditions of globalisation and the free-market economy is a “secular” phenomenon.³⁷¹ People along the Indo-Bangladesh border migrate due to varied reasons such as economic needs, political unrest, cultural ties, and familial connections.

³⁶⁹Ministry of Home Affairs, Notification dated 7 Sept. 2015, *The Gazette of India*, 8 Sept. 2015. <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2015/165755.pdf>, Accessed 31 Jan. 2019.

³⁷⁰Niraja Gopal Jayal, “Faith-based Citizenship the Dangerous Path India is Choosing”, *India Forum* (November 13, 2019). <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/faith-criterion-citizenship>. Accessed April 5, 2020.

³⁷¹See Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (Delhi: Sage, 1999), 76–79.

Understanding migration as external aggression perpetrated by religious groups with sinister motives thus stands against the principles of the liberal democratic world and neglects the historical processes that divided communities across borders. The actions of the Indian state, such as the preparation of the NRC and amending citizenship laws on the basis of descent or religious affinity, leave millions of people in a state of “liminal legality”.³⁷² In India, citizenship rights are not unconditionally extended to Muslims, Dalits, and other minorities. As the case of East Bengali migrants shows, people coming from non-Hindu or lower-caste Hindu communities have always been suspect in the eyes of the Hindu majoritarian state, and have to repeatedly prove themselves as legitimate members of the nation. Such perpetual marginalisation has also given birth to localised resistances such as the MM’s movement for citizenship rights of Dalit migrants. These movements, as the politics of the Matuas demonstrates, result in the emergence of new political actors and new practices of representation that operate outside the control of the dominant establishment.

³⁷²Sanjib Baruah, “The missing 4,007,707”. *The Indian Express*. August 2, 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/assam-nrc-draft-list-names-citizenship-5287213/>. Accessed January 31, 2019.



The MM's hunger strike in Thakurnagar in 2014 in demand of unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali migrants.



The MM's rally in Kolkata in 2016.



Baroma Binapani Debi at the MM's rally in Kolkata in 2016.



Binapani Debi at her residence, The Exile, in Thakurnagar.

New Politics of Representation: Matua Mahasangha and Party Politics

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the politico-cultural assertions of Matuas in the public sphere for recognition of their distinct community identity, coupled with their movement for unconditional citizenship rights, led to their consolidation into a political community, i.e. the Matua political public, particularly over the last two decades. In spite of internal differences and tensions, this emerging counter-public public, as we saw, is held together by: (a) the adherence of its members to the anti-caste ideology and protest consciousness of Matua Dharma at the ideological level; (b) the organisational network and activism of the MM at the grassroots; and (c) the Thakur family's emotional grip on the Matuas. The collective assertions of the Matuas have provided them considerable visibility in the mainstream discourse, led to the fulfilment of their demands to a considerable extent, and brought them closer to the state and its institutions. Moreover, the MM, apart from being a 'religious philanthropic institution', has revamped itself as the political representative of the Matuas that can negotiate with the state on their behalf. At this juncture, the question arises: what explains the emerging salience of the hitherto marginalised Matuas and the MM in the politics of West Bengal? In other words, why do the Matuas matter? This brings us to the final, and most recent aspect of Matua politics, i.e. the mobilisation of the community as an electorally salient vote bank and the engagement of the MM in party politics.

This chapter looks at the active involvement of the Matuas as a distinct Dalit group in electoral politics, organised primarily under the banner of the MM or its local units in support of different political parties, in contemporary West Bengal. Through an analysis

of the electoral politics around the Matuas in the last two decades, the chapter shows how the older practices of mobilisation of Dalits in rural politics have fundamentally changed. In other words, what we are witnessing today, the chapter argues, is a new politics of caste in West Bengal.³⁷³ The chapter is divided into two halves. In the first section, I discuss the existing academic literature on Bengal politics to understand the changing role of caste in political mobilisation, particularly during elections. The second section is on the engagement of the MM in party politics, the new practices of representation, and its effects on Matua politics. Here, I also explore the role of the MM as a new representative institution in the rural politics of the state.

I

Caste and Electoral Mobilisation of West Bengal

In 2001, after the Left Front won the state assembly election for the sixth consecutive time, Anjan Ghosh wrote an article titled “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”.³⁷⁴ In this piece, Ghosh argued that even though there were ample examples of caste-based discriminations at the social level, caste as “the language of exclusion” was, on the one hand, displaced from the mainstream discourse by other principles such as “education and culture” due to the continued hegemony of the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok*; and on the other hand, it was not “the principal conduit of political power and contestation”.³⁷⁵ Since the colonial times, the hegemony of the *bhadralok*, as we discussed in the Introduction, was cemented because of a host of historical processes such as Permanent Settlement (1793), the introduction of English education, the dominance of upper castes in white-collar

³⁷³Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste”.

³⁷⁴Ghosh, “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”.

³⁷⁵Ghosh, “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”.

professions and their declining interests in agriculture, and the partition of Bengal in 1947.³⁷⁶ While the *bhadralok*, as “the mutated upper caste”, drew privileges from their higher rank in the caste hierarchy, they instituted their power by promoting a “secular-modern” language of politics to keep their hegemony unchallenged and restrict the possibilities of caste or identity-based mobilisations of traditionally non-privileged communities.³⁷⁷ It has been politically beneficial for the *bhadralok* to displace or suppress caste in the mainstream public discourse by emphasising other categories such as class, education, culture, and merit as markers of social respectability and inclusion/exclusion. Such a strategy of not talking about caste, and thereby silencing it, led to the dominance of the *bhadralok* in all avenues of public life, including positions of political power in the state.³⁷⁸ Compared to other states, West Bengal has one of the highest Scheduled Caste populations in the country.³⁷⁹ But unlike many other states, quite surprisingly, West Bengal has neither witnessed any organised Dalit movement after Independence nor has it produced a Dalit chief minister or a prominent Dalit leader. On the one hand, the absolute hegemony of the *bhadralok* in politics and, on the other, the dissimilar political interests of different Dalit communities (such as the Bagdis, the Bauris, the Namasudras, the Rajbanshis, and the Poundras) restricted the possibilities of cross-caste solidarities.³⁸⁰ Caste and caste-based discriminations, as scholars have shown, did not become “a major public issue” in the *bhadralok*-dominated formal-institutionalised domain of party politics; rather, the questions of ‘class’ and ‘development’ became the favoured issues for political

³⁷⁶Ghosh, “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”; Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 69-70.

³⁷⁷Nigam, “Secularism, Modernity, Nation”, 4262.

³⁷⁸Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 70.

³⁷⁹According to the 2011 Census, West Bengal has the second-highest Scheduled Caste population in the country. See Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Ministry of Home Affairs, India, T 00-005: Total Population, Population of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and their proportions to the total population, Censusindia.gov.in. https://censusindia.gov.in/tables_published/a-series/a-series_links/t_00_005.aspx. Accessed August 4, 2021.

³⁸⁰Samaddar, “Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?”, 78-79.

mobilisation.³⁸¹ However, as Partha Chatterjee has noted, caste did not disappear from the political consciousness of the people and has functioned as a tool for electoral mobilisation in the uninstitutionalised world of popular politics, particularly in the villages.³⁸²

The Congress Regime

In Bengal politics, the dominance of the *bhadralok* came under threat, albeit momentarily, in the 1930s and 1940s because of the rise of a Muslim middle class, and the organised assertions of Dalits such as the Namasudras.³⁸³ The partition of Bengal along religious lines removed this “principal challenge” to *bhadralok* dominance in the realm of politics.³⁸⁴ The *bhadralok* restored their political authority in West Bengal immediately after Independence during the Congress regime and city-based upper-caste leaders across parties, be it the ruling party or the opposition, started to control and manage party politics across the state.³⁸⁵ At the rural level, however, Congress leaders derived their political authority from their privileged status as landed elites, or due to caste loyalties and religious associations.³⁸⁶ These rural leaders emerged from the dominant middle castes such as the Mahishyas, the Sadgops, and the Aguris who held leadership roles at the state level, but “only after conceding the predominant position to the city-based upper-castes”.³⁸⁷

In rural West Bengal, the Congress also had a Scheduled Caste leader such as P.R. Thakur who enjoyed considerable influence among Namasudras. At the time of Partition

³⁸¹Ghosh, “Cast(e) out in West Bengal”; Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 157-161.

³⁸²Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 82-84.

³⁸³Partha Chatterjee, “Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(50) (2012): 69; Samaddar, “Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?”, 78.

