

## Article

# Gender, Education and Citizenship as Ideological Weapons of an 'Army of Holy Women' in Bengal: The Matua Matri Sena

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to analyze the recent phenomenon of the development of a Matri Sena (literally, an 'Army of Holy Women') among the Matua sect of West Bengal, India. Historically known to have suffered caste-based untouchability and forced migration due to communal conflict, the Matua community's current political motivations surround the issue of 'refugeehood' and Indian citizenship. Given this background, the emergence of the Matri Sena as a complex identity among a religion–caste–gender–nation nexus is oriented towards bipartite objectives: one, to actualize the gender-egalitarian ethos that informs Matua religious foundations, and two, to claim legal citizenship status for its community members precisely through a new gendered ideology. We argue that the women gurus of the Matri Sena are able to realize their religious/political aims by fashioning themselves as mothers of an ideal family, community, and by extension, the nation. In deploying their specific gendered ideological constructions, they enact their new roles as influencers in both private and public Matua lives. In such renderings, the woman guru's mother-figure emerges as a political subject through crucial engagements with Matua religiosity on one hand, and dominant Hindu nationalist discourses on the other. In this article, we critically analyze ways in which the Matri Sena constructs a new maternal notion of religio-political power, and how such power furthers both collective Matua aspirations and contemporary national imaginations.



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## 1. Introduction

“Mothers are warriors,” states Parbati Das<sup>1</sup>, one of the founding members of the Matua Matri Sena, as she explains in an interview that the specific essence of motherhood lies in courage, endurance and struggle. In other words, Das deems that motherhood is a political experience. The Matri Sena—literally, an 'Army of Holy Women'—is the most recent development among the Matua sect of Bengal. Founded in 2019 under the headship of Sundari Thakur<sup>2</sup>, in Thakurnagar<sup>3</sup>, West Bengal, India, the women gurus of Matri Sena posit gender, education and citizenship as the three most fundamental ideological weapons in their fight against patriarchy, educational disprivilege and caste and territorial inequality. Historically, the Matua community emerged as a low-caste religious group in East Bengal (now, Bangladesh) in the nineteenth century. Matua faith derived heavily from the philosophical foundations of Bengal Vaishnavism, which was a medieval (15–16th centuries), anti-caste, religious movement based on intense devotionism, and centered on the guru-figure of Chaitanya (1486–1533) (see [Chakravarti 1985](#)). However, later, the Matua sect created a separate religious identity and developed further as a social reformative movement to uplift the Namashudras, a lower-caste peasant group who lived in the marshes of southern East Bengal, and who were socially considered untouchables. The founding gurus of the Matua community, Harichand Thakur and his son, Guruchand

Thakur, condemned such caste discrimination and emphasized the urgent need for political and social awakening through specific focus on education and work.

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). In such political renderings, the family was construed as the rudimentary unit of reform. Women—as mothers within the family—were attributed striking importance in the constitution of a gendered caste consciousness. However, only around two hundred years after the initial Matua movement took off, the Matri Sena, a consolidated women’s wing of the community, has now come to prominence. What has led to the development of an army of holy women? Why and how does the mother-figure translate as a warrior in the Matua movement? How do women gurus influence social, religious and political lives through their specific gendered modalities? According to Parbati Das’s deliberations, mothers embody the singular potential to transform families, and therefore, the society at large. But in what way does this mother-figure mediate between the apparently antagonistic domains of the religious and the political, and especially in comparison with male Matua gurus?

The question of the emerging mother gurus is intimately tied with the Matua history of displacement. After the Partition of India in 1947, a great number of Matua followers migrated to West Bengal, while their main pilgrimage centre remained in Bangladesh. The community has ever since maintained regular cross-border traffic of pilgrims, ideas, texts and annual festivals. All these factors came together in complex ways recently, in 2019, when the government of India decided to officially document the identities of migrant and refugee populations. This gave rise to protests against the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) and NRC (National Register of Citizens). The protestors consisted of several marginalized masses, including those followers of the Matua community who had migrated from Bangladesh over the decade and had not yet received official rehabilitation. Amidst such political strife, the Matua women’s wing was established. Because they were the bearers of the family, the women devotees of the Matri Sena were also imagined then as the mothers of the community. Their recent claim to authority also rested on the fact that, despite the Matua movement having accorded official gender equality in their gurus’ religious writings, in practice, men had overwhelmingly dominated their spaces. However, the singular contribution of the Matri Sena lay in their fights to claim citizenship status for the displaced Matua people. As mothers and as flagbearers of the home(land), Matua women gurus’ demands for citizenship rights for the refugee Matua populations contributed to a particular form of gendered politics. Thus, the development of the Matri Sena is a major milestone for the Matua religious movement.

In this paper, we try to analyze the specific kind of religious and political contribution that the Matri Sena makes to the Matua community. Drawing upon the injunctions of the founding saints of the Matua sect, the mother gurus contribute to addressing pressing social issues in their contemporary avatars. Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the community’s pioneers, laid particular emphasis on gender equality, especially through their teachings on the institutions of family and education. Within the family, they stressed the equivalence of the mother and father, and initiated infrastructural facilities for women’s education alongside men. In the contemporary context, we thus seek to understand how the Matua women gurus usher as truer Matua subjects than their male counterparts as practical enforcers of their founding gurus’ religious tenets on a gender-egalitarian community. To address their political agenda of mitigating the gap between the gurus’ foundational ideological enunciations and the actual lived gender realities of Matua women, the mother gurus of the Matri Sena devise a peculiar strategy which influences women not only inside their homes but also outside their domestic contexts. Thus, we aim to critically understand the ways in which the women gurus of the Matri Sena construct a maternal notion of religio-political power, and also how such power simultaneously furthers collective Matua aspirations.

Thus, in contrast to other women political actors on national platforms, such as the ‘dashing’, masculine women of the Shiv Sena (Bedi 2007), the Matri Sena embodies a religiously specific feminized form of political power. Nevertheless, such claims to (gender) equality by deploying specific religious rationales or invoking gurus’ teachings run the risk of attaining only spiritual equality while overlooking actual, pragmatic questions of social justice (see Ben-Herut 2018; Keune 2021). Since the Sena was formed as recently as 2019, it is still early to decide whether or not this wing would be able to substantially move ahead of its male counterparts and bridge the gaps between theory and practice. However, while the male Matua members had earlier focused on actualizing gender-egalitarianism within familial and religious domains only, in contemporary times, the Sena’s mother gurus further their gender-inclusive religious foundations by influencing women to occupy public, political spaces too. Thus, the claims of gender equality that the women are making strongly, and the ways in which they are fashioning themselves as mother-warriors, help them anticipate a different kind of community ethos and nation-formation in comparison to their male predecessors. Since the women of the Matri Sena strongly identify with Matua religious foundations that are uniquely feminized and familial, they are deemed intrinsically holy. The specific framing of the guru as a mother-figure is invoked through these women’s cultivation of religious ideals, which in turn enables them to influence political action. Thus, the Matri Sena’s political activities directly follow from their religious sensibilities.

In this article, we shall thus discuss the Matri Sena’s sacred maternal notion of politics that is invoked to demand protection and rights for a displaced Matua population. Although the Matuas have historically claimed legitimacy for their uprooted community, the development of the Matri Sena promises new futures. The Sena’s novel political visions influence women devotees in foregrounding elements of caste, gender and religion to construct a political nationhood. Furthering their sect’s gender-egalitarian ethos, the Sena’s gurus uphold the mother-figure as the protagonist of private domains as well as broader political stages. As mothers of the ideal family, community, and the nation, the Matri Sena imagines the Matua community as national subjects.

To analyze Matri Sena practices, we primarily rely on ethnographic fieldwork with its followers and other Matua devotees in Thakurnagar [Figure 1], the heartland of the sect, located in North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India. The ethnographic material also involves texts written by the community’s founding members and other followers.



**Figure 1.** Members of the Matri Sena gathered at the Thakurnagar shrine, on the occasion of the annual meeting of the All India Matua Mahashangha (Federation), 7 November 2022 (Source: Photograph taken from Matua Matri Sena Facebook page, 2023).

