

## EMPOWERING WOMEN: GENDER EQUITY IN MATUA COMMUNITY

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### Abstract

The word 'feminism' is a common term in today's world. The status of women in India has been subject to many changes over the span of recorded Indian history. The Matua movement was initiated during the late 19th century by the Namasudras, a group of people belonging to lower caste peasants. This eventually took the form of a social movement. This movement later lost momentum just after raising hopes from Dalit awakening in the context of West Bengal. The term 'Dalit' means 'oppressed' or 'downtrodden'. And when it comes to Dalit women, they are doubly marginalized for being a Dalit and being born as a woman. However, the Matua movement has changed that view. Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the pioneers of the Matua community, laid emphasis on gender equality to enlighten women through their family and education. In the Brahminical patriarchal society, women were intentionally excluded from participation in social activities, education, and administrative power in the name of social purity. But the Matua ideology did not accept gender discrimination between men and women. Harichand Thakur declared in a revolutionary voice, ignoring the distinction between men and women. This research paper will analyze the contribution of women empowerment that "Shanti Shatyavama Nirban Committee" and "Matua Matri Sena" make to the Matua community. Thus, we aim to critically understand the ways in which the women gurus of the Matua community construct women empowerment and create a notion of equality that contributes to our (patriarchal) society.

**Key-words:** Gender, equality, women, Matua, discrimination, education, empowerment.

Women have equal contribution in every creation of the world. But that woman has been left behind in society. In the Matua community, women occupy a special place. In ancient India the equality of men and women was recognized since Vedic period. But later in the course of time women started to be considered as tools of human resource production of the patriarchal society. The "Manusmriti", a text attributed to Manu, outlined societal norms and laws, including those related to women. Women were expected to be under the protection and the authority of their father or husband. Their primary roles were seen as home makers, mothers and caregivers without any freedom. In the middle age, the position of women was very tremendous.

The liberation of depressed class people is very much important in the context of social welfare. Mainly Dalit women need special focus. Male supremacy oppresses women, creates bondage. Women rights, respect and dignity are not yet universally recognized all over the world. In the 19th century when the waves of feminism arose, during that period Matua community made a special place for women in Bengal. The Matua movement driven by the Matua community was first initiated in 1860 AD from Bangladesh. Considerable number of those adherents later got scattered in some parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Matua followers were predominantly found in Nadia and North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. The main purpose of their movement was to bring socio- cultural changes especially in rural parts of Bengal. As well as women empowerment takes place intensively. The Holy Scripture of the Matua community, 'Sri Sri Harililamrita' (The Sacred Acts of God) composed by Tarak Chandra Sarkar, became the reservoir of female emphasis.

" Koribe Grishta Dharma loye nijo nari Ghire

theke nyasi banaprasthi brahmachari"

(Observe religious duties with your wife, in the household, within the family and be an ascetic and experience divinity ) (Sarkar1994, P.135).

Family is given primary importance in the Matua community. The matua community believes in equality of gender as well as caste and they consider both male and female to participate in both physical and spiritual work. There were no gender division in matua masses that proves the sacred text of the matua community 'Harililamrita'- "meyera purushera bosu akpate khaye, Meyeder ento khey pododhula loy, purush dholia pore meyeder paye" (women and men dine together , men consume their wives' orts and touch their feet men bow down to their wives" (Sarkar 1994, p 107- 109) .The community does not also believe in early marriage, widow marriage. In the Matua community their spiritual instructor (both male and female )addressed them as the "gonsai". "Once compared to some sects and school of Sanskritic Brahminical faith, the Matua religion may be less socially deterministic ; however, it often seeks more headway or opportunity for individuals from modest backgrounds by adjusting, rather than denying, the tenants that the Hindu castes also have' ( Walker 1999: 563)

Guruchand Thakur, one of the eminent figures of the Matua community, wanted to liberate oppressed class men and women. He felt only education can uplift the downtrodden people. Guruchand Thakur travelled to various places for the purpose of spreading education. Guruchand Thakur built a school for women education in his house - " nari shikha tore prabhu apan alay/Santi Satyavama name school ghore daye" ( The great leader has built Shanti Shatyavama school for women education ).He made the common people realize about the lack of education, so that it can save them in every possible way. He especially focused on female education to elevate their equality with the men. Many schools were established with his intense endeavour. "Yuganayak Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur started the 'Liberation Movement' with the help of many oppressed and depressed men and women. The principal motive of the movement is 'Education'. In undivided Bengal, five thousand schools were established by this

movement"(K.K. Thakur 2009, p. 9 -10).