³⁸⁴Chatterjee, “Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics”, 69.

³⁸⁵Chatterjee, “Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics”, 69.

³⁸⁶Partha Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(9) (2009): 44.

³⁸⁷ Chatterjee, “Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics”, 69-70; also see Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*.

and its aftermath, Thakur mobilised them in support of the Congress in anticipation of their proper rehabilitation and access to state resources. He became a member of the Constituent Assembly with Congress's support in 1946, got elected to the state assembly from Haringhata in 1957, was re-elected from Hanskhali in 1962, and also became the minister for tribal development.³⁸⁸ In December 1947, Thakur bought some land in North 24 Parganas, managed INR 80,000 as government grant in 1951 to develop a refugee settlement, and established "the first Dalit refugee colony" in West Bengal that came to be known as Thakurnagar.³⁸⁹ However, the Congress government's policies vis-à-vis Namasudra refugees led to Thakur's disenchantment with his party in the mid-1960s. On the one hand, Thakur's support for refugee rehabilitation programmes such as the Dandakaranya Scheme alienated him as a political leader from sections of his supporters; on the other hand, a massive influx of Namasudra refugees in the 1960s after communal riots, and police repression and attacks finally made him resign from the Congress in 1964.³⁹⁰ Soon, Thakur joined the Bangla Congress and defeated his Congress rival in the 1967 Lok Sabha election from Nabadwip.³⁹¹ This was Thakur's last electoral victory. In 1971 and 1977, Thakur contested in the parliamentary elections from the same constituency, first time again on a Congress ticket and second time as an Independent, but was defeated by the CPI-M candidate. The two consecutive electoral losses alienated Thakur from party politics, and he took more interest in reviving the MM in the 1980s as we have already discussed. In an article published in the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, the author claimed that Thakur realised towards the end of his political career that he was

³⁸⁸Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition", *Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group* (2014), 14. <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP59.pdf>. Accessed August 19, 2018.

³⁸⁹Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal", 75.

³⁹⁰Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal", 76-77.

³⁹¹Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal", 75.

“humiliated” during his long stay in the Congress and the Bangla Congress.³⁹² As per this article, Thakur once said in a devotees’ meeting:

“I have carried the Congress flag for a long time. I realised that it is not for us. Now, many of us are carrying the Communist flag. That is also not for us as they will realise one day. It’s time that we carry our own flag.”³⁹³

One can get an idea about Namasudra mobilisation and the representation of their interests during the Congress regime in West Bengal by looking at P.R. Thakur’s illustrious political career. The post-Partition politics of the Namasudras, as we saw, was mainly concerned with the questions of migration, communal violence, and refugee rehabilitation. This entailed that, unlike the colonial period, the Namasudras had to rephrase their “idioms of victimhood and resistance, placing less emphasis on caste and focusing more on the predicament of migration and the struggles of the refugees”.³⁹⁴ In the absence of a strong organisation of their own, Namasudra refugees either rallied behind the Congress or participated in the refugee movements led by the Communists. The politics and policies of the Congress, controlled and determined by the upper-caste leadership, did not allow a leader such as Thakur to adequately represent the demands of the Namasudras for rehabilitation within the state. His support for the Congress’s policies on resettling refugees outside West Bengal alienated Thakur from his support base. At the end of his career, Thakur therefore recommended the Matuas to look for alternative autonomous platforms as he realised that the *bhadralok*-dominated political parties would never represent the political interests of Dalits. Moreover, the electoral defeat of Thakur twice in the 1970s, as

³⁹²Utpal Biswas, “Baroma Binapani Debi-r Matua Dharmandolan O Matua Samaj”, in *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, ed. Jagadish Halder and Prasenjit Biswas (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, November 6, 2014), 44.

³⁹³Biswas, “Baroma Binapani Debi-r Matua Dharmandolan O Matua Samaj”, 44.

³⁹⁴Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity*, 248.

noted by Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, indicated a “decisive...takeover of the refugee- and Scheduled-Caste constituencies” by the mainstream Left parties.³⁹⁵

The Left Front Years

The politics of West Bengal witnessed a structural shift after the Left Front came to power in 1977. Three major changes under the parliamentary Left made an unprecedented impact on the state’s rural politics: (a) at the economic level, the Left broke the concentration of land in a few hands through tenurial reforms, imposition of land ceilings, and redistribution of small plots of land to the rural proletariat; (b) at the institutional-administrative level, it introduced three-tier decentralised local government institutions consisting of elected representatives at the grassroots level for the management of rural issues; and (c) at the social level, the political party emerged as the new actor in rural politics that took control of and supplanted every other socio-cultural and religious institution.³⁹⁶

The new Left administration was thus characteristically different from the older Congress regime, particularly in the rural areas. Unlike the erstwhile leaders of the Congress administration who drew their power from landed property or caste loyalties, the Left leaders derived “their authority from their participation in political movements and by the fact that they represented the ‘party’”.³⁹⁷ One of the foremost movements of the communists in West Bengal, as Prafulla Chakravarti has shown, was launched under the banner of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), formed in 1950, that articulated the demands of a heterogenous refugee population in and around Calcutta for their

³⁹⁵Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, “In Search of Space”, 15.

³⁹⁶Bhattacharyya, “Of Control and Factions”.

³⁹⁷Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal”, 44.

rehabilitation under proper conditions.³⁹⁸ The UCRC leaders attacked the Congress's policies on rehabilitation, and demanded the resettlement of refugees in the state. In the late 1960s, the communists organised a violent peasant movement against rich landlords in Naxalbari that saw the participation of lower-caste communities who worked as "sharecroppers, cultivators and tea garden labourers".³⁹⁹ These movements gave rise to "a new style of leadership" that established its legitimacy as representatives of the people not on the basis of "economic or cultural power" but "autonomously in the political domain".⁴⁰⁰ However, it must be noted that the new Left leadership was not very different from the older Congress regime in terms of the dominance of the upper-caste *bhadralok*. Similar to the Congress, the central leadership of the mainstream Left belonged to the traditionally privileged upper castes, and Left leaders, both at the state and local levels, bypassed the caste question or rather actively silenced it. For instance, leaders of the Communist Party of India (CPI) condemned Namasudra leader Jogendranatha Mandal and labelled him "communal" when he raised the question of caste vis-à-vis refugee rehabilitation, pointed out the discriminatory policies and practices, and established a separate organisation for Dalit refugees, namely, the East India Refugee Council (EIRC).⁴⁰¹ Another instance of such deliberate silencing of the caste question would be the example of former chief minister Jyoti Basu's comment before the Mandal Commission in 1980. Basu said, "Caste was a legacy of the feudal system and viewing the social scene from the casteist angle is no longer relevant for West Bengal."⁴⁰² Such instances show how the absolutist position of the *bhadralok* Left on the caste question did not allow lower-caste

³⁹⁸Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*.

³⁹⁹ Samaddar, "Whatever Has Happened to Caste in West Bengal?", 79; also see Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 57.

⁴⁰⁰Chatterjee, "The Coming Crisis in West Bengal", 43-44.

⁴⁰¹Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal", 72.

⁴⁰²Quoted in Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, 255.

communities to successfully articulate their own specific demands even when they tried to do so.

The Left Front rule of over three decades in West Bengal is a story of unusual electoral success. The protagonist of this success story was the party. The Left gave birth to a new structure and changed rural politics in the following ways. One, the organisational network of the Left, its ability to reach out to the people at the grassroots because of a dedicated cadre-base, and its involvement in negotiating local disputes on an everyday basis changed the nature of party politics in the countryside.⁴⁰³ The party became a part and parcel of the quotidian lives of people. Two, policies such as land reforms and decentralised political representation benefitted the lower-caste communities (Dalits and Adivasis) and brought them closer to the Left's politics.⁴⁰⁴ But, in spite of disrupting the erstwhile dominance of the landlord class in the countryside, ethnographic studies of village politics in the state revealed that caste continued to persist in popular consciousness and shaped power relations at the grassroots. For instance, scholars such as Arild Ruud and Dayabati Roy have shown how the Left, in fact, expanded its influence on rural politics by not disturbing local hierarchies based on caste.⁴⁰⁵ Even at the policy level, the upper-caste hue of the mainstream Left was reflected when the Jyoti Basu administration backed an economic blockade and the killing of Dalit refugees in 1979 when the latter wanted to settle down on the deltaic island of Marichjhanpi in south Bengal.⁴⁰⁶ Finally, the political party acquired the role of a new mediatory institution, particularly in rural areas, under the Left regime. To understand the politics of negotiation between the state and the non-elite masses that emerged out of "the developmental policies of government aimed at specific population groups", Partha Chatterjee proposed a theoretical tool that he calls "political

⁴⁰³Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*, 160-161.

