

Who Are the Matuas?

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In the present volatile political situation in West Bengal, the term “Matua” has gained currency on a scale that has surprised the middle-class and mostly upper-caste Bengali babus. Both the ruling CPI(M) and the major opposition party, the Trinamul Congress (TMC), are now bent on wooing the Matuas obviously with an eye to the forthcoming assembly elections. How come that the Matuas have acquired so much of prominence? And who are the Matuas anyway?

Though the history of the Matua movement which dates back to the late 19th Century has been documented by several scholars, upper and middle-caste Bengalis have little knowledge of this dalit movement led by the Namashudra community in the-then eastern Bengal. Unlike Maharashtra or Tamilnadu, Bengal has no remarkable history of dalit uprising or anti-Brahmin movement. The Namashudra uprising in undivided Bengal therefore stands out as somewhat unique. It began in Faridpur (now in Bangladesh) in 1872 when the Namashudras, insulted by the Brahmins, called a strike and declared that they would not serve in any upper-caste households unless their upper status was recognised. The Namashudras had already organised themselves against Brahminical domination in several other districts. Spread of education among them had sharpened their sense of self-dignity and emboldened them to stand against upper-caste hegemony.

The Matua movement originated at Orakandi, a village in Faridpur district in the mid-19th Century under the leadership of Harichand Thakur. After Harichand's death in 1878, his son Guruchand Thakur provided a boost to the movement and expanded its influence over a large section of the community. It also attracted some other dalit groups too. The Namashudras consciously stayed away from the anti-partition movement (1905-11) conducted mostly by upper-caste Hindu leaders and a small number of nationalist-minded Muslims.

The leaders' call for unity had appeal to a section of the low-caste villagers who even took a boycott of foreign goods. But the Namashudras didn't join the movement. During the same period (1907) Guruchand Thakur rather submitted a memorandum to the Governor of Bengal demanding that they be treated as Brahmins and accorded a higher-caste status. Upholding the same demand, the Namashudras published a number of tracts and from 1908 began to bring out a journal entitled *Namashudra Shruhid*. The name of Namashudra as a community figured in the census report of 1911.

In later days, the development of the Namashudra movement under the able leadership of Jogendranath Mondol, its link with B R Ambedkar on the one hand; and on the other, political alliance with the Muslim League (ML) in the 1940s—is another history. What is relevant to the Matua movement is that the Namashudras were close to the ML during the 1947 partition and J N Mondol became a minister in the-then East Pakistan. But their faith in the ML soon crumbled and they felt threatened in the face of the horrible communal violence of 1950. The Namashudras then began to move to West Bengal almost in a body. Of them, the Matua devotees gathered at Thakurnagar in (North) 24 Parganas and tried to maintain their tradition in this part of Bengal.

They lived as a distinct sect and no political party cared to pay attention to them. After 1977 i.e the beginning of the Left Front rule, the CPI(M) did influence a section of them; but the Matuas never shook off their distinct identity as the followers of Harichand and

Guruchand Thakur. Every year, they would organise a large assembly where they would invoke the name of Orakandi—the place of their origin. Meanwhile the sect gained in volume since Matuas formed a sizeable section of the 1971 refugees who stayed back in West Bengal even after the birth of Bangladesh.

It is too well-known that the flow of refugees—both Hindus and Muslims—from Bangladesh continues to this day as an unending stream. Continuous migration from across the border has not only changed the demography of some areas in the border districts of West Bengal, it has raised the complex issue of citizenship. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) insisted on branding the Muslim migrants as ‘infiltrators’, the Congress Government at the Centre till the end of the last century preferred to treat both the communities as ‘unrecognised’ refugees even as it accorded citizenship to their progeny. Surprisingly in 2003, the BJP-led NDA Government made matters more complicated by including all the post-1971 Hindu refugees and their progeny in the ‘illegal migrant’ category.

The Left Front Government in West Bengal played a queer role on this count. They simply overlooked the serious problem of continuous migration or infiltration; but began to recognise those people in a sort of clandestine manner by providing the migrants with ration cards at least in some areas. This helped enlarge the vote-bank of the LF, particularly the CPI(M); but the problem of migration continues to trouble the already overpopulated state. It took more than twenty years for the CPI(M) to admit that it was a ‘problem’. For them the best way to solve a problem is not to solve it.

True to their tradition, the Matuas, however, have been able to establish themselves as a powerful group and the issue of citizenship has got tied up with the independent-minded stance of the community. Presently, it has therefore become difficult for any political party, involved in electoral politics, to ignore them. Led mainly by the upper class and castes, the Bengal Leftists neglected the demand of the dalit communities for a long time. They didn’t even co-operate with the Mondol Commission in the 1980s. And now they are trying to win the Matuas over, in a bid to reverse electoral misfortunes.

Naturally, the TMC is also keen on proving that they are sympathetic to the Matuas. Hence, leaders of both the parties are now visiting the Matua centre at Thakurnagar, meeting Binapani Devi, the revered Mother (‘Boroma’) of the sect and holding out promises to fulfil their demands. None of them however is addressing the grave issue of citizenship which involves the identity of a large number of people.

Political leaders’ sudden concern with the Matuas is a familiar part of electoral game. In the midst of this exercise, what stands out is the strong dalit assertion that has practically brought the leaders to their knees. Leaders of both the CPI(M) and TMC have been forced to share the platform on the occasion of a recent meeting in Kolkata called by the Matua Sangha. On his 150th birth anniversary, Rabindranath would have been happy to see how the depressed and neglected have now mustered the strength to control the pulling-string (*rather rashi*) of the chariot. □□□