



Religion as Resistance: The Political and Cultural Mobilization of the Matua Movement in Contemporary Bengal

Adarini Kanjilal Biswas

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Ram Krishna Dharmarth Foundation (RKDF) University, Ranchi

Abstract:

The Matua movement represents one of the most significant socio-religious mobilizations among marginalized communities in eastern India. Emerging in the nineteenth century as a spiritual and egalitarian reform movement under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and later Guruchand Thakur, Matua religion has gradually transformed into a powerful cultural and political force in contemporary Bengal. This research article examines how religion functions as a mode of resistance for the Matua community, enabling collective identity formation, social assertion, and political mobilization. Drawing upon historical sources, sociological theories of religion, and contemporary political developments, the study explores the intersections of faith, caste, migration, and power. The article argues that Matua religion transcends conventional spiritual boundaries by acting as a counter-hegemonic framework through which historically oppressed Namasudra communities negotiate dignity, rights, and representation in modern democratic India. The paper further analyses how cultural practices, festivals, pilgrimage sites, and organizational structures have become instruments of socio-political consciousness, transforming religious devotion into collective resistance.

Keywords: Matua Movement, Religion and Resistance, Namasudra Community, Political Mobilization, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Religion has historically played a paradoxical role in South Asian societies—simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchies and providing a language of protest against oppression. Among marginalized communities, religious movements often emerge as vehicles for social reform, cultural revival, and political assertion. The Matua movement of Bengal stands as a compelling example of religion functioning as resistance. Originating among the Namasudras, one of the most marginalized Scheduled Caste communities in Bengal, the Matua faith sought to dismantle Brahmanical dominance and caste-based exclusion by promoting equality, dignity, and collective self-respect.

In contemporary Bengal, the Matua movement has acquired renewed relevance due to changing political landscapes, migration histories, refugee experiences, and identity politics. No longer confined to spiritual practice, Matua religion has evolved into a dynamic socio-political force shaping electoral politics, cultural

discourse, and community mobilization. This article explores the transformation of Matua religion from a devotional movement into a powerful instrument of resistance, focusing on its political and cultural mobilization in present-day Bengal.

Objectives: This research article examines how religion functions as a mode of resistance for the Matua community, enabling collective identity formation, social assertion, and political mobilization.

Historical Origins of the Matua Movement

The Matua movement originated in the mid-nineteenth century in undivided Bengal under the leadership of Harichand Thakur (1812–1878), a spiritual leader from the Namasudra community. At a time when caste oppression, untouchability, and social exclusion were deeply entrenched, Harichand Thakur articulated a religious philosophy grounded in egalitarianism, human dignity, and ethical living. Rejecting Brahmanical rituals, idol worship, and caste hierarchy, he emphasized *Manusher Dharma* (religion of humanity) as the core of Matua belief.

Harichand Thakur's teachings stressed simple devotional practices, congregational singing (*kirtan*), moral conduct, and collective solidarity. His movement attracted large numbers of Namasudras who had long been denied access to temples, education, and social mobility. The Matua faith thus emerged as a counter-religious discourse that challenged dominant Hindu orthodoxy and offered an alternative spiritual identity rooted in equality.

Following Harichand Thakur, his son Guruchand Thakur (1846–1937) played a crucial role in institutionalizing the movement. Guruchand emphasized education, social reform, and political awareness, encouraging Namasudras to pursue literacy and organizational unity. Under his leadership, the Matua movement became increasingly conscious of its political potential, laying the foundation for future mobilization.

Religion as Resistance: Theoretical Framework

The notion of *religion as resistance* is grounded in sociological and cultural theories that conceptualize religion not merely as a system of metaphysical beliefs, but as a lived social practice embedded within relations of power. Classical sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and later critical theorists like Antonio Gramsci have demonstrated that religion can generate collective consciousness, moral solidarity, and symbolic frameworks through which social groups interpret and contest their material conditions (Durkheim, 1912; Weber, 1922; Gramsci, 1971). For marginalized communities in particular, religious movements often function as counter-hegemonic spaces where dominant ideologies are questioned and alternative value systems are articulated.

Gramsci's concept of *cultural hegemony* is especially useful in understanding how religion can operate as resistance. When dominant social groups maintain power not only through coercion but also through cultural consent, religious movements among subaltern communities can disrupt this consensus by producing new moral and cultural narratives (Gramsci, 1971). Similarly, Durkheim's emphasis on religion as a source of collective solidarity underscores its capacity to bind communities together in the face of social exclusion, while Weber's analysis of religious ethics highlights how belief systems can motivate social action and transformation (Durkheim, 1912; Weber, 1922).

In the context of the Matua movement, religion functions as resistance in three interrelated and mutually reinforcing ways. **First, as cultural resistance**, Matua religious practices explicitly reject Brahmanical authority, ritual purity, and caste hierarchy. By privileging *Manusher Dharma* (the religion of humanity)

over scriptural orthodoxy, the movement affirms alternative cultural values rooted in equality, dignity, and ethical living, thereby challenging dominant Hindu norms that historically marginalized the Namasudras (Bandyopadhyay, 2011).