⁴⁰⁴Bhattacharyya, "Of Control and Factions".

⁴⁰⁵Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics*; Roy, "Caste and Power".

⁴⁰⁶Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves"; Sen, "Reconstructing Marichjhanpi".

society”.⁴⁰⁷ In a postcolonial democracy such as India, Chatterjee argues, the bulk of the population, i.e. the poor and the marginalised masses, does not enjoy basic rights as citizens, and remains excluded from civil society, i.e. the realm of the elites.⁴⁰⁸ The domain of the political society where the politics of negotiation between the state and the non-elite masses takes place, according to Chatterjee, thus stands outside the realm of the legal-bureaucratic rationality of the liberal state and the bourgeois civil society.⁴⁰⁹ To survive and meet the basic livelihood needs, Chatterjee shows, the non-elite masses build political solidarities not as individual rights-bearing citizens but as communities. They press their claims and demands as distinct population groups in response to governmental policies, and in turn, are governed through ad-hoc, extra-legal and contextual arrangements made by the state on grounds of justice and fairness.⁴¹⁰ In West Bengal, under the Left rule, this mediation between the government and masses, i.e. the management of the activities of the political society, was solely done by the party.

The role of the political party, however, extended beyond mediation between the state and the non-elite masses. Despite being a useful theoretical tool, the concept of political society, as Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya argues, cannot adequately explain the new structural changes in rural politics that emerged during the Left rule.⁴¹¹ Bhattacharyya shows that the urban-centric examples that Chatterjee cited to develop the concept of political society fail to capture the specific conditions of rural politics. Under the Left regime, Bhattacharyya’s study shows, the overwhelming dominance of the political party in the countryside led to – (a) weakening or erosion of all other channels of public transactions; (b) suppression of deep-rooted social divisions along caste, religion or

⁴⁰⁷Chatterjee, *The Politics of The Governed*, 40-41.

⁴⁰⁸Chatterjee, *The Politics of The Governed*, 40-41.

⁴⁰⁹Partha Chatterjee, “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(19) (2008): 53-62.

⁴¹⁰Chatterjee, “Democracy and Economic Transformation in India”, 53-62.

⁴¹¹Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 125-126.

ethnicity by not talking about these differences; (c) polarisation of every village matter, “private or public, individual or collective, familial or associational”, along partisan lines; (d) functioning of the party as “moral guardians in the public life of society and the private lives of families”; and (e) “frequent incursions by the political parties” into the functioning of governmental institutions, thereby adversely affecting the autonomy of the latter.⁴¹² To explain this new structure, Bhattacharyya has proposed the concept of “party society”.⁴¹³ Party society, he writes, is “the modular form of political society in West Bengal’s countryside” that has “its roots in the violent class-based movements of the poor peasants as they fought against the domination of the landlords”.⁴¹⁴ At this point, it is important to note that the model of party society does not only explain the functioning of the CPI-M. Rather, all other political parties, both the Left Front partners as well as the opposition parties, “emulated” the “modular form of party activity” set forth by the CPI-M in rural society.⁴¹⁵ Therefore, what we can infer from the aforementioned analysis, put forward by scholars such as Bhattacharyya and Chatterjee, is that party society is a model of upper-caste rule in rural West Bengal, introduced by the Left and imitated by the others. Since the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok* leadership continued to control and dictate the language and the functioning of political parties, across ideological lines, at all levels, the political activities of Dalits and Adivasis, made from non-party autonomous platforms, remained on the margins. This explains why the MM’s huge rally in Calcutta in 1994, during the height of Left rule, not only failed to receive the desired public attention but was in fact labelled as “irrational” in a leading English daily.⁴¹⁶

The Crisis of Party Society

⁴¹²Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 126; Bhattacharyya, “Of Control and Factions”, 68-69.

⁴¹³Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 123-154.

⁴¹⁴Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 230-232.

⁴¹⁵Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal”, 43.

⁴¹⁶Sen, “Rationality takes a back seat in Calcutta”.

In the late 2000s, the party society met an inevitable “crisis” for a host of reasons.⁴¹⁷ First, there emerged a new form of patron-client relationship between the party and the people in which the party held its supporters “under some sort of permanent dependence by making various governmental and other benefits conditional upon their continued electoral support”.⁴¹⁸ Second, as Sumanta Banerjee has noted, the Left increasingly recruited “a generation of young cadres who have never been trained in the ideology of Marxism”.⁴¹⁹ The Left regime thus increasingly turned out to be a corrupt party-dictated rule. Three, Muslims and Dalits shifted their loyalties from the Left as the government failed to address their interests, claims and demands. For example, the failure to implement the 2006 NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) alienated the rural poor from the Left’s influence to a large extent.⁴²⁰ Finally, the industrialisation policies of the Left in the late 2000s turned the Left into “an apologist for corporate capital”.⁴²¹ The image of the Left, which once proposed ‘*Langol jar, Jomi Tar*’ (Land to the Tiller), imploded when it decided to acquire agricultural land against the will of peasants in Singur and Nandigram.⁴²² In other words, the stable party society that had its roots in the class-based movements of the poor and the marginalised failed to reproduce its initial conditions of being.⁴²³ This resulted in a series of agitations against the Left Front government, and its poor performance in the 2008 panchayat elections and the 2009 Lok Sabha polls.

The crisis of party society, as Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya has noted, led to “the identitarian politics of the community, based on locally constituted networks of caste,

⁴¹⁷Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 232-238.

⁴¹⁸Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal”, 42.

⁴¹⁹Sumanta Banerjee, “West Bengal: Violence without Ideology”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 34(19) (2000): 3004.

⁴²⁰Bidyut Chakrabarty, Bidyut, “The Left Front’s 2009 Lok Sabha Debacle in West Bengal, India”, *Asian Survey* 51(2) (2011): 305.

⁴²¹Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 238-240.

⁴²²Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*, 155-212.

⁴²³Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 238.

ethnicity and religious associations”.⁴²⁴ The Left sensed its declining influence among Dalits and Muslims in the late 2000s, and changed its erstwhile political position vis-à-vis the minorities.⁴²⁵ For instance, the Left Front government, which once refused to implement the Mandal Commission’s recommendations, took a U-turn and amended the Panchayat Act, and “reckoned Muslims as OBCs and has accordingly announced 10% reservation for them” in 2010.⁴²⁶ The same year, the government instituted an award in the name of Harichand-Guruchand and conferred it on the then head of the MM, Kapil Krishna Thakur, to gain the support of the Matuas. Other political parties such as the TMC and the Congress took similar steps to win the support of the minorities by reaching out to their community organisations. When looked from below, these changes at the time of the crisis of party society were a result of the collective assertions of minority communities organised under the banners of their own local institutions. The assertions of these communities, as the case of the Matuas shows, brought major changes to rural politics. This is a new politics shaped around the questions of recognition, representation, dignity, justice, and substantive citizenship that, I argue, cannot be explained through conceptual tools such as political society or party society.

Scholars have questioned the applicability of the idea of political society in the context of explaining Dalit politics in India. In his study of Dalit politics in Maharashtra, Suryakant Waghmore argues that the political assertions of Dalits based on their community identities have created a problem for liberal and postcolonial scholars.⁴²⁷ For the liberal (and if I may add, the Marxist) school, Waghmore shows, community identities and identity politics are seen as divisive forces that hinder the formation of a normative

⁴²⁴Bhattacharyya, “Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis”, 245.

⁴²⁵Santosh Rana, “The Crisis of Identity”, *Frontier*, 43(12–15), 2010.
<https://www.frontierweekly.com/archive/vol-number/vol/vol-43-2010-11/vol-43-12-15/crisis-43-12-15.pdf>. Accessed April 5, 2021.

⁴²⁶Rana, “The Crisis of Identity”.