Studies on gender and sacrality have argued that religious descriptions are often abstracted out of their gendered contexts (see [Avishai 2016](#); [Marti 2014](#)). Again, the analysis of religion for scholars of gender opens up avenues that question the secularist and masculinist biases in theory ([Avishai 2016](#), p. 262). Only three decades back, the scholarship on gender and religion was able to shift focus from studying women as objects to studying gender regimes, wherein religion—as a social institution—constructs gender as a social category ([Avishai 2016](#), p. 264). Such articulations make possible the analyses of both how gendered individuals respond to religious categories, and how gender itself is produced through religious processes. Thus, religion may serve as the site for the articulation of gender claims and uphold women as strategizing sacred entities.

In the case of the Matri Sena, their articulation of themselves as a gendered unity, drawing on their community's religious tenets, centrally informs their political sensibilities. This constitutes critical agentic ideological roles for women within religio-political frameworks that continue to be male-dominated. Further, these women's political presence within the community has repercussions on the construction of Matua identity in general, which again has implications for a larger nation-building process. The women's wing's new mode of influence is no longer restricted to familial sites only but is extended to larger public spaces of community assertion. In minute ways, therefore, the Matri Sena is emerging as a political determinant of Matua fate.

It is important at this stage to clarify our usage of the terms 'women', 'mothers' and 'gurus'. Throughout the article, we have used the terms 'women' and 'mothers' interchangeably. This is because, following the strict family ethos of the Matuas, every woman other than one's married partner is treated with distant reverence, and the best way to ascertain this is to accord them the status of the mother (*ma*). It is this particular feminized and maternal identity which makes women intrinsically holy in the Matua community. All these women, however, have the spiritual potential of cultivating themselves as guru-figures for the sect. When some of these women do choose the path of gurudom, we have referred to them as 'women gurus' or 'mother gurus.' For those women who have rather continued as ordinary devotees, we have used the terms 'women' or 'mothers.' In this context, therefore, it is the women gurus who are specific influencers, while all other women devotees are the influenced subjects. This entire cohort of women constitutes the Matri Sena, which we have thus translated as an 'army (Sena) of holy women (Matri)'.

## 2. Displacement, Religion and Gender: Rooting an Uprooted Community

Since its conception in 2019, the Matri Sena has given unparalleled importance to the issue of citizenship rights. In 2019, with the attempts of the Indian government to identify refugees and migrants in India, and to devise a national register for legal citizens, the displaced Matua populations stood severely affected. Ever since, the mother gurus of the Matri Sena have actively consolidated religion, politics and society into one gendered movement through their fight for legal citizenship status for refugee Matua populations. They conceive of their maternal political power as the source of a national identity for Matua sons, families and the community at large. Despite their historical caste-based antagonism with upper-caste Hindus, in recent times, the women gurus of the Sena have begun identifying with an overarching Hindu identity, which informs a favorable patriotic sentiment in an increasingly growing Hindu majoritarian nation (see [Hansen 1999](#)). As Hindu mothers of the nation, they claim to build their (Hindu) motherland (and therefore, claim citizenship rights for their community members). This critical issue about ways in which the Matri Sena has been able to develop a gendered imagination of nation-building to legitimize their claims to citizenship has connections with the historical development of the Matua community.

The Matua movement emerged by the late 19th century within the context of the Namashudra community's agitation against upper-caste atrocities, which denied these lower-caste groups the right to own lands, and even imposed restrictions on commensality and touchability ([Lorea 2020a](#), p. 8). Namashudras were collectively labelled with the

pejorative term 'Chandala', implying ritually polluted untouchables, who were socially outcast as 'avarnas'<sup>4</sup>, or those outside the caste hierarchy of the Hindu social order. However, in 1871, for the first time, the Namashudras organized a protest against such social degradation, which was followed by the 1881 Namashudra Conference of Dattadanga in the Khulna division of undivided Bengal, presided by Guruchand Thakur, with the stated aim of enabling caste unity (Bandyopadhyay 1997, pp. 51–52). Since the first decade of the 1900s, especially after the Swadeshi movement in India, the Namashudras gradually gained institutional political vigor. Guruchand Thakur, who played a central role in the consolidation of lower-caste unity, also sought help from Western missionaries who had considerable power in Bengal under the British colonial government. In fact, the Matuas also received support from the Australian Baptist Mission of Faridpur, active since the early 20th century (see Mead 1911). One of our respondents remarked that for turning to Western colonizers to ensure social upliftment, the community has been historically criticized as anti-nationals (*deshdrohi*) by upper-caste nationalist politicians in India. This historical label of the 'anti-national' has serious implications in contemporary India, wherein large sections of the Matua population contest for legal citizenship status.

Furthermore, in the complex political climate of the then-undivided Bengal, the community also experienced communal tensions with the regional Muslim sharecroppers. Unfolding in a nexus of caste, class and religious turmoil, the Matua sect indeed also gradually grew closer to caste-Hindus under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur's grandson, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. This development was particularly expedited by the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946, which marked nationwide communal violence between Muslims and Hindus, when Muslims demanded a separate homeland following the British exit from India (Lorea 2020a, p. 9). Furthermore, the Partition of India in 1947 unraveled hostile conditions that forced Hindu and other non-Muslim populations to flee from East Bengal. This unprecedented displacement, which continued since 1947 and was also bolstered by the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971<sup>5</sup>, uprooted a majority of the Matua community from Bangladesh, breaking their territorial unity (Byapari and Mukherjee 2007, p. 4116). With the constitution of two separate nation-states—India and Bangladesh—a newly dispossessed community grappled with their identities as untouchables, Hindus, and also, new refugees in India.

The post-Partition violence marked a hostile moment of forced migration of the community members, and scattered them as diasporic congregations to the Indian mainland, islands of Andaman and across various other geographies. In the face of Islamization in East Bengal and the subsequent increase in the movement of non-Muslim masses to India, the Matua concentration in Bangladesh diluted, leaving them vulnerable in their homeland. By the 1950s, at least one-fourth of the Matua population had migrated out of East Pakistan (see Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2014; Sen 2014). The conditions of migration thus were complex. While there had been many instances of alliance between Muslim and Matua peasants in their struggle against Hindu landlords, the relocation of the elite landholders to India left the low-caste peasants in a state of inter-communal strife, fighting with Muslims over resources, stability, and allocation and compromising earlier communal liaisons (Bandyopadhyay 1997, pp. 252–54).

In India, the migrants were often termed 'riot refugees' (Rahman and Schendel 2003, pp. 566–69), and were rehabilitated in refugee camps under morbid conditions. The newly formed Indian government also segregated such dispossessed populations to distant sites. While the Indian resettlement schemes were often along caste divisions, the overarching narrative emphasized the upliftment of humiliated Hindus who had been ousted from East Pakistan. Under such a Hindu nationalist epithet, the caste specificities of Matua identity emerged as ambiguous and secondary (Lorea 2018a, p. 51).

In 1947, under the patronage of the descendant of the Harichand–Guruchand lineage, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Thakurnagar became the heartland of Matua congregations and the seat of their political institution, the Matua Mahashangha (Lorea 2020a, p. 12). Ever since, the Matua Mahashangha has negotiated with national and regional political

players in reinstating their community's identity. In the political history of India, the Matua community has had shifting alliances with the Congress Party<sup>6</sup>, and then, the Left<sup>7</sup> in West Bengal, also resulting in national and regional politics integrating 'refugee masses' as successful vote banks. Through these political bargains, however, Matua migrant populations gradually came to be identified with Dalit politics through the imperative of self-determination under Pramatha Ranjan Thakur; the term 'Dalit' being an assertive self-applied label implying lower-caste groups, who were previously deemed untouchables.