Second, as social resistance, the Matua movement fosters a strong sense of collective identity and solidarity among Namasudras, countering centuries of social stigma and internalized inferiority. Through congregational worship, festivals, and shared narratives of suffering and resilience, religion becomes a means of reconstructing selfhood and community pride. This aligns with theories of identity formation that view collective religious affiliation as a powerful response to structural marginalization (Jenkins, 2008).

Third, as political resistance, Matua institutions and leadership have increasingly engaged with electoral politics, citizenship debates, and policy advocacy to demand state recognition, rights, and resources. While rooted in spiritual traditions, the movement has translated religious solidarity into political bargaining power, illustrating how faith-based mobilization can intersect with democratic processes (Chatterjee, 2004).

Taken together, Matua religion operates as a form of *lived resistance*—one that simultaneously challenges cultural domination, social exclusion, and political marginalization. Rather than retreating from the public sphere, the movement demonstrates how religion can become an active site of contestation, negotiation, and empowerment for historically oppressed communities in contemporary Bengal.

Matua Identity and the Namasudra Experience

The Namasudras have historically occupied a deeply marginalized position within the Hindu caste hierarchy, subjected to practices of untouchability, economic exploitation, and persistent social humiliation. Colonial ethnographic and administrative records frequently classified them as agrarian laborers, fishermen, and menial workers, reinforcing their subordinate status and legitimizing caste-based discrimination (Risley, 1891; Bandyopadhyay, 2011). Such classifications not only shaped colonial governance but also entrenched social stigmas that continued into the postcolonial period.

Within this context of exclusion, the Matua movement offered an alternative ideological and spiritual framework through which the Namasudras could reinterpret their social identity. By rejecting Brahmanical dominance and ritual hierarchies, Matua religion enabled community members to articulate a distinct religious and cultural identity separate from orthodox Hinduism (Chakrabarti, 2015). This redefinition of selfhood was crucial in resisting internalized oppression, as it transformed religious affiliation into a source of dignity, moral worth, and collective pride. Matua identity thus emerged as a counter-narrative to caste inferiority, fostering social assertion and psychological empowerment among its followers.

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 further reshaped Matua consciousness and identity formation. Large numbers of Namasudras migrated from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) to West Bengal as refugees, encountering displacement, material deprivation, and prolonged state neglect in camps and resettlement colonies (Chatterjee, 2004). In these precarious conditions, Matua religion functioned as a crucial unifying force, sustaining community cohesion and offering moral support. Shared religious practices and collective memory helped transform the refugee experience into a narrative of endurance and resilience, reinforcing Matua identity as both spiritual and socio-political (Basu, 2018).

Cultural Mobilization and Religious Practices

Cultural practices occupy a central position in the mobilization strategies of the Matua movement, serving as vital instruments of collective expression and resistance. Festivals such as *Harichand Jayanti* and *Guruchand Jayanti* function not merely as religious commemorations but as large-scale public gatherings

where cultural affirmation intersects with political articulation. These events bring together dispersed Matua populations, fostering solidarity while simultaneously providing platforms for community leaders to address issues of rights, recognition, and representation (Chakrabarti, 2015).

Pilgrimage centers such as Thakurnagar have emerged as powerful symbolic spaces of Matua identity, attracting millions of devotees annually. These sites transcend their spiritual significance by operating as hubs of cultural memory and political negotiation, where religious devotion is intertwined with collective assertion in the public sphere (Bandyopadhyay, 2011). The spatial concentration of faith thus strengthens the movement's organizational capacity and visibility.

Matua songs, oral narratives, and devotional literature further reinforce shared histories of struggle, migration, and resistance. Rooted in folk traditions and vernacular language, these cultural forms preserve collective memory while transmitting values of equality, self-respect, and social justice across generations (Assmann, 2011). By privileging accessible modes of cultural expression, the Matua movement ensures broad grassroots participation, enabling religion to function as a living and inclusive medium of cultural and political mobilization.

Political Mobilization in Contemporary Bengal

In recent decades, the Matua movement has emerged as a significant and influential force in the electoral politics of West Bengal. The numerical strength of the Matua population, combined with its dense organizational networks and shared religious identity, has rendered the community a crucial constituency within the state's competitive political landscape (Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Basu, 2018). Consequently, political parties across ideological divides have actively sought engagement with Matua leaders, religious institutions, and pilgrimage centers, recognizing the strategic importance of Matua support in closely contested elections (Chatterjee, 2004; Palshikar, 2019).

Central to Matua political discourse are issues such as citizenship rights, refugee rehabilitation, Scheduled Caste recognition, access to welfare schemes, and socio-economic inclusion. These concerns are deeply rooted in the community's historical experience of displacement following the Partition of Bengal and the prolonged marginalization faced by Namasudra refugees in postcolonial India (Chakrabarti, 2015; Datta, 2020). Political mobilization, therefore, is not merely instrumental but emerges from collective memories of exclusion and demands for substantive citizenship and dignity (Holston, 2008).