⁴²⁷Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 6.

civil society in India; and for postcolonial scholars, “civil society and mass politics are antithetical” as these scholars celebrate the resistance to capitalist modernity by the non-elite masses who build solidarities as communities in postcolonial societies.⁴²⁸ In both these approaches, scholars have kept community-based political assertions such as Dalit movements outside the realm of civil society. Waghmore thus criticises these approaches and argues that “caste... has not been in conflict with democracy and civil society” in postcolonial Indian politics.⁴²⁹ Caste, according to him, can function as an instrument of both oppression as well as emancipation; it is not only “a source of inequality” but also “a resource for mobilisation against inequalities”.⁴³⁰ For Waghmore, civil society is a “non-state” political space for “solidarity building” and “collective identity formation” of the minorities such as Dalits whose politics is “inherently linked to civilizing processes”.⁴³¹ It is in this field that Dalits collectively assert themselves and make claims and demands for recognition, representation, dignity, and substantive citizenship. Other scholars such as Sanjeeb Mukherjee and Nissim Mannathukkaren have also raised concerns vis-à-vis the concept of political society.⁴³² Mukherjee shows that the associational politics of lower castes and minority communities has given birth to “subaltern civil societies” that demand “rights, equality, justice and dignity”.⁴³³ He asserts that “the most vigorous of these subaltern civil societies have emerged among dalits”.⁴³⁴ For instance, Mukherjee gives the example of the associational politics of Dule Bagdis, a Dalit community in West Bengal, from the 1960s-1970s. They organised themselves in “representative and deliberative bodies” that could match any modern and active society.⁴³⁵ Moreover, it is important to

⁴²⁸Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 5.

⁴²⁹Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

⁴³⁰Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

⁴³¹Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

⁴³²Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East", 57-63; Mannathukkaren, "The 'Poverty' of Political Society", 295-314.

⁴³³Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East", 61.

⁴³⁴Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East", 61.

⁴³⁵Mukherjee, "Civil Society in the East, 62-63.

note that Dalits do not seek temporary and ad-hoc solutions to their problems mediated by upper-caste-controlled institutions or non-Dalit representatives. It is the failure of the postcolonial state, controlled by the upper castes, that make them depend on contingent measures. Following Nissim Mannathukkaren, one can say that Dalits do not seek temporary solutions to their problems and needs; rather they struggle for permanent structural reforms.⁴³⁶

“A demand for civility”, as Waghmore notes, lies “at the heart of Dalit politics”.⁴³⁷ Not talking about caste or not highlighting deep social divisions, as the model of party society in West Bengal shows, failed to offer Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis civility and genuine citizenship. Invisibilisation of the caste question from the mainstream discourse in West Bengal, therefore, has been a strategy of the upper castes to keep their hegemony over the public discourse intact. The crisis of party society and the subsequent emergence of organised Dalit assertions have finally made a dent in the absolute hegemony of the *bhadralok* in West Bengal politics. In short, the engagement of the Matuas in party politics under the banner of the MM, as we shall discuss below, has introduced new practices of representation in the rural politics of the state.

⁴³⁶Mannathukkaren, "The 'Poverty' of Political Society", 295-314.

⁴³⁷Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 21.

II

The Matua Mahasangha and Party Politics

The MM entered party politics in the 2000s. Before that, Matua leaders and individuals from Matua families such as P.R. Thakur (Congress), Kanti Biswas (CPI-M), and others had been active in politics but primarily as representatives of their respective parties. The political mobilisation of the Matuas autonomously under the MM as an important vote bank in selected constituencies started in the mid-2000s on two grounds: one, a permanent resolution of their demand for unconditional citizenship in India; and two, the recognition of their distinct cultural identity. First, after the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, as I discussed in Chapter Three, Dalit refugees found themselves without a representative voice. All the major *bhadralok*-led political parties shared a consensus on illegal migrants and supported the 2003 Act. The refugees were left with no option but to consolidate themselves under the aegis of an organisation, the MM, that was not controlled by the upper castes. The MM thus replaced the political party and turned into a new mediatory institution in rural politics. The MM now negotiated with political parties and the government on behalf of Dalit refugees in different ways (such as regular protests and petitioning the courts) in exchange for the electoral support of the Matuas. The second reason for the MM's engagement in electoral politics was non-recognition of their cultural icons in the public sphere. Before the 2006 state assembly election, the MM demanded that a government college in Helencha in North 24 Parganas be named after Harichand-Guruchand. The Left Front ignored the demand and named the college after Ambedkar. This episode, as I discussed in Chapter Two, angered the Matuas. Under the direction of the MM, they decided to collectively vote for the TMC and defeat Left Front's candidates in three constituencies viz. Bagda, Bongaon, and Gaighata in that election. The MM took credit for the TMC's victory in all three constituencies.

The collective voting behaviour of the Matuas in selected constituencies, particularly in the border districts of North 24 Parganas, Nadia, and Malda drew the attention of political parties. After the 2006 election, Haripada Biswas, a prominent leader of the Forward Bloc (a constituent of the Left Front), started building a rapport with the MM leadership. In 2009, Biswas was made the president of the MM's Advisory Committee. Biswas's camaraderie with the MM benefitted the latter in terms of receiving financial aid. Two MPs, namely Debabrata Biswas and Subrata Bose, both from the Forward Bloc, allocated INR 15 lakhs each from their MPLAD funds to construct an old-age home within the premises of the MM headquarters. Other Left leaders such as Subhash Chakraborty (CPI-M) and Ashoke Ghosh (Forward Bloc) also visited *Thakurbari* during this time to meet Binapani Debi and other MM leaders. Between 2009 and 2011, the Left Front government instituted an award, sanctioned a plan to build a college in Chandpara in North 24 Parganas, and established a research centre (Sri Sri Harichand Guruchand Thakur Research Foundation) in Rajarhat near Kolkata to win the support of the Matua electorate. The TMC took similar steps. In 2008, TMC leader Jyoti Priya Mallick became the party's nodal person in charge of mobilising the Matuas. He frequented *Thakurbari* and slowly grew close to a section of MM leaders. Mallick and ex-TMC MP Dinesh Trivedi allocated money from their MLALAD and MPLAD funds for the renovation of *kamanasagar* (holy pond) at *Thakurbari* and the installation of a drinking water facility, and also donated an ambulance. Mallick took initiatives to bring the MM leadership close to his party supremo Mamata Banerjee. In 2010, Banerjee became a member of the MM, and was appointed the organisation's chief patron by Binapani Debi herself. Being the railways minister at the time, Banerjee sanctioned the plan to rebuild Thakurnagar railway station to resemble the *Thakurbari Harimandir*, and a project to build a railways stadium in Bongaon. Moreover, TMC leaders such as Mukul Roy and Gobinda Naskar gave funds for renovation works at

the MM headquarters. The Left Front, the TMC and other parties also started to associate themselves with the Matua Dharma Mahamela and use the space for political mobilisation. In short, since the late 2000s, the MM's efforts to consolidate the Matuas as a vote bank resulted in – (a) the flow of financial and material benefits for the development of the organisation; and (b) the recognition of Harichand-Guruchand and other Matua leaders such as P.R. Thakur and Binapani Debi as the emerging icons of Dalit politics in the state. This phenomenon continued in subsequent years. For instance, before the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the TMC government established the Harichand Guruchand University, formed the Matua Development Board, awarded Binapani Debi the Banga Bibhushan Award (civilian award instituted by the West Bengal government) in 2018, and also declared a state holiday on the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur in 2021 before the state assembly polls.

Nomination in Elections

The MM's engagement in electoral politics compelled political parties to nominate Matua leaders as candidates in elections at different levels: national, state, and local. In 2011, Manjul Krishna Thakur, the youngest son of P.R. Thakur and Binapani Debi, became the TMC candidate from Gaighata. Binapani Debi campaigned for her son. This election marked the official entry of the MM in party politics. Manjul Krishna Thakur won and was appointed the minister of state for refugee rehabilitation and relief. After this election, the TMC took steps to bring the MM completely under its control. The composition of the MM central committee was changed, the office-bearers who were attached to the organisation were asked to step down, and Manjul Krishna Thakur's wife, sons and close associates became the new faces of the organisation. Manjul Krishna's elder son Subrata Thakur joined the TMC and became a member of the local panchayat samiti.