Thereafter, the question of rehabilitation of the refugee populations became a central concern of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the single largest political party in India aligned with right-wing politics, and a declared opponent of the National Congress Party. The BJP's ideology was established on a particular form of majoritarian nationhood defined by Hindu religious principles. The BJP thus took up the Matua rehabilitation agenda in their election campaigns, and communalized the refugee issue (Lorea 2020a, p. 14). They declared that the Congress-led government had indirectly helped Bangladeshi Muslim refugees to infiltrate the Indian borderlands. As a result, in some areas, Muslim refugees and Matua migrant populations were conflated and collectively deemed as 'infiltrators' by other local ethno-nationalist groups. This culminated in further communal polarization and competition between the low-caste Hindus and the Muslims in India (Lorea 2020a, p. 14).

Within such contexts, founded in 1943 and later revived in the 1980s, the Matua Mahashangha in Thakurnagar has served as the centralized bureaucratic site of Matua socio-political operations. In the face of complex political developments, the issue of citizenship has also remained central to the Matua Mahashangha. The Citizenship Act of 1955 followed by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2003 declared all migrants who came to India post-1971 as illegal (Lorea 2020a, p. 16). This denial of citizenship status created significant unrest for the Matuas. Again, in 2016, the BJP introduced the Citizenship Amendment Bill and passed it as the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019. The Act promised citizenship rights to all non-Muslim masses who had migrated from Bangladesh, and other such neighboring countries. This communitization between Muslims and non-Muslims in the larger national context polarized sentiments between Matuas and Muslims. Thus, while earlier Matuas were against caste-Hindus, with time, through various historical developments since Partition and up to the recent CAA, a large section of Matuas have aligned politically with caste-Hindus, and the BJP (Nath and Kumar 2021).

However, in the regional political landscape, the current Chief Minister of West Bengal and the leader of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) propagates a strong secular vision supporting Muslim masses. A considerable section of Matuas, however, support the TMC, as it is the largest political force in West Bengal that opposes the BJP's construction of India as a Hindu nation. Historically subjected to oppression by upper-caste Hindus, several Matuas refuse to identify with BJP's politics. Also, the continued uncertainty around citizenship rights leveraged by TMC's strong opposition against the CAA and NRC has appealed to many Matuas. However, a majority of the community still aligns and in fact identifies with Hindu politics in order to actualize their aspirations.

This complex unfolding of political instability for the Matuas has resulted in recurrent demands for citizenship rights, sometimes even with an overwhelmingly communal rhetoric. Oscillating between political headships, the Matua members keep consolidating themselves to protest until citizenship rights are granted to them. The leadership of the Matua community, currently bifurcated between the BJP and TMC, has not yet been able to resolve the citizenship issue.

Amidst this political strife, the Matua Matri Sena was founded as late as 2019. Primary to their political agenda was the claim that Dalit activism in West Bengal has largely remained male-dominated. Members of the Matri Sena uphold a specifically gendered imperative in grounding national identity for the refugee Matua populations. Through their particular maternal notion of political power, the women gurus of the Matri Sena—literally

an Army of Holy Women—envision consolidating the women of the Matua community and beyond. Since 2019, the women gurus and their women followers have joined rallies and organized protests to claim legal citizenship status [Figure 2], alongside the male members of the Matua Mahashangha.



**Figure 2.** Women gurus of Matri Sena leading the citizenship rights protests, November, 2020 (Source: Photograph taken by a Matri Sena leader who shared it with the authors in 2023).

Headed by Sundari Thakur, the Matri Sena is an autonomous organization, constituted of female Matua members, that works alongside the All India Matua Mahashangha. Sundari's husband (who is a direct descendant of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur) is the President of the Matua Mahashangha and is also a BJP Member of the Indian Parliament. On the other hand, Mamata Bala Thakur, wife of the late Kapil Krishna Thakur<sup>8</sup>, heads the Sarva Bharat Matua Mahashangha (All India Matua Federation), which owes its political allegiance to TMC.

Interestingly, despite their ideological differences, both these political parties have unique constructions of the woman-figure. The BJP's ideation of the woman constructs her as a symbol of collective honor, while also empowering her with techniques of self-defense (*atmaraksha*), to cultivate and manifest her valor (*virya*) (Sethi 2002, p. 1547). As a wife, her bravery lies in awakening the men against the political 'other', while as a mother, she is required to nurture in the young the qualities of fearlessness and patriotism (Sethi 2002, p. 1547). Both these constructions utilize women's roles as mothers and wives in formulating the woman-as-agent in national politics. The TMC's construction of the ideal woman figurehead, however, rests on the iconic image of their leader, the Chief Minister of West Bengal. Her embodiment as a single and strong woman—unmarried, clad in a white saree, and always appearing humble and frugal—and her self-fashioning as an organic representative of the people make her political presence venerable through a claim to authenticity, sanctity and asceticism. This discourse of nonattachment (to political power) constructs ideas of a moral leadership of an idealized figure of the female-outsider in the male-dominated realm of politics (Ray Chaudhury 2022, p. 950). The Chief Minister, whose name literally means 'maternal attachment', and who is ubiquitously referred to as *Didi* (elder sister), endorses a leadership model that rests on the stated triple tropes of *Ma-Mati-Manush* (Mother-Soil-People). This serves to reinforce her public persona as an elder sister, playing the role of the proxy-mother. Aside from the 'Didi' persona, she is also revered as an embodiment of the Hindu warrior goddess, the ten-armed Durga<sup>9</sup> (Chatterjee 2019).

The Matri Sena's 'mothers' thus emerge by conjoining the BJP and TMC's constructions of the woman-figure. On one hand, the women gurus become political actors through their roles as mothers and wives; on the other, they claim to cleanse the corrupted political sphere based on their moral cultivations of nonattachment, in contrast to self-seeking masculinist politics. These simultaneous constructions embody as the maternal political power of the Sena's women gurus.

Stressing the original gender-egalitarian ethos of the Matua ideology, the Matri Sena aims to extend religious vitality to women devotees in order to consolidate their political ambitions. Their specific contribution to the caste and religious history of the Matua movement, however, has been through their claim to citizenship rights. As mothers of the community, the Matri Sena envisages a familial political formulation by reintegrating the neglected Matua *udbastu* (refugees) into a singular nation. In positing the family and the home(land) as the model for claims to citizenship, and therefore, for nation-building, these mother gurus are thus able to introduce a sacred feminine realm into the public, masculine political sphere; and this is their precise mode of influence.

Thus, the peculiarity of the development of a women's wing borrows from the potential to infuse politics with a sacred sanction, which stands in contrast to the masculine domain of secular politics. Women gurus harp on such sacrality to portray their political action as a primary derivation of a religious responsibility towards the family and community. The women of the Matri Sena have become political determiners by navigating domains that are both thoroughly religious, informal, domestic and familial as well as publicly political. With the sheer ability to exist in the dual spheres of 'the public' and 'the private', and in catering to both formal and informal correspondences, these women take up the task of "cleaning up politics" (see [Rajagopal 2001](#), p. 232). Through this sanctification of politics, they are also able to transform religion "from being the object of action to serving as the means by which the objective is accomplished" (see [Rajagopal 2001](#), p. 233). Furthermore, in becoming an 'army of holy women', the female devotees' wing envisions a peculiarly feminine militant (and sacred) form of politics—a domain that is otherwise conventionally signified by androcentrism. Building on the community's gender-inclusive ethos, the Matri Sena simultaneously incorporates vocabularies of familial and communitarian assertion and aggressive nation-building.

### 3. From Doctrine to Door: Realities of Matua Women Gurus

According to Carola Erika Lorea, the term 'Matua' refers simultaneously to a community (*sampradaya*), a religion (*dharma*) and a movement (*andalan*) ([Lorea 2020a](#), p. 2). These three configurations of the Matua faith also feature within the creation of the Matri Sena. However, the critical historical problem lies in the fact that despite the Matua movement having accorded official gender equality in their founding gurus' writings, in practice, men have predominantly featured in both the religious and political spaces. Thus, the conception of the Matri Sena was justified on the grounds of the ideological foundations of the Matua faith itself. The mother gurus, therefore, at their gatherings and public meetings<sup>10</sup>, routinely engage in reading aloud portions from their religious texts and singing *harisangeets* (songs in the praise of god), which are full of mentions of gender-egalitarian accounts. They also encourage the cultivation of such reading and singing practices by women devotees in their respective homes. In the rural landscape of Thakurnagar, thus, religious motivations serve as primary catalysts in mobilizing women. The repeated emphases on gender equality in the texts of Matua founding gurus charge these women to assume political positions (of power) as well.