The institutionalization of political engagement has been facilitated by organizations such as the **Matua Mahasangha**, which function as intermediaries between the community and the state. These bodies have transformed religious authority into political brokerage, enabling Matua leaders to negotiate policy commitments, welfare access, and symbolic recognition from ruling regimes (Basu, 2018; Hansen, 2014). However, this growing entanglement of religion and electoral politics has also generated internal debates within the community. Critics argue that excessive alignment with party politics risks diluting the movement's original egalitarian ethos and reducing a historically emancipatory religious movement to mere electoral arithmetic (Chatterjee, 2004; Gramsci, 1971).

Thus, while political mobilization has enhanced visibility and bargaining power for the Matua community, it simultaneously exposes tensions between spiritual autonomy and political co-optation, raising critical questions about the long-term trajectory of faith-based resistance movements in democratic contexts.

Gender, Participation, and Internal Dynamics

Although Matua ideology is founded upon principles of equality, dignity, and social justice, gender relations within the movement reveal complex and often contradictory dynamics. Women occupy a central role in religious rituals, devotional singing, festival organization, and the transmission of cultural memory, making them indispensable to the everyday functioning of Matua religious life (Basu, 2018; Chakrabarti, 2015). Through these practices, women contribute significantly to sustaining community cohesion and intergenerational continuity.

Despite this active participation, formal leadership structures within Matua organizations and religious institutions remain largely male-dominated, reflecting the persistence of patriarchal norms prevalent in wider South Asian society (Kabeer, 1999; Ray, 2011). Decision-making roles, public representation, and political negotiations are often controlled by male elites, limiting women's access to institutional power even within a movement that ideologically rejects hierarchy.

At the same time, Matua religious spaces have enabled women's participation in the public sphere in ways that were historically denied to marginalized caste women. Participation in festivals, pilgrimages, and collective rituals allows women to engage in social interaction, leadership at the informal level, and moral discourse, thereby subtly contesting gendered boundaries between the private and public domains (Fraser, 1990; Datta, 2020). These spaces function as what Fraser terms "subaltern counterpublics," where marginalized voices negotiate agency within constrained structures.

The intersection of religion, gender, and resistance within the Matua movement thus remains an evolving and contested terrain. While religious participation has opened avenues for women's visibility and collective expression, the transformation of symbolic participation into substantive leadership continues to be shaped by broader socio-cultural and political constraints.

Challenges and Contradictions

Despite its significant transformative and emancipatory potential, the Matua movement confronts a range of structural and ideological challenges that complicate its contemporary trajectory. One of the most pressing concerns is the increasing politicization of religion, which risks fragmenting community unity and diluting the movement's original egalitarian ethos. As Matua institutions and leaders become entangled with electoral politics, religious identity is often mobilized as a vote bank, leading to factionalism, leadership rivalries, and ideological dilution (Chatterjee, 2004; Hansen, 2014). Such developments raise critical questions about whether political visibility necessarily translates into substantive empowerment.

Internal divisions within the movement further complicate its cohesion. Competing claims to religious authority, generational differences, and disagreements over political alignment have occasionally weakened collective solidarity, undermining the inclusive ideals articulated by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur (Bandyopadhyay, 2011; Chakrabarti, 2015). These internal contradictions reflect broader tensions inherent in faith-based social movements that seek to balance spiritual autonomy with political pragmatism.

Moreover, persistent structural inequalities continue to shape the lived realities of Matua communities. Widespread poverty, precarious employment, limited access to quality education, and inadequate healthcare remain significant challenges, particularly among refugee-descended populations in semi-urban and rural settlements (Datta, 2020; Basu, 2018). While religious mobilization has fostered cultural dignity and political assertion, it has proven insufficient on its own to address deep-rooted material inequalities. This underscores the limits of symbolic resistance in the absence of sustained structural interventions (Fraser, 1990; Holston, 2008).

Taken together, these challenges reveal the contradictions embedded within the Matua movement's evolution—from a spiritual reform initiative grounded in egalitarian ethics to a politically mobilized collective navigating the complexities of democratic power. The movement's future effectiveness may ultimately depend on its ability to reconcile religious ideals with inclusive leadership, socio-economic reform, and sustained engagement beyond electoral cycles.

Conclusion:

The Matua movement illustrates how religion can function as a powerful form of resistance for marginalized communities. Rooted in egalitarian spirituality and collective ethics, Matua religion has enabled the Namasudras to challenge caste oppression, reclaim cultural identity, and assert political presence in contemporary Bengal. By transforming faith into a source of social and political mobilization, the movement underscores the enduring capacity of religion to articulate resistance and envision alternative futures.

As Bengal continues to navigate questions of identity, citizenship, and inclusion, the Matua movement remains a vital site for understanding the intersections of religion, culture, and power in modern India.

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