The TMC's increasing control over the MM, however, led to voices of dissent from within the organisation. For instance, a former office-bearer of the MM lamented:

“In 2010, when Baroma addressed the public rally, she was mother to all the political parties. But when she could not resist her motherly affection and campaigned for her son Manjul Thakur in 2011, she became one party's mother.”⁴³⁸

During this time, MM leaders who were not from the Thakur family and did not like the TMC's growing influence in the organisation looked for other political options. For instance, K.D. Biswas, a former MM office-bearer, became the BJP's candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha election from Bongaon. The TMC nominated Kapil Krishna Thakur, the then *sangbadhipati* of the MM, as its candidate against K.D. Biswas. Kapil Krishna comfortably won the election. Unfortunately, a few months after the election, Kapil Krishna died on 13 October 2014. The death of the *sangbadhipati* resulted in an organisational crisis and a property dispute between Kapil Krishna and Manjul Krishna's families. The internal feud became public and the BJP took advantage of it to quickly make inroads in the MM. In January 2015, Manjul Krishna Thakur resigned as minister and joined the BJP with his son Subrata. The Thakur family's internal fissure finally turned into an electoral contest in the bye-election to the Bongaon parliamentary seat in 2015. The TMC nominated Mamata Bala Thakur, the widow of Kapil Krishna Thakur, as its candidate, while the BJP fielded Subrata Thakur. Mamata Bala won the election. However, the familial dispute still exists and the MM currently stands divided along party lines. I shall come back to this dispute. The point I am trying to make here is that all the political parties, be it the ruling party or the opposition, can neither bypass the Matuas nor ignore the support of Matua leaders when it comes to the electoral arithmetic of Matua votes in contemporary West Bengal.

⁴³⁸Interview with Sukumar Pandey, November 12, 2014, in Chakdaha, Nadia, West Bengal.

To put it differently, the Matua factor has become a major consideration for every political party when it comes to choosing the possible representatives in selected constituencies, particularly in the border districts. In the 2016 and 2021 state assembly elections, for instance, the CPI nominated Matua intellectual Kapil Krishna Thakur as the Left Front's candidate from Gaighata. In the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP gave a ticket to Shantanu Thakur, the younger son of Manjul Krishna, from Bongaon against TMC candidate Mamata Bala Thakur. In the 2021 election, Subrata Thakur, Manjul Krishna's elder son, won from Gaighata as the BJP candidate. After P.R. Thakur's electoral losses in 1971 and 1977, no member of the Thakur family became elected representatives till 2011. Between 2011 and 2019, five members of the Thakur family – Manjul Krishna Thakur, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Mamata Bala Thakur, Shantanu Thakur, and Subrata Thakur became either an MP or an MLA. Moreover, it has become a standard practice for candidates across parties in the present politics of the state to attend Matua *utsavs* in Matua-populated areas, and take Matua *dals* along to election rallies and while filing nominations. These election-time practices where all the political parties publicly associate with the Matuas, use their icons and symbols, and extend support to their claims and demands characterise the present political salience of the Matuas, especially in rural areas.

Internal Factionalism

Participation in party politics, as I mentioned, deeply affected the MM, which currently stands divided along partisan lines. This division germinated when the TMC started to influence the functioning of the organisation after coming to power in 2011. The appointment of Manjul Krishna Thakur as the *saba-sangbadhipati*, his elder son Subrata as the general secretary, and his younger son Shantanu as the treasurer of the MM created discontent among devotees. These appointments were also criticised by Kapil Krishna

Thakur. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Kapil Krishna Thakur, in his felicitation speech in 2014 after becoming an MP, invoked the idiom of protest (*pratibaad*) entrenched in Matua Dharma and asked devotees to take charge of the MM. Popular dissent against Manjul Krishna's family also emerged at the level of local units of the MM. For instance, in 2014-2015, the Nadia district unit of the MM refused to accept the composition of the MM and called it "*paribar-tantric* (dynastic)".⁴³⁹ Kapil Krishna Thakur's decision to contest the 2014 Lok Sabha election further widened the disagreement between the two brothers, and affected the functioning of the organisation. The death of Kapil Krishna in October 2014 finally made the feud public and led to the bifurcation of the MM. The CEC of the MM is formed usually in November during *Rashpurnima*. In November 2014, the MM was formally split into two camps – one led by Manjul Krishna Thakur, and the other by Mamata Bala Thakur. On November 6, 2014, Manjul Krishna's camp held the usual annual meeting of the MM on the eve of *Rashpurnima*. Being the eldest male member of the family after the death of his brothers, Mridul Krishna and Kapil Krishna, Manjul Krishna Thakur was declared the new *sanghadhipati* of the MM. Within a fortnight, another meeting was convened by Mamata Bala Thakur at *Thakurbari*. The different block committees of the MM, particularly the units in Ashokenagar, Bagda, Palta, Habra, and Barasat supported her, and decided to challenge the legitimacy of the committee formed on 6 November. These units called Manjul Krishna's committee dynastic and decided to form a parallel CEC. On 19 November, 2014, another committee was formed by these units, and it was named '*bhakta-der committee*' (committee of the devotees). This new committee elected Mamata Bala Thakur as the first woman *sanghadhipati* of the MM. She was also given a new name – *Notun Ma* (New Mother). All other official posts were distributed among the leaders of the different block committees. Some people who had been a part of Manjul

⁴³⁹Utpal Biswas, "Baroma, Binapani Debi-r Matua Dharma-Matua Andolan", in *Sri Sri Hari-Guruchand o Matua Andolan*, ed. Utpal Biswas (Palta: Matua Dharma Sammelan Committee, Matua Mahasangha, Palta, 6-9 February, 2015), 49.

Krishna's committee resigned from it to join the '*bhakta-der committee*'. Since both the committees were announced in the presence of Binapani Debi, both claimed to be the real MM. The former committee, i.e. Manjul Krishna's camp, started using the name All India Matua Mahasangha (AIMM) while the committee led by Mamata Bala called itself the Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha (SBMM). While the AIMM has stayed closer to the BJP since the Bongaon by-election in 2015, the SBMM stands with the TMC. This split in the MM leadership also divided the local units. They had to choose between the two camps as both the AIMM and the SBMM tried to establish their authority over the organisation at the grassroots. This made most devotees unhappy. "*Thakurbari te rajniti dhuke geche* (politics has entered *Thakurbari*)," said Jatin Biswas while narrating the growing discontent among devotees about the changing state of affairs in the MM.⁴⁴⁰ Since Mamata Bala Thakur won the 2015 Bongaon by-election and was a sitting TMC MP, the SBMM faction was more publicly attached to party politics. The AIMM thus used the popular discontent about the politicisation of *Thakurbari* to expand its influence over local MM units. Shantanu Thakur, the new leader of the AIMM, called for a '*rajniti mukto Thakurbari* (Politics-free *Thakurbari*)'. However, he soon changed his stance, joined the BJP, and became the party's candidate in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls. Shantanu defeated Mamata Bala, his aunt, and is currently the BJP MP from Bongaon. In June 2021, he was appointed a minister of state in the central government. The BJP, in recent years, has made changes in the MM's organisational structure by introducing new units and renaming old units. For instance, the AIMM's women's wing is currently known as the Matua Matri Sena and there is a new wing called the Matua Sena. However, in spite of being divided, the AIMM and the SBMM share a common political agenda. For instance, both the factions keep pressure on the TMC and the BJP, i.e., their respective allies, to keep supporting the demands of the Matuas such as

⁴⁴⁰Interview with Jatin Biswas, November 19, 2014, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

unconditional citizenship, easy distribution of caste certificates, and the commemoration of Matua icons. While the AIMM faction pressured the BJP to fast-track the implementation of the CAA, the SBMM staged a series of agitations when Matuas were excluded from the Assam NRC. In other words, what we are witnessing is an evolving, complex yet coherent Matua political public. On the one hand, the repeated incursions by the upper-caste-dominated political parties have divided and destabilised the erstwhile structure of the MM. On the other hand, the internal contestations did not allow the MM leaderships, across factions and party affiliations, to compromise or shift their focus from the specific claims and demands of the community vis-à-vis the state.

A New Politics of Mediation

The crisis of party society in the late 2000s in rural West Bengal, as discussed above, meant the declining influence of political parties over social, cultural, and religious institutions at the grassroots. With the growing salience of local organisations such as the MM, the political party, as I shall show in this section, no longer remained the sole mediator in rural politics that could negotiate between the government and the people. In other words, organisations such as the MM emerged as new mediators in rural society. The following examples that I came across during fieldwork demonstrate this new politics of mediation.