The religious imaginations that inform Matri Sena's contemporary political goals derive heavily from the religious historical development of the Matua sect. Although the community emerged with a significant Vaishnavite orientation, over the last decade the Matuas' explicit allegiance to Vaishnavism has decreased in favor of an overarching Hinduism. The social appeal of Vaishnavism<sup>11</sup> still holds strong over Matua faith, however. This is because Vaishnavite devotional ethos as a peculiarly feminized one significantly

shapes Matua religiosity (see Haberman 1988). In fact, there are two specific ways in which Vaishnavite influence on Matua notions of feminine power could be imagined: first, through the emphasis on the family; and second, through the cultivation of feminine religious subjectivities. Modernized sectarian forms of Vaishnavism have focused on the unit of the family (Fuller 2003, pp. 181–82), which bear semblances with Matua constructions of ideal familial structures. Thus, as bearers of the family, mothers become central figures in both Vaishnava and Matua religious orders. Furthermore, Vaishnavism doctrinally emphasizes on the strong cultivation of feminine vitality (Sarbadhikary 2015). Despite the apparent lack of any ‘high female deities’ in the Vaishnava iconographic universe (Krishna being the Supreme One), it has created spaces of agency for Krishna’s lover, Radha and other women devotees (see Bhattacharya 2007, p. 932). The cultivation of ‘emotional Krishna bhakti’ (Hardy 1983) situates feminine, subservient devotionism as a most desirable trait among Vaishnava practitioners. Thus, the powerful trope of Radha and her *sakhis* (Radha-Krishna’s handmaiden friends) longing for Krishna reflects the inner worlds of women devotees and foregrounds intimacy as a peculiarly feminine devotional expression in Vaishnavism (Chakravarti 1985; Bhatia 2017). Moreover, bhakti in Vaishnavite contexts does not only translate to devotion but also denotes devotional service. Vaishnava devotees, thus, understand social service as purely spiritual, because service for them simply means serving Krishna’s devotees (Sarbadhikary 2015, p. 170). Since the Matua sect was born from Vaishnavism, the women gurus of the Matri Sena centrally borrow from its emphasis on feminine power and simultaneously uphold an ethical and pragmatic commitment toward social service as a direct derivative of the community’s religious foundations.

Deriving from the compelling gendered sensibilities of their Vaishnavite origins, the mother gurus of the Matri Sena assemble themselves in new avatars. Their sociopolitical presence draws upon the highly feminized roots of the Matua-Vaishnava devotional spirit. As mother gurus, the Sena’s women foreground and perpetuate feminine subjectivities as religious and therefore political. The Matua scriptures also become an important reservoir of emphasis on women. For instance, we see that in their holy text, the *Sri Sri Harililamrita* (The sacred acts of god) composed by the Matua poet-singer and hagiographer, Tarak Chandra Sarkar, Harichand Thakur says the following:

“Koribe Grihastha Dharma loye nijo nari  
Grihe theke nyasi banaprasthi brahmachari”

rendered as the following:

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

—*Sri Sri Harililamrita* (Sarkar 1994, p. 135)

The primacy given to the householder and the ethical commitments towards the family bring out the essence of Matua religiosity. As Lorea notes, “Ideas about the mother and father are not only linked to parenthood: they are about conception and offspring, reproduction and ontogenesis; but more broadly, they are inextricably part of a sophisticated understanding of cosmogony, anatomy, sexuality, and soteriology, translated into ethical norms” (Lorea 2020b, p. 246). Arguing further, Lorea states—resonating with esoteric Bengali Tantric and Vaishnava lineages—that the doctrine of *mata-pita-tattva* (the truth of the father and the mother) in the Matua understanding, constructs the mother–father duo as equal, complementary and holy (Lorea 2020b, p. 246). In complex ways—appearing as *dehatattva*<sup>12</sup>—the substances of *pitridhan* (paternal bodily substance) and *matridhan* (maternal bodily substance) are imagined to constitute the devotee’s body and its subtle essence (Lorea 2020b, p. 247). Thus, a Matua offspring, they emphasize, borrows equally from the father and the mother, right from the moment of birth. Furthermore, through a strong emphasis on *garhastya dharma* (the ethic of the householder) and the importance of the dignity of labor, Matua conjugal lives are scripturally defined as disciplined and collaborative, and rooted in the material world (*bastubadi*) (see Lorea 2020a, p. 4).

A common saying among Matuas is “*Mala tepa phonta kata jol phela nai/Hate kam mukhe nam mon khola chai*” (Mindless ritualism involving sacred beads or sacred water does not count. Rather, it is manual labor and repetitive chants of god’s names, that together open the devotee’s heart towards realizing truth). The saying thus instructs followers to abandon the obsession with ritualism and instead remain committed to one’s dutiful work. Such dedication, nurtured in bodily and ethical habits, should indeed be cultivated within the home, and led by the mothers, the women gurus of the community.

In the same sacred text, the *Harililamrita*, we also find other directives which ensure that gender divisions are eliminated among the Matua masses. For instance

“*Meyera purushera boshi akpate khaye  
Meyeder ento khey pododhula loy  
Purush dholiya pore meyeder paye*”

rendered as

(Women and men dine together

Men consume their wives’ orts and touch their feet

Men [must] bow down to their wives).

—*Sri Sri Harililamrita* (Sarkar 1994, pp. 107–9)

This proverb suggests strongly that men and women should not only consume meals together, but also that men should accept their wives’ leftovers. Within the rural Bengali upper-caste context, where the man as the head of the family is ideally the first recipient of cooked food and the singular epitome of respect, the Matua gurus’ equal positing of women alongside men surely stands as a radical step. One might argue that this does not immediately guarantee the man and woman’s real equality. However, such mentions in Matua sacred scriptures marked significant symbolic steps in a culture in which wives were otherwise often considered worthy of only the man’s leftovers.

Matua doctrine also gives significant importance to the social upliftment of women. Guruchand Thakur, who came to be known by the epithet of the *shikha-guru* (educator-saint), is believed to have founded 1836 schools in his lifetime (Lorea 2020a, p. 8). He extended the twelve sacred commandments of Matuas (*dwadosh agya*), proposed by Harichand Thakur, to incorporate social reforms in the spheres of education, employment and marriage practices (see Lorea 2020b, p. 249). The twelve commandments centrally include important codes of conduct that instruct Matuas to ensure a gender-egalitarian social order. One of these commandments, for instance, posits the mother–father equal supremacy, and prescribes honoring parents as they are the ideal recipients of devotion. Another religious commandment instructs devotees to regard another person’s wife as one’s mother, highlighting the recurrence of the mother-figure in Matuas’ everyday social lives.

Furthermore, Guruchand Thakur identified the lack of education among Matuas as the root cause of their humiliation. He focused on all Matuas being educated as a critical step towards the formation of a rational human collective. In fact, he famously recommended that daytime schools be opened even under cowsheds, and that girls and boys alike should be sent to schools (Mukherjee 2008). Furthermore, critiques of the Brahminical standards of widowhood—such as the infamous practice of *sati*<sup>13</sup>—informed Guruchand’s strong endeavors in addressing marriage practices of Bengal (see Mandal 2021, p. 267). Named after his mother, Guruchand Thakur also built the Shanti Satyabhama School, dedicated to the cause of educating women.