From the very beginning of the Matua community along with the men, women were given special status and rights in every aspect. There is no injustice towards women and also the Matua community doesn't believe in inequality."Vedavedh gyan nei nari ki purus"(There is no difference between men and women). It is a powerful protest against the origin of discrimination in the male dominated society ( Sarkar, 1994). After the death of Harichand Thakur, his grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur took the predominance of the Matua community. After the partition, he came to West Bengal with his oppressed people and established Thakur Nagar colony in North 24 Parganas.

In rule no 7 of Matua constitution, which was formed by Matua Mahasangha, discussed various works of the Central Executive Committee. Women department was one of the major functions of the committee to fulfill the aims and goals of the Matua community. (Constitution of Matua community, 2004 p.7). Boroma Binapani Devi , considered the highest source of power and blessed, formulated "Shanti Shatyavama Nirban Committee" that was initiated by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur in 1990. It was a commitment for women empowerment so that along with men they can also participate actively. As the word 'nirban' means liberation, the name of the committee itself portrays the liberation of women with equal social status. A few notable names among the women who were part of the committee are Smt. Komolini Biswas, Smt. Kajollota Kanjilal, and Smt. Basanti Devi Bala Thakur. Apart from women Bidhu Biswas (editor), Haribar Bala, Biren Thakur, Abinash Kanjilal, Chitta Roy Chandra were present in the meeting of the committee ( Mondal 2017, p. 11). It is a very significant aspect that can be seen rarely in society to give equal importance to men and women in their workplace. The active participation of women along with men can be a way to decrease gender discrimination to some extent and create bonds within society. On the third Wednesday of every Bengali month, Shanti Sabha is



held at Thakurnagar thakurbari. In this meeting, the women irrespective of class, caste, participate willingly and discussed about their problems. This committee strives

for self-determination and self-reliance of women. The historical Matua Conference that was held at Kolkata Shahid Minar in 1993 was led by Binapani Devi and Kapil Krisha Thakur. As per the instructions of Binapani Devi (commonly known as 'Boromaa') "Shanti Shatyavama Nirban Committee" performed the opening song of the event. At present this committee has been formed all over India. The committee led by women is moving forward with dignity.

The most recent women's development among the Matua community of West Bengal is the 'Matua Matri Sena.' Under the leadership of Sundari Thakur, this mother warrior team was developed in 2019. The Matua Matri Sena primarily focuses on empowering women within the community and addressing various social issues faced by them. They work towards women's education, healthcare, and overall empowerment. Formulating a materially grounded religious philosophy, the founding saints advocated for gender and caste egalitarianism, as well as the unequivocal dignity of labor (Roy et al. 2021). As women are the bearers of the family, the mother gurus of the Matri Sena imagined them as the mothers of the community. They have a special role within the Matua community to serve as mothers. The political agenda of Matri Sena is to claim Dalit activism, which has largely been male-dominated yet. Since 2019, women gurus of the community and their followers, along with men, have been participating in various rallies to protest against domination. This is how they are growing as a symbol of unity and equality.

According to Carola Erika Lorea, the term 'Matua' refers simultaneously to a community (sampradaya), a region (dharma) and a movement (andalan) (Lorea2020a, p.2). These three are the major forms maintained by Matua Matri Sena. In comparison to their male counterparts, Matua Matri Sena belongs as a mother figure from their family inside and the public sphere outside. In the year 2021, Matua Matri Sena building was constructed at Thakurnar Thakurbari. In an interview with Madhabi Mondal, assistant secretary of the Central Executive committee of Matua Matri Sena, she emphasized the activities and operation led by them. According to her

interview, it is now a regular visiting place for Matua women to discuss and resolve their problems. The issues regarding education, health, domestic violence, and most recently the citizenship rights of Matua refugees from Bengal are also focused on. At present Matua Matri Sena is divided into three Central Executive Committee. They also focus on gender identity and marginalized issues. As a mother figure, Matua Matri Sena protects their family as well as their larger Matua community. The Matri Sena has also played a significant role regarding early marriage of women, which is a common problem in the rural district of West Bengal. (Ghosh 2011).

At last, it can be said that the Matua community spoke neither only of women nor only of men. Said about equality, in the family even outside the family. Guruchand Thakur, son of Harichand Thakur said - "sunechi pitar kache ami bohobar, /nari o purush pabe sama odhikar / Samaje purush pabe jei odhikar/Nari o pabe taha korile bichar" ( I have heard from my father men and women will have equal rights . The rights that a man has in society . A woman should have the same) (Sharma 1989) . Developing equality and awakening women through the Matua community is an ongoing process that can be done with pride and dignity in this way. The community will work for the welfare of the society with honor and Pride.

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