The Question of Illegal Migrants

The questions of illegal migration and citizenship lie at the heart of Matua politics. Matuas, like other Dalit migrants such as Bhils, as I discussed in the previous chapter, continue to live on the margins of the nation and have to repeatedly prove themselves as

legitimate members of a Hindu majoritarian state. For various reasons – historical, social, economic, and political – people from Bangladesh have migrated to India and have settled here. Ranabir Samaddar has shown how Namasudra migrants from Bangladesh are Indianised.⁴⁴¹ Samaddar shows how these refugees arrive and settle here, take up local occupations, receive support from people due to caste and other affinal ties, get paperwork (voter card, ration card, caste certificate, etc.) done, and finally vote in elections.⁴⁴² The Left Front, as Sandip Bandyopdhyay has noted, dealt with the question of migration from Bangladesh on quasi-legal grounds and recognised the refugees in “a sort of clandestine manner by providing the migrants with ration cards”.⁴⁴³ In other words, the management of illegalities under the Left’s rule was done by the party.⁴⁴⁴ However, changes in the citizenship law, coupled with the possibilities of exercises such as the NRC and the consensus among the parties in the mid-2000s on the question of illegal migration, compelled Dalit migrants to explore new representative platforms at the grassroots level that could negotiate with local government agencies and the police on their behalf. The MM, at this point, turned itself into the new mediator in rural politics. For instance, the MM, in its 26th Annual Report, explained why the Matuas must get organisational identity cards issued and always carry them. It said,

“Many dangers can be avoided if one carries the identity card. It is said that one can encounter dangers in an unknown place. Such as getting labelled as infiltrators, terrorists, etc. But the identity card has the phone number of the MM. It has the details of your membership. If required,

⁴⁴¹Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 96-106.

⁴⁴²Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 101.

⁴⁴³Sandip Bandyopadhyay, “Who are the Matuas?”, *Frontier*, 43(37), 2011. <https://www.frontierweekly.com/archive/vol-number/vol/vol-43-2010-11/vol-43-37/matuas-43-37.pdf>. Accessed on April 5, 2021.

⁴⁴⁴Chatterjee, “The Coming Crisis in West Bengal”.

one can get in touch with the MM's office and get out of such dangers."⁴⁴⁵

Explaining the process of crossing the border using broker-assisted networks, Jatin Biswas said now it was easy for newly arrived migrants to get paperwork done if they had MM membership.⁴⁴⁶ Another respondent, Ratan Bala, informed me that the AIMM camp led by Shantanu Thakur initiated a membership card distribution drive after the 2019 Lok Sabha election.⁴⁴⁷ These practices of the MM show the emergence of a new mediator in rural politics that functions outside the realm of a crisis-ridden, weaker party society. At this point, it must also be noted that although the MM replaced the political party in the management of illegalities in rural politics, the organisation does not seek temporary solutions to the demands of the Matuas. Rather, the Matuas under the MM have successfully negotiated with the state, to a large extent, to find a permanent solution to their demand of unconditional citizenship.

The Case of Bongaon College

Caste-based discrimination is an everyday affair in Indian society. West Bengal is no exception to this larger phenomenon. The following incident that took place at a local government college in Bongaon is one such example of everyday life of caste in the country. On my first visit to the MM headquarters in 2012, I had a long chat with Sukumar Pande, an important officer-bearer of the organisation.⁴⁴⁸ We talked about the Matua

⁴⁴⁵Matua Mahasangha 26-tama Barshik Sammelan Kendriya Karyanirbabee Committee-r Pakshe Sadharan Sampadaker Pratibedan (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, November 28, 2012), 15.

⁴⁴⁶Interview with Jatin Biswas on November 12, 2012, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas.

⁴⁴⁷Telephonic interview with Ratan Bala on February 04, 2020.

⁴⁴⁸Interview with Sukumar Pande on November 17, 2012, at Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas.

community, the MM, and the larger questions of caste and discrimination in our society. During this conversation, Sukumar babu showed me a newspaper. It was a local weekly called *Simanta Bangla* published from Bongaon in North 24 Parganas. The headline quickly caught my attention. It said – “*college-chhatro ke ‘namasudra’ bole gaalir jer...matua-der bikebobb-e tolpaar bongaon, F.I.R.*” (College Student abused as ‘Namasudra’... Matua protesters rock Bongaon, F.I.R.).⁴⁴⁹ As mentioned in this report, the incident was as follows.

On 13 September, 2012, the general secretary of Bongaon college and his acquaintances were accused of foul-mouthing students from the Matua and Namasudra community, and mentally and physically assaulting two students. This action of the general secretary was condemned by a section of the students. They submitted a deputation the next day to the college authorities, asking them to look into the matter. The students also organised a protest march and public meetings in different parts of Bongaon town demanding a public apology from the perpetrators. But the general secretary denied the allegation and described the incident as a political conspiracy against him. The protesting students approached the MM. On 25 September, the MM called a public meeting at the Bongaon Lalit Mohan Bani Bhavan to condemn the incident. The speakers at the meeting demanded the arrest of the perpetrators within seventy-two hours. The local Matuas hit the streets to protest against the incident. The MM and another local organisation (the Bhagawan Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur Janmo-Jyanti Uthjaapan Samiti) also sent deputations to chief minister Mamata Banerjee, describing the entire episode and requested her to take action. An MM delegation submitted a deputation to the local district magistrate as well. An F.I.R. was also registered at the local police station.

After I finished reading the report, Sukumar babu told me how the MM had become active in resolving such local issues of caste violence. Incidents of caste violence

⁴⁴⁹*Simanta Bangla*, Issue 45, Year 16, November 8, 2012, 1.

are nothing new in West Bengal. One can recall the incident of Chuni Kotal, a Lodha student who died by suicide after a professor in her university humiliated her for being an Adivasi. In West Bengal, one can hardly remember any instance of public protest organised by political parties against everyday incidents of caste discrimination and violence. These matters were mostly resolved informally. This express silence of the *bhadralok* on caste violence has now become unsustainable. As the case of the Bongaon college shows, Dalits now have institutional support from local organisations such the MM and its affiliated units to report incidents of caste discrimination and violence, hold public protests against such incidents, and pursue legal means to get justice. In other words, Dalits in rural society have found a new political mediator that is organisationally strong enough to represent them before the state and its agencies in their fight for dignity and social justice.

A Land Dispute in Ashokenagar

Let me narrate one last instance of the new practices of representation in contemporary rural West Bengal. On 9 June 2014, the Matuas in Ashokenagar blocked Jessore Road and the Bongaon-Sealdah railway track in protest against a case of land grab. The agitation was organised under the banner of the Ashokenagar Block Matua Mahasangha (ABMM). According to the ABMM, the agricultural land of seven Matua farmers in Bhurkunda Mouza near Ashokenagar was forcefully acquired by a local businessman. This land was next to a water body called Nelor Bil. The businessman was the lease-holder of this water body. The local Matuas whose land was forcefully occupied alleged that the lease-holder had changed the character of the land by slowly digging and making it marshy, and by building a muddy wall around it. The Matuas protested and finally went to the police on 6 June 2014. The police, however, did not register their complaint and advised them to file a case under Sec. 144(2) of the CrPC in the court. The farmers

approached the ABMM, and urged it to intervene. On 9 June, the ABMM staged the agitation near Ashokenagar Road railway station. It demanded that the land be returned to the Matua farmers in its earlier cultivable condition. It also filed a petition in the court following the advice of the local police. A few days later, on 15 June, an ABMM delegation met the local municipal chairman with the land ownership papers of the farmers. The ABMM members also met the local Block Land & Land Reforms Officer (BLRO), the Block Development Officer (BDO), the Additional District Magistrate (ADM), and the local police to submit evidence in support of their demand. Apart from mediating between the farmers and the state offices on its own at the local level, the ABMM also involved other political actors in the process, and got them to come to its support. On 27 June, a delegation of the ABMM met Kapil Krishna Thakur, the then *sanghadhipati* of the MM and informed him of the incident. Three days later, another team met the local MP, Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, to submit a deputation and make its demand. A week later, on 7 July, the ABMM wrote a scathing letter to Manjul Krishna Thakur who was then the minister of state for refugee relief and rehabilitation. It wrote:

“...you can resolve this issue. It is possible with your one phone call. If you call the ADM and the LRO, they are bound to provide us a new map [of the land]. If you think that you need the Matuas, kindly do this. As long as there is a last drop of blood in the Block Matua Mahasangha, we shall not shift from our demand. If needed, we won’t hesitate to seek assistance from other political leaders.”⁴⁵⁰

The dispute was finally resolved by the office of the district magistrate and the farmers got back their land. This episode reveals the complex network of political actors (in this case,

⁴⁵⁰Deputation of the Joint-Secretary of the ABMM submitted to Manjul Krishna Thakur on 6 July 2014.

the ABMM, the central MM, an MP and a minister) that mediate between the poor, non-elite masses and the state in West Bengal today. It also reveals the methods used by the rural poor and their organisations to negotiate with the state. Moreover, what we see is that the political party is no longer the first and only point of contact in matters of local disputes. Rather, the activism of a community organisation of Dalits and its local units has marked the decline of party society, and has introduced new practices of representation in rural politics.