The distinctive nature of Matua religious practices has been characterized as feminine (Lorea 2018b). The religious lives of the Matua masses even apart from scriptural doctrines generally legitimize a maternal mode of power for the Sena’s women gurus. For instance, the Matuas are known for their collective devotional experiences, in which men and women equally, and together, participate in ecstatic chanting and other religious euphoric singing and dancing rituals. Sonic intensification through the deployment of various instruments such as the *danka* (large drum), *damburu* (percussion), *kamsi* (brass gong) and *singa* (buffalo

horn), is accompanied by repetitive chants of Hari's (Krishna's)/god's names, culminating in collective shouts of 'Haribol' (take the names of Hari!), alongside their vigorous communal dance known as *matam*. This energetic excess is considered by devotees as a manifestation of the Vaishnava theology of feminine egalitarian devotional love (*prem bhakti*) towards Hari/Krishna, and is expressed also through emotional outbursts, in the form of weeping, hugging and touching all devotees present, irrespective of their sex. In such affective states, devotees enter trance-like conditions called *bhaber bhibor* (literally, hypnotized by emotions) (Lorea 2022). The Matuas have thus been associated with synonyms of lunacy—an excess, often linked with feminine domains of emotionality and affect—and marked by states of being “*naamey premey matoyara*” (maddened by [Hari's] names and love), which again is deemed as feminine, subservient, and yet strong and motivated (see Lorea 2020a, p. 3).

The sonorous enactment of devotion in *matam* is also influenced by Tantric ideologies. In Matua songs and embodied knowledge, *matam* is represented as a simple (*sahaja*) practice of self-realization. The embodied techniques of sound, rhythmic repetition and the dynamism of movements enable a meditative manipulation of breath. This mindfulness is built upon a conception of the subtle body that can be directed towards divinity through sound (Lorea 2022). The mother gurus of the Matri Sena claim that the sonic path towards divinity also has direct influence on Matua social lives. Songs of *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) which the mother gurus rehearse and propagate, are believed to liberate one from *kam* (desire), since rather than viewing women as objects of sexual desire, they elevate them to the status of divine mothers (see Lorea 2022).

During the Matua annual festival of *Barunimela*<sup>14</sup>, devotees are seen smeared in soil as they roll their bodies on the muddy grounds in a state of penance and devotion towards their gurus. This ritual of the '*kanda mati khela*' (muddy earth play) [Figure 3] enables devotees to physically absorb the dust upon which respectable feet (of their ancestors) have walked. While women directly absorb the sacrality of the mud, for men, the body-soil connection allows for a “gendered transformation towards [ . . . ] feminine [ . . . ] penetrability, softness and surrender” (Lorea 2018b, p. 7).



**Figure 3.** Matua woman rolling her body on the grounds of the sacred Thakurnagar shrine on the occasion of the All India Matua Mahashangha's annual meeting, 7 November 2022 (Source: Photograph taken by authors, 2022).

Thus, in the ideological constructions and practices of the Matua Matri Sena, the gender-egalitarian scriptural doctrines, the specific feminized foundations of the Matua everyday and the strong emphasis of the founding saints on women's social position within the Matua society find recurrent resonance. Further, the power of women calling on men to avenge the honor of Matua femininity also becomes important in the successful mobilization of both men and women. As Mahant (2002) notes, for the Matuas, emancipation from caste oppression cannot be imagined outside of the simultaneous upliftment of women. This also means that in order to devise a holistic rights-based movement for the community's peoples, all other critical divisions, especially gender, demand to be addressed immediately and practically by both men and women.

The Matri Sena derives heavy ideological support from the figure of *Boro Ma* [1920–2019] (Great Mother, an epithet for the twentieth-century woman guru, Binapani Devi Thakur), a matriarch of the family to which the Matua sect's main gurus belonged. After the demise of her husband, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, *Boro Ma* was known to have single-handedly consolidated the Matua population, which is now estimated at 50 million, in and outside of Bengal. Under her leadership, the first women's organization of the Matua community, the 'Shanti Satyabhama Nirvaan Committee', was formed in 1990, at the Thakurnagar Thakurbari (the main compound of Thakurnagar's sacred shrine). This committee only focused on consolidating women to take part in festivals and ceremonies held at the shrine. To this day, the committee functions as a purely religious collective based on women's participation in Matua social life.

As a matriarch of the Matua lineage, *Boro Ma* gained remarkable limelight in both regional and national politics. Despite not holding any official political position, *Boro Ma's* authority continued to inform the community's collective motivations and actions. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, she informally operated as the chief advisor of Matuas in Bengal. On the demise of the matriarch on 5th March 2019, several spokespersons of the Matua community declared that they had lost their spiritual and political patronage. Different media platforms reported the great loss, and both national and regional politicians extended their condolences and support to the Matuas. After *Boro Ma's* passing away, internal political divisions intensified and led to the breaking up of the 'great joint family' of the Matuas. Such an instance highlights the highly feminized ethos of familial cohesion, that is lost once the mother-figure is absent.

Thus, we see how Matua women have historically attempted to occupy spaces of power within a complex nexus of caste and gender hierarchies. However, despite the egalitarian claims of the Matua faith, considerable gender disparities persisted till the contemporary period. An instance of such discrimination is the fact that a woman member is not allowed to hold any official political post in the All India Matua Mahashangha. Women-led wings have hitherto only functioned as offshoots of male-dominated organizations or stayed constricted to strictly religious affairs. However, very recently, agonized debates have been initiated by the Sena around questions of women's direct participation in political affairs. While it is yet to be seen whether or not the women are able to make significant claims to the larger male-dominated political spaces, recently made confident and vehement criticisms of their own marginalization have started being noticed by the Mahashangha and even important political figures. The acknowledgement of the Matri Sena as a most significant Matua wing also coincides with the simultaneous decade-long investment of the BJP in women's questions nationwide. We thus find important political moves in the Home Minister of India visiting the Matuas in February 2021, and even promising the community's citizenship rights to the Matri Sena. Further, as the Matri Sena activists informed us, in the very near future, they also aim to acquire and substantially channel funds from the Central Government, which were earlier only received by the Mahashangha.

However, the women's already-established political positions in the Matri Sena are based on notions of maternity and informality, which subvert the earlier androcentric status quo of the Matua political landscape. In addition to more domestic ways which have mostly

affected Matuas' inner lives, however, the Sena is also seriously investing in expanding the scope of their activities nationwide to occupy political centre stages. Since the BJP's recent emphasis on women's empowerment also echoes with the community's gendered political idioms, the Matri Sena finds a new promise of national visibility. However, since the Matri Sena is a relatively new development, one cannot yet say how exactly this will unfold. This is also since, as discussed earlier, the Matri Sena's virulence also fits with the image of the leader of the regional party.

In light of such religio-political negotiations within and outside the community, Matua women have raised important questions about the existing gap between a gender-egalitarian ideology and its actual manifestations in practice. The establishment of a distinct women's wing, thus, salvages the mother-figure from the erstwhile strictly domestic religious lifeworld, and places her within the public lives of resistance, reclamation and political religiosity. Also exemplified through the image of *Boro Ma* and her dual importance as the mother of the Matua founding-gurus' lineage, as well as a matriarch of the community at large, we see how her peculiar religious involvement problematized the private-public divide.

In the next section, we look into the specific modes of operation of the Matri Sena and how it unites caste, gender and nationality. This section is a direct outcome of in-depth fieldwork in Thakurnagar. Several unstructured face-to-face as well as telephonic interviews with Matri Sena women gurus and followers were conducted to both study the Sena's operations and compare them with the male-dominated parent organization, the All India Matua Mahashangha.

#### 4. The Matua Matri Sena: Gendering Caste, Gendering Nation

Headed by Sundari Thakur, wife of the BJP Member of Parliament and President of All India Matua Mahashangha, the Matri Sena's most fundamental political claim coincides with the already ongoing Matua movement for citizenship rights in India. Within the current Hindu majoritarian framework of the Indian nation-state (see Hansen 1999), the Sena further deploys the mother-figure as the bearer of the sons of the Hindu soil. Such a gendered rhetoric of national construction also coincides with caste claims associated with the Matua people's constructed identity as primordial, original or indigenous inhabitants, the *mulnibashis*, of undivided Bengal. In a representative view, a Matua follower explained that the caste system was introduced by Aryan invaders in ancient India, while the original inhabitants of the territory were unjustly relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy, as lower-caste *shudras*. The Matuas identify themselves as descendants of these pre-Aryan aboriginals, the *adim adibashis*, the true sons of the soil. Therefore, the Matri Sena's striking political presence in the fight for legal citizenship status for all refugee Matua populations under the guidance of their influential mother gurus at once combines registers of gender, caste and nationality.