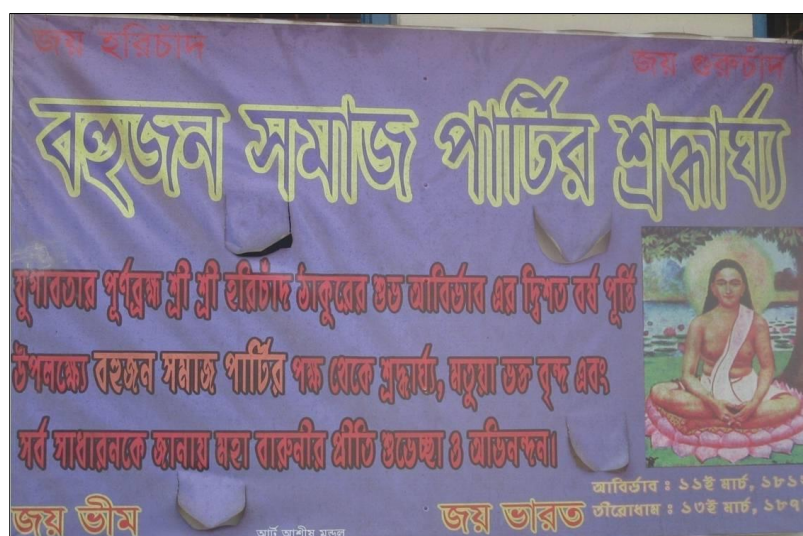
To conclude, as the above discussion shows, the crisis of party society in the late 2000s in West Bengal brought fresh structural changes in rural society and politics. First, with the emerging assertions of Dalit communities, such as the Matuas, under the aegis of their own organisations, the political party lost its erstwhile salience as the sole mediator in rural politics. Unlike the major political parties in the state (such as the TMC, the CPI-M, the BJP, and the Congress) that are dominated by the urban, upper-caste *bhadralok*, these community organisations are run by Dalits themselves. Therefore, organisations such as the MM offer Dalits autonomous platforms to press their demands more effectively than *bhadralok*-dominated parties. A similar example is the case of the Rajbangshis who have also organised themselves in the recent past under the two factions of the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association (GCPA).⁴⁵¹ Second, the successful mobilisation of Dalits by their community organisations has turned the latter into new political representatives. Political parties across ideological lines now depend on these organisations for electoral support in selected constituencies. This has led to new electoral alliances between political parties and the community organisations, the terms of which are largely determined by the latter. However, engagement with party politics has also weakened these organisations at

⁴⁵¹Snigdhendhu Bhattacharya, "TMC, BJP Woo Rajbangshi Voters, Bengal's Largest SC Group, Ahead of Polls", *The Wire*, February 13, 2021. <https://thewire.in/politics/bjp-bengal-elections-amit-shah-koch-rajbangshi-tmc-greater-cooch-behar>. Accessed August 4, 2021.

times, fragmented them, created discontents within different Dalit groups, and also catalysed social antagonisms between minority communities. Finally, participation in polls has put community leaders in elected offices that provided them more political power. In turn, these leaders and their organisations achieved a new political role in rural politics as mediatory actors in addition to the political parties. To put it differently, the collective assertions of Dalit communities such as the Matuas in the last two decades, i.e. with the crisis of party society, have given West Bengal politics a democratic turn. Dalits no longer solely depend on political parties to make claims and demands vis-à-vis the state. This has introduced a new politics of caste that aims at recognition, representation, dignity, equal citizenship and emancipation of the hitherto unnoticed people.



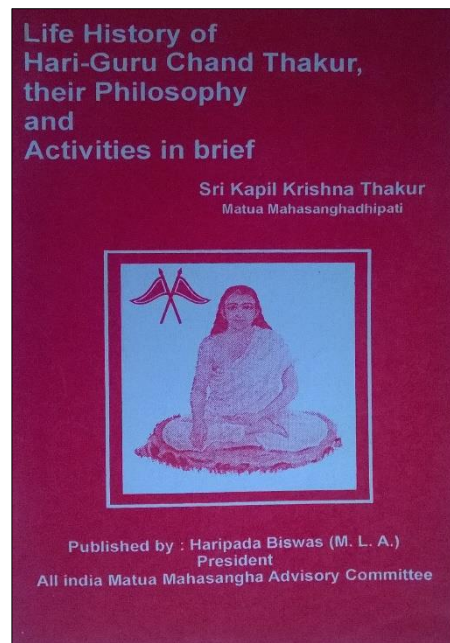
Contributions by TMC lawmakers on a plaque at the MM headquarters.



A Bahujan Samaj Party poster using the image of Harichand Thakur.



A gate leading to Amit Shah's rally in Thakurnagar in 2021.



A booklet on Harichand Thakur published by Forward Bloc leader Haripada Biswas.

Conclusion: A New Politics of Caste

“*Monchake dhil poreche* (a stone has struck the beehive)!” said Rezzak Mollah, a firebrand farmers’ leader and former minister in the Left Front government, in an interview with two social scientists in 2013.⁴⁵² After the Left Front suffered a major setback following a series of defeats in the Lok Sabha, state assembly and local body polls from the late 2000s, Mollah criticised his former party, the CPI-M, for being Brahminical in composition and functioning, and claimed that it led to its electoral debacle. He said, “The dalits and minorities are giving their lives for the party while the Brahmins and the Kayasthas are bossing over.”⁴⁵³ Another prominent CPI-M and Namasudra leader, Kanti Biswas, supported Mollah’s criticism and pointed out that “since the days of the undivided Communist Party to today’s CPI-M, nobody from the scheduled communities could find a place in the state secretariat”.⁴⁵⁴ These voices of dissent within the CPI-M attacked the party and the erstwhile Left Front government for ignoring the caste question and the development of minorities during its rule of over three decades. Mollah was immediately expelled from the party for “serious anti-party activities” and for “tarnishing the party’s image in the eye of the people”.⁴⁵⁵ Along with other minority leaders, Mollah constituted a new political forum of Dalits, Muslims, and Adivasis, namely the Samajik Nyayvichar Mancha or the Social Justice Forum, in 2014.⁴⁵⁶ This forum, however, disintegrated soon after Mollah was inducted into the TMC and nominated as the party’s candidate from

⁴⁵²Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya and Kumar Rana, “West Bengal Panchayat Elections: What Does it Mean for the Left?”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(37) (2013): 13.

⁴⁵³Bhattacharyya and Rana, “West Bengal Panchayat Elections”, 13.

⁴⁵⁴Bhattacharyya and Rana, “West Bengal Panchayat Elections”, 13.

⁴⁵⁵See link: <http://ganashakti.com/english/news/details/4602>. Accessed June 1, 2016.

⁴⁵⁶Times News Network, “Mollah Floats ‘Social Justice Forum’”, *The Times of India*, February 24, 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/mollah-floats-social-justice-forum/articleshow/30920592.cms>. Accessed March 4, 2021.

Bhangar in the 2016 assembly election. He won the election and became a minister in the second TMC government.

The above-mentioned story is not simply about Mollah's criticism of his former party, rather it tells us about the changing politics of caste in West Bengal. It provokes us to investigate why the mighty party structure, the metaphorical beehive, with delicate networks that ruled the state for more than three decades finally encountered a crisis. On the one hand, we see that internal voices of resistance grew within the CPI-M, the most influential constituent of the Left Front coalition, from its Muslim and Dalit leaders such as Mollah and Biswas in the last decade. On the other hand, the assertions of different minority communities (Dalits, Muslims and Adivasis) during the same time led to the formation of alternative platforms for political representation, power, and recognition. In other words, the story is about how the leadership of the *bhadralok* was finally challenged by the hitherto subjugated minority voices from within and outside the political party.

The thesis examined this changing politics of caste by exploring the mobilisation of Matuas under the banner of the MM in contemporary West Bengal. By presenting the case study of the Matuas, it argues that emerging Dalit assertions in the last two decades have given birth to a new politics of caste in the state. In doing so, the thesis looks at concepts such as political society and party society that have been previously deployed to understand West Bengal's politics and shows why these theoretical tools fail to explain the changing politics of caste in the state. Based on multi-sited ethnography, done in phases between 2012 and 2016 primarily in the two districts of North 24 Parganas and Nadia, I show how the consolidation of the Matuas by the MM over the last three decades has transformed them into a coherent political public that is politically aware, culturally assertive, and electorally salient. The collective assertions of the Matuas in the vernacular public sphere as well as in the realm of electoral politics, the thesis illustrates, have made a

dent in the erstwhile hegemony of the *bhadralok* in the politics of the state to a considerable extent. This is reflected, as we discussed, in three areas: (a) the political deification of Harichand-Guruchand and other Matua icons such as P.R. Thakur and Binapani Debi, and the emergence of a new Dalit iconography in the mainstream public discourse; (b) the responses of the state and its institutions, the government, and political parties to the specific demands of the MM, and the growing closeness between all these actors; and (c) the emergence of new representatives, and new practices of mediation in West Bengal at the level of electoral contest and local village politics.

Theoretically, the thesis explains, based on the evidence collected during fieldwork, why the conceptual tools of political society and party society cannot capture these changes that emerged as a result of the assertions of Dalit communities such as the Matuas in the recent past. The clear-cut divisions between civil society and political society, formal and informal, or modernity and tradition fail to explain the politics of Dalits that revolves around the demands for democratic civility, dignity and social justice, recognition, political equality, and substantive citizenship.⁴⁵⁷ The patterns of political mobilisation of the Matuas, their collective activism, and organised movement since the late 2000s show that Dalits do not want to rely on temporary solutions of their livelihood problems mediated by the *bhadralok*-led political parties. Rather, as the politics of the Matuas show, Dalits have been more effectively pressing their claims and demands, and engaging with the state and its organs from their own political platform for permanent structural reforms such as amendments to the citizenship law, representation in elected offices, recognition in the public sphere, and a fair share in the developmental agenda of the state. To fight structural

⁴⁵⁷Nissim Mannathukkaren, in his critique of the concept of political society developed by Partha Chatterjee, shows why it is important to move “beyond binaries” such as civil society/political society to understand the politics of Dalits and Adivasis (Mannathukkaren, “The ‘Poverty’ of Political Society”, 295-314); also see Waghmore, *Civility against Caste*, 7; Mukherjee, “Civil Society in the East”.

inequalities perpetuated by the *bhadralok*, Dalits such as the Matuas have strategically used caste and popular religion to build solidarities and construct their distinct community identity as a political collectivity outside the dominant Hindu establishment.

The invisibilisation of the caste question and caste-based discriminations in West Bengal, as we saw, have been part of the strategy of *bhadralok* politics to keep intact the upper-caste control over all aspects of public life, and thus dictate the terms of political mobilisation in the state. This is evident from the modes of operation of party society. For decades, the *bhadralok*-led political parties, on the one hand, have fitted themselves within the local hierarchies of village politics and reproduced the conditions of existing inequalities⁴⁵⁸; on the other hand, they have deliberately silenced the caste question by not highlighting the deep-rooted social divisions in a caste-ridden society.⁴⁵⁹ One can also think of the policies of the *bhadralok*-dominated political parties vis-à-vis the rehabilitation of Dalit refugees at different points of time after Partition, and the consensus among them on the question of illegal migration from Bangladesh in the mid-2000s as examples of upper-caste position on the citizenship demand of Dalits and non-Hindu minorities. Moreover, the *bhadralok* class, in spite of drawing privileges from its higher rank in the caste hierarchy, has resorted to other markers of inclusion/exclusion such as education and culture to further silence the caste question. This silence has finally been broken. Dalit communities such as the Matuas have started “speaking caste on its own terms” from a platform that is not controlled by the *bhadralok*.⁴⁶⁰ Over the last decade, the MM has actively negotiated with political parties, but the terms of such negotiations have been dictated by the former in exchange for electoral support, and not the other way round. An important aspect of party society, as we discussed, is that political parties in such a structure enjoy

⁴⁵⁸Roy, “Caste and Power”; Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics*.

⁴⁵⁹Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice*.

⁴⁶⁰Rege, “Introduction”, 33.

total control over every other social, religious, and cultural institution. The MM's politics shows that this control is on the wane as the organisation has strategically and effectively dealt with all the political parties on its own for the fulfilment of its demands in the last two decades. In other words, the engagement of the Matua political public with the state shows the workings of a vibrant civil society. In fact, the crisis of party society and the emergence of new political actors at the grassroots have opened up possibilities of democratisation from below.

To understand this democratic turn, the thesis engages with the questions of caste, religion and politics, and situates the politics of the Matuas and the MM within the larger context of the Dalit movement in India. In the first chapter, I distinguish between doctrinal and popular religions in a modern stratified society to understand the role of the latter in shaping the community identity and political actions of the oppressed. While the former, i.e. a doctrinal religion such as Hinduism, operates as a tool of oppression for the dominant; the latter, i.e. a popular religion such as Matua Dharma, functions as an ideology of protest for the oppressed masses, binds them together as a community, and provides them “an emancipatory identity”.⁴⁶¹ Moreover, unlike doctrinal religions, Matua Dharma is entrenched in the pragmatic and material concerns of the oppressed such as access to education, government jobs, and political power. The second chapter explores the formation, structure, leadership, and functions of the MM. It also discusses how the use of religious symbols, icons, images, and spaces by the MM to assert the distinct cultural identity of the Matuas in the public sphere led to the formation of a Matua political public and made Harichand and Guruchand Thakur the regional icons of Dalit politics. The third chapter examines the movement of the MM demanding unconditional citizenship rights for Bengali Dalit refugees in India. On the one hand, the movement exposed how the laws

⁴⁶¹Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity*.

and policies of the postcolonial Indian state vis-à-vis citizenship have created a sense of perpetual fear and uncertainty among minorities, pushing them to the margins of the nation; and on the other hand, we see the efforts of the Hindu majoritarian state to integrate Dalits within its fold by creating social antagonisms among preferred and unpreferred minorities, thus communalising the citizenship question. But the movement of the MM, as the chapter shows, has also been instrumental to the consolidation of the Matua political public, empowering it to engage with the state and its institutions. Despite internal tensions within the MM, this movement has held together the Matuas as a politically coherent community and provided them considerable visibility both at the state and the national level. The final chapter discusses the participation of the MM and Matua leaders in party politics to demonstrate the new practices of representation that have emerged as a result of such political engagement. These new representative practices, the chapter shows, are reflected in the growing camaraderie and electoral alliances between the MM and political parties across ideological lines, the nomination of Matua leaders as election candidates, and the role of the MM as a new mediator in rural politics in addition to the political party. In a nutshell, the thesis presents a detailed discussion on the different aspects of Matua politics – its ideology, organisational network, iconography, processes of political mobilisation and identity formation, movement for citizenship rights, and engagement with party politics for representation – in contemporary West Bengal. It makes a contribution to the existing scholarship on the state's politics as well as to the larger academic literature on caste in Indian democracy.

Let me conclude with one last instance that shows the emerging salience of Matuas in politics. In March 2021, during the state assembly election in West Bengal, prime

minister Narendra Modi visited Bangladesh on a diplomatic tour.⁴⁶² Modi visited Orakandi, the birthplace of Harichand Thakur. He was assisted by the head of one MM faction, Shantanu Thakur, who is also a BJP MP. Modi offered prayers at the temple there, addressed the Matuas, and announced that “India will upgrade one girls’ middle school and set up a primary school in Orakandi”.⁴⁶³ This was the first time that an Indian prime minister visited the holy place of the Matuas. Modi’s visit was undoubtedly connected to the ongoing polls in West Bengal. The TMC criticised this tour as a violation of the model code of conduct during the election. But more importantly, the visit revealed that Matua politics was no longer limited to the state’s politics but had also evolved as a diplomatic tool of the Indian state vis-à-vis Bangladesh. These developments show how the collective political assertions of the Matuas in the last two decades, and their successful negotiations with the dominant Hindu establishment, have brought them from the margins to the mainstream.

⁴⁶²Scroll Staff, “PM Modi visits temple in Orakandi in Bangladesh in reach out to Matua community”, *Scroll.in*, March 27, 2021. <https://scroll.in/latest/990735/pm-modi-visits-temple-in-orakandi-in-bangladesh-in-reach-out-to-matua-community>. Accessed August 4, 2021.

⁴⁶³Scroll Staff, “PM Modi visits temple in Orakandi”.

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