However, in contrast to their male counterparts, the uniqueness of the Matua women's army lies in their ability to coexist in domestic spheres as well as public political platforms. This is possible because of the specific capacities of these women to navigate dual worlds, a quality that male political leaders have not historically been adept at. Because they straddle the public-private divide, the Matri Sena is able to consolidate larger populations of women devotees into their fold by negotiating intimate devotional spaces, entering homes and remaining in touch with Matua devotees in their everyday contexts while also strategizing, planning, and undertaking public initiatives for the welfare of Matua women. They initiate incoming devotees through an ethic based on cooperation and connection among women. Their shared spaces become highly interactive sites where an army of holy women is consolidated by verbally propagating a religious and political consciousness. Such a sociable and personal form of politicizing women stands in contrast to formal, male-dominated political realms. The Matri Sena's emphasis on shared religiosity also in some ways downplays more political intentions, which then helps in securing the women's safe domain against possible external interferences by the male members.

While the Matri Sena bases its identity on differences with the male-dominated Mahashangha, the Mahashangha is not in explicit conflict with the women's wing. Rather, they support the Matri Sena and its ideologies. While this may seem contradictory, we argue that this is because their primary sectarian virtues also speak of gender equality. Not supporting the Matri Sena would imply an anti-Matua move. The focus on gender egalitarianism is thus an extension of the Matua identity. This extension of self-identity only intensifies Matua claims to a political nationhood spearheaded by the mother-figure, and embodied especially by the BJP's national imagination of the Bharat Mata (The Hindu India Motherland) (Menon 2010; Varshney 2016). Thus, absolutizing male and female domains and forming clear binaries of 'total power' and 'total powerlessness' shall not benefit our discussion on Matri Sena because the army of holy women assumes shifting roles in relation to other political actors within and outside the Matua community (see Sarkar 2001, p. 21).

In an interview with Sundari Thakur, the President of *Matri Sena*, she emphasized the specific unofficial, informal mode of the Sena's operation. According to her, the Matri Sena is a maternalistic umbrella under which Matua devotees address their day-to-day problems. The Matri Sena's centre is based in Thakurnagar, within the same Thakurbari compound in which the Mahashangha has its office [Figure 4]. The Matri Sena building was constructed as recently as 2021, where their followers now regularly meet, discuss, and resolve women's issues. These issues range from concerns regarding education, practices of forced marriage owing to destitution, domestic violence, and more centrally, the dilemmas around the citizenship rights of refugee Matua populations, as well as the further difficulties faced by the women in being triply marginalized as low-caste, migrant and gendered subjects.



**Figure 4.** The newly-constructed *Matri Sena* building in the Thakurnagar Thakurbari complex featuring the idol of Shanti Ma, wife of saint Harichand Thakur (Source: Photograph taken by authors, 2022).

Parbati Das—one of the founding members of the Sena—told us about how Matua devotees are now influenced, motivated and oriented towards roles outside of their familial sites as well. She said

“Matri Sena encourages women to come out of their homes and dedicate their lives to the service of the community’s welfare. The organization motivates women of all ages, and instils within them, *shakti* (literally meaning, power; also, a cognate for feminine power in the Hindu religious discourse). The Sena is generally committed to safeguarding (*rokkha*) the Matua masses through all their possible perils.”

The rhetoric of *rokkha* (protection) translates to defense-as-action for the *Matri Sena*. As ‘mothers’, they are committed to protecting families, and therefore, the larger Matua community. These ‘protective’ or ‘defense’ gestures of the mother gurus towards the people of the soil and nation constitute the major ‘actions’, which in the Matua context, are maternal and thus political, political and thus religious. The women gurus are thus enacting their Matua subjectivities, though indeed as truer subjects.

Das, in her conversations with us, noted that despite the organization’s lack of funds at present, the women gurus believe that they can enthuse followers simply through their strong words of commitment to the Matua cause. The gurus, thus, aim to influence women devotees verbally during weekly congregations called *shantishabhas* (peace congregations), which are held at the Thakurbari. These weekly meetings focus on small-scale philanthropic agendas such as the distribution of ration or warm clothes for the destitute masses to survive the winters [Figure 5].



**Figure 5.** Matri Sena President distributing clothes to Matua women in Basirhat in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 11 December 2022 (Source: Photograph taken from Matua Matri Sena Facebook page, 2023).<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the women gurus have specific ideological orientations which help them to perform their roles especially well. The domain of substantive political action therefore leads to a strong gendering of the overarching Matua politics both within and outside the home. Through the embodiment of the figure of the matriarch, of the family, community, and nation, the women take it upon themselves to actualize the gendered tenets of the Matua sacred texts.

More centrally, the Sena emphasizes intensely on the significance of education. They ensure women's education by providing them with tuition facilities, channelizing possible scholarships and distributing academic books. They also stress the importance of the cultivation of professional skills and the dignity of labor to orient and encourage women towards economic self-sufficiency. Additionally, more recently, they have started imparting self-defense training to women. Thus, the Sena not only focuses on issues which are apparently generic to women but also those that the Matua ideology generally identifies with.

The Matri Sena has also played a significant role in discouraging early marriage of women, which is otherwise a common phenomenon in the rural districts of Bengal (see Ghosh 2011). The organization is also known to have made quasi-legal interventions in matters of domestic violence. Reportedly, the Matri Sena intervenes in domestic matters when women, seeking resolution, approach gurus with concerns about familial qualms, as well as allegations against their husbands. The resolution of these delicate matters is often sought along religious lines, reiterating that a good Matua man is one who respects women. Therefore, disrupted families are rehabilitated informally through vocabularies borrowed from an ethical, religious commitment towards the Matua faith.

This religiously charged domain of substantive politics that stands in contrast to androcentric formal electoral politics which mostly remains aloof to matters of informality, marks the significance of the Matri Sena. These mothers act as real influencers by penetrating into the everyday lives of the Matuas, and in shaping the communitarian ethos by protecting its most fundamental unit—the family. As Hausner and Khandelwal note, the ideal of chastity corresponds to a form of femininity with a properly regulated expression of sexuality, imbued with status and morality, and supportive of marriage ideals (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006, p. 18). As chaste mothers with the ability to formulate a code of ethical familial conduct along religious lines, the gurus legitimize their exercise of political powers. Therefore, by foregrounding the ideal family, as is also performed by the overarching Matua religious ethic, the Sena's women gurus act as gendered agents in the propagation of their foundational religious principles.

The imagination of women's presence as 'mothers' has also however affected the general Matua political life. The mother-figure within the Matri Sena's religio-political constructions resonates with the larger national context and has deep implications for the politics of religious nationalism, in this case, Hindu nationalism. The vision of India as Bharat Mata (The Hindu India Motherland) has played a crucial role in constituting identities of ideal patriotic subjects in the Hindu nationalist discourse, and this gained renewed momentum since 2014, when the BJP formed the government. Since the days of freedom struggle against British colonization, the feminized protectress image of the Bharat Mata has featured as the bearer of national honor (Sarkar 1987; Bose 1999). Similarly, the women gurus of Matri Sena identify with the nationalist vision of both embodying and defending India's integrity; in cultivating themselves as the community's suitable 'mothers', and also protecting the motherland. Therefore, for them, any attack on the Indian territory, the motherland, directly translates as an attack on the sacred body of the mother (see Menon 2005).

However, the crucial significance of the Matri Sena's mode of protecting and even embodying the motherland is that it radically differs from the primarily upper-caste discourses of freedom struggle and nation-building. As Chatterjee (1989) notes, the male, upper-caste Indian nationalist project against the colonizers rested on an unequivocal public-private divide. The private domain of spirituality was imagined as being protected by the woman of the family, and became the repository of notions of sacred indigeneity, while the public life of Indians was constructed as secular, western and represented by political males (Chatterjee 1989, pp. 238–39). This distinction between the inner and outer worlds helped in the construction and preservation of a privatized 'Indian' identity. However, in the case of the Matri Sena, the public and private domains of social and political lives are radically

bridged. The mothers constitute their religious, caste and national ambitions by knitting their private worlds with public political consciousness.

A Matri Sena follower told us in an interview that during the pandemic-induced lockdown of 2020 and 2021, the Matri Sena undertook the responsibility of looking after devotees who were stranded at the Thakurbari campus after attending their annual festival, the *Barunimela*. During the lockdown, the Matri Sena also initiated online modes of participatory religious activities to address the spiritual discontentment among devotees as they were forbidden to participate in congregational devotional forms which are central to Matua religiosity. Even going beyond their own community, in 2022, the members of the Matri Sena observed the auspicious day of *Raksha Bandhan* in Thakurbari (a Hindu ceremony known for sisters tying amulets around the wrists of brothers, to symbolically protect [*raksha*] them from all evil) by tying the holy thread around the wrists of revered army men. The Matua women, clad in red-bordered, white sarees (typically worn by diligent married women), praised the army, ululated and prayed for their long lives such that they are able to defeat death (*mrityunjoyi*). It is also telling that while there is a Bengali counterpart of the same festival, the Matri Sena chose to celebrate the pan-Indian Hindu *Raksha Bandhan*. Instances such as this testify to their emerging national roles as protectress mother gurus, defending the protectors of the nation.

The Matri Sena enables the army of men, and also organize and consolidate themselves as militant mothers (as well as sisters and wives in the prototype of the proxy-mother). Their peculiar subjectivities as an army of holy women thus also lie in politically enabling their male counterparts to embody their being as the true sons of the soil who defend the territory. Summarily, the women gurus gather women devotees to influence them in furthering the cause of women, making them strong at home and beyond, as well as nurturing the community devotees, protecting patriotic sons and constructing an authentic national identity. Thus, the Sena's political interventions are played out on all levels: as mothers of the ideal family, the community and the nation at large. Therefore, alongside the existing influence of Vaishnavite notions of feminine vitality and subservient devotion, the newly formed Matri Sena's compelling roles as guardian-mothers are also slowly becoming akin to Shakta notions of feminine power (see [Kinsley 1988](#); [McDermott 2001](#); [McDaniel 2004](#)). The women gurus of the Sena deploy their religiously sanctioned feminine vitality to call upon the devotees and motivate them towards political action. Like the strand of political Shakta bhakti (Shakta devotion) where the devotees regard the goddess as a direct representative of the land (see [McDaniel 2004](#), pp. 180–87), the Sena's mother gurus evoke patriotism among their subjects as a form of devotion.

Furthermore, by cultivating a maternalistic ethic in uniting women beyond their immediate contexts, the Matri Sena finds resonances with an overarching Hindu nationalist project. In this light, one of our respondents stated

“The Matri Sena does not aim to serve only Matua women. It exists for all those mothers who continue to be subjected to the patriarchal norms of the society. In fact, Matuaism (Matua *mot*) is not an exclusive religion. Our guru, Sri Harichand Thakur, deemed the Matua faith as *sukshma* (refined) *sanatan dharma* (eternal truth of Hinduism). It is also our ethical responsibility however to eliminate all evils like caste, that have historically propagated untouchability and social degradation within the *sanatan dharma*. We cannot shy away from transforming our society. We have to be within the Hindu order and bring about social transformations from the inside, for both women and lower castes. We believe our mothers will be able to do that.”

This important deliberation indicates the attempts at Matua reintegration into the Hindu order. Having had a history of being subjected to caste-based oppression by upper-caste Hindus, a section of the Matua community has been against the emergent Hindu–Matua dialogue ([Biswas Thakur 1977](#); [Sarkar 2015](#)). However, by rendering a gendered angle to the caste history of Bengal, the Matri Sena complicates the role of the ‘mother’ in the propagation of caste, religious and national identities. Their argument that all

Hindu mothers are one and the same, has important implications. Although in the past too, the dissolution of caste boundaries has enabled women across caste-divisions to form alliances (such as the Maharashtrian militant women of the Shiv Sena) (Sen 2007, pp. 30–31), the Matri Sena's claim to a Hindu identity is novel. The mothers of the Sena simultaneously acknowledge their low-caste identity and emplace themselves within the broad Hindu spectrum. Not forgetting past conflicts with upper-caste Hindus, the Matua women identifying as Hindu mothers aim to however transform the Hindu society itself by eliminating caste-based discrimination.

In general, caste hierarchies are maintained by ritualizing female sexuality through endogamy. Women in the Hindu system of reproduction are mere receptacles and transmitters, never the carriers of lineage or caste identities, that are legitimized through patriarchal modes of intergenerational transmission (Chakravarti 2018, p. 30). Thus, while in the upper-caste Hindu order the woman is deemed merely as a child-bearer, the blood-line and rights of heredity resting with the father, the Matua emphasizes on the clear equality of both parents in blood-line propagation also enables women gurus to make a claim about salvaging all women and female sexuality in general. With the rhetoric of segregating caste identity as purely a function of patriarchy<sup>16</sup>, Matua women are able to build ties across caste divisions with other Hindu mothers. They emphasize the gendered notion of caste fluidity (since all women have shifting caste identities informed by patriarchy, which is once assigned at birth and then again in marriage) in imagining a common ground for all mothers.

Furthermore, the claims of Matua belongingness to the Hindu order as the *sukshma sanatan dharma* allow Matua followers to identify themselves with the ancient and prestigious Hindu past (Lorea 2020b, p. 261). Such belongings have critical political bearings on Matua women's larger aims to contribute to the ongoing citizenship rights movement.

One of our interlocutors said "Matuaism is a way of life, it is not a separate religion. Harichand Thakur is a reincarnation of the Hindu god of creation, Narayan. Many Matuas still believe that Matuaism is a distinct religion. But if we read our sacred texts, we come to know that we are a part of the *sanatan dharma*. We have historically fought against the social evils of untouchability without disowning Hinduism. We have thus tried to bring about a change, by demanding our rightful acknowledgement within the Hindu social order." Furthermore, she continued, "We worship Shanti Ma, wife of Harichand Thakur, as an avatar of the Hindu goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. Harichand Thakur, and his consort, Shanti Ma, are worshipped as the Hindu deity-consort, Narayan-Lakshmi."

We thus find that contemporary women gurus reconcile the historical disjunction between upper-caste Hindus and lower-caste Matuas, by strategically referring to notions of an originary religious unity between the Hindu–Matua followers. We argue that Matua women's imagination of a universal motherhood solidifies their claims to *sanatan dharma*. However, whether or not upper-caste women who make equal claims to *sanatan dharma* would consider the Matri Sena as colleagues, still remains a question, since the Sena is a relatively new organization and has not yet had the grounds to form alliances with other organizations.

However, historically speaking, the founding saints of the Matua sect were known to have rejected the elitist nationalist movement of the upper-caste Hindus led against the British colonizers in India (Mandal 2021; Pal 2021). The Matuas, rather, found confidence in the British authorities from whom they sought active help to uplift themselves (Mukherjee 2008, pp. 52–53). However, in the wake of a rise in Hindu majoritarian forces in contemporary India, there has been a considerable shift in Matua negotiations and identifications with Hinduism as *sanatan dharma*. In this development from being erstwhile anti-nationals (see Mukherjee 2008, p. 53) to Hindu national subjects, the Matua mothers become key players by reconstructing the ideal family, community and nation as typically Hindu units. Thus, by resolving earlier relationships of ambivalence with respect to upper-caste Hindu religiosity and in their renewed political allegiance to the Hindu social and nationalist order, the Matri Sena legitimizes its claims to Matua citizenship rights.

However, the Sena's current political presence also has to negotiate a space between the Hindu majoritarian national party and the secular claims of the regional TMC party. Since 2016, when the Indian government introduced the Citizenship Amendment Bill in order to make all non-Muslim refugees from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan eligible for citizenship, the Matua masses have organized rallies to actualize their dreams of Indian nationhood. After the Citizenship Act of 2019, which allowed persecuted religious minorities who arrived in India before the end of December 2014 to gain legal citizenship status, the then newly formed Matri Sena extensively motivated Matua women to join *pathsabhas* (roadblock demonstrations) for the realization of their citizenship rights. Their claim to authority has ever since been legitimized among Matuas through their specific role as mothers fighting for a national identity for the Matua refugee populations.

Thus, these women gurus place their gendered imperative in a religious nexus, dually informed by Matua religious foundations as well as contemporary Hindu idioms, in order to strategize and implement their political goals. At one level, as Matua mothers within the family and community, they straddle the public-private divide by extending their gender-egalitarian religious doctrines and highly feminized religious practices. This intracommunal positioning helps them usher as truer Matua subjects vis-à-vis their male counterparts. On another level, they negotiate through earlier ambivalences with Hinduism and come to identify themselves as an army of Hindu mothers of (Hindu) sons of the soil. This construction enables the mother gurus to validate their claims to citizenship rights for the refugee Matua families in the broader context of Hindu nationalist political forces in contemporary India. Thus, by bringing together elements of gender, caste and religion in their political deliberations, the Matri Sena is able to engage substantially as political determinants of Matua identity assertion.

Matua mothers are thus trying to establish Matuas as national subjects. Such a political enactment enables Dalit groups to form normative national identities (Guru 2016, p. 247). Since the mothers are both political and religious influencers, they demand a special kind of ethical attention, and the onus now lies with the nation-state to recognize Matuas as legal citizens.

For the Matua mothers, therefore, religion serves as the site for the articulation of politicized gender claims which uphold women participants as creative and strategizing entities. Through their gendered negotiations, marginalized Matua mothers assume a range of identities vis-à-vis various political actors. Therefore, the characterizations of the Sena's political claims do not rest only on their essential traits or cultural differences as Matua women, but also through innovative blurring and hybridizing with larger communitarian and national forums (see Saward 2014, p. 725). Repositioning multiple roles, these women gurus emerge as shape-shifters in creatively representing themselves, their community and the nation (see Saward 2014, p. 725).

## 5. Conclusions

This article has tried to highlight the particular contributions made by the Matua Matri Sena in defining the family, the Matua community and the Matua national aspirations through specific gendered religious renderings. The Sena works as militant mothers, consolidating, influencing and collectivizing as an army of holy women. Their roles as mothers enable them to navigate private, domestic spheres, as well as public, political life. They reinstate Matua religious ideological foundations that promote gender-levelling ethics to exercise their power both within and outside familial contexts. In actualizing the gender-egalitarian ethos of their founding gurus' injunctions, they appear as truer Matua subjects in relation to their male counterparts, who have hitherto operated separately in the private as religious gurus, and in the public as political leaders.

Furthermore, in their central and complex struggle for citizenship rights, the Matua women construct a novel maternal notion of politics to formulate specific national aspirations for their community. Despite having faced a history of Hindu caste-based oppression, these Matua women, amidst the contemporary political exigencies, come to identify them-

selves with the broader Hindu religious order. As ‘Hindu mothers’, the Matri Sena emplaces its community members as national subjects.

Through the deployment of a Hindu nationalist ethos, these women are able to constitute themselves as active subjects of their own community’s history (see [Guru 2016](#), p. 239). The framework of religious nationalism, therefore, acts as an avenue for Matua women’s self-realization, allowing them to be political actors and not only social participants (see [Guru 2016](#), p. 239). Such a construction validates their larger claims of citizenship, in the context of an ever-rising Hindu majoritarian force in Indian politics. Thus, Dalit groups such as the Matuas, who have been historically identified as anti-nationals because of their lack of prominence and participation in the elite, upper-caste freedom struggle against the British, emerge as new contributors to contemporary nationalist projects through their women gurus’ specific contributions as an army of holy mothers.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All interviews cited in this article were conducted in Bengali. We have used pseudonyms for all our interlocutors.
- <sup>2</sup> Sundari Thakur is the wife of a direct descendant of the founding saints. While Sundari heads the Matri Sena, her husband is the President of the All India Matua Mahashangha alongside being a Member of the Parliament from the Bongaon constituency in West Bengal, India.
- <sup>3</sup> Thakurnagar, the devotional hub of the Matuas, is located in the borderlands of the North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. It is also famously known as the ‘Mecca of Matuas’ ([Bagchi 2016](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> *Varna* refers to one’s social position in a hierarchical caste system, in which there are two categories of people: *savarna*, or one with caste, can have four divisions: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra; and *avarna*, or one without caste who are treated as untouchables (see [Chandra 1989](#), pp. 230–31).
- <sup>5</sup> The 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, also known as *Muktijuddho*, was a revolution by Bengali nationalist groups in Bangladesh against the West Pakistan military. Led by *muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters), the war was sparked by claims for self-determination and independence from the Pakistani military (see [Jamal 2008](#), pp. 5–7).
- <sup>6</sup> The National Congress Party played a major role in India’s independence struggle. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur allied with the Congress Party till 1964 and supported their refugee-rehabilitation schemes ([Lorea 2020a](#), p. 13).
- <sup>7</sup> Pramatha Ranjan Thakur resigned from the Congress Party because of their inaction against attacks on the Matua refugees in West Bengal in 1964. Consequently, Matua allegiance temporarily shifted to the Left, until when again Indira Gandhi, from the Congress Party, the then Prime Minister, ushered as the ‘savior’ of India ([Lorea 2020a](#), p. 14).
- <sup>8</sup> Late Kapil Krishna Thakur (1940–2014) was the elder son of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. Kapil’s younger brother and Pramatha’s younger son was Manjul Krishna Thakur. In contemporary times, the great Matua family is politically bifurcated. While Kapil’s immediate family aligns with the TMC, Manjul’s sons are members of the BJP.

- <sup>9</sup> Durga is a warrior goddess and her iconography highlights her martial skills. Mounted on a lion, Durga is seen in the midst of a war against the buffalo-demon, *Mahishasur*. She symbolizes the victory of good over evil and is identified with the principal aspect of the primordial Hindu mother-goddess, *Adi Shakti*.
- <sup>10</sup> These congregations are held at the *Matri Sena's* new building in Thakurnagar and are also oftentimes held at temporarily-built shamiana setups in districts across West Bengal.
- <sup>11</sup> A group of Matua writers however heavily criticize the description of Matuas as a Vaishnava sect (Mahant 2002, p. 25). Some mentions of Vaishnavism in Matua scriptures as well as later compositions accuse it of reducing the Chaitanya-led movement to ritualism and casteism (Lorea 2020a, p. 3).
- <sup>12</sup> *Dehatattva*, literally, 'the truth of the body', refers to esoteric Bengali religious theories which understand the body as a microcosm of universal principles (McDaniel 1989).
- <sup>13</sup> *Sati* refers to the practice of immolating the wife of a deceased man on his funeral pyre (Weinberger-Thomas 1999, pp. 182–85).
- <sup>14</sup> *Barunimela* is celebrated at the Thakurnagar Thakurbari in the Bengali month of *Chaitra* (March–April) and is marked by a ritual bath (*Barunisnan*) in a sacred pond which is believed to fulfil wishes and prayers (*kamana sagar*) (Lorea 2020a, p. 7). It is also celebrated as Harichand Thakur's birth anniversary.
- <sup>15</sup> To maintain respondents' anonymity, we have blurred facial images of potentially identifiable, living members of the community. However, we have retained the portrait of *Boro Ma* who is a well-known public leader and whose images are widely in circulation.
- <sup>16</sup> Many important works complicate the specific interaction between gender and caste in the Indian context (see Rao 2003; Rege 2006; Banerjee and Ghosh 2019).

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