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Beyond Devotional Egalitarianism: Matua Sangeet and the Socio-Cultural Reconfiguration of Faith, Caste, and Community in Bengal

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Abstract

The lower caste Chandals, mostly agriculturists, migrated to West Bengal and other parts of India since 1949, bringing their memories through the songs. Many of them stayed there in contemporary East Pakistan and retained the same cultural rhythm. These songs connected the community beyond international borders and different societal environments. This paper explores the unexplored tradition, culture, and protest against societal discrimination, implementing the songs written by the Chandal themselves. These attributed songs were not only songs, but they also preserve the history of togetherness. On the subject of representation, it appears to be unanimously acknowledged that a dominating race or religion cannot represent minority populations in any way. The patterns of cultural representation of disadvantaged people across the world begin with their folk culture. The evidence of mobilised voice against the long prevalent caste system in which they abandoned the superstitious god and goddesses, and rather started worshipping a human social reformer, Harichand Thakur. This was very striking for the traditional society, as a lower caste, an unconscious community developed a sense in all milieus.

Keywords: Matua Sangeet, Matuaism, Social and Cultural Revival, Political Consciousness, Migration

Introduction

Sangeet, or song, offers a miniature version of a society's customs and cultural diversity. The Indian subcontinent's songs have always been diverse in terms of geography, social experience, customs, etc. Hindustani, Classical, Ghazal, and Adhunik are some more general names that may be used to describe how the general public behaves in society. On the other hand, rural communities' geographical, economic, and social aspects are reflected in the rough form of folk tradition. The number of kinds could not be determined using their respective names; thus, the term folk was used to describe them all. Folk music is the unintentional musical expression of people's hobbies, personalities, and ethnic feelings (Miller, 1960). Similarly, Lloyd defines folk music as a song that has been so ingrained in the heritage of a community or nation that there is a sense of shared ownership, whether the composer is acknowledged or not (Lloyd, 1968). Ofofu defines folk music as any traditional song of hazy and undefined antiquity that has gained widespread popularity and approval (Ofofu, 1989).

However, the majority of the oral melodies from before Harichand are no longer available in any scriptures; in this

instance, Lloyd's definition applies to composer recognition. Novetzke notes that although government archives disregard these documents, they are nonetheless in existence. He finds that singers' notebooks are rarely discovered in libraries and institutions; when they are, they are often found in open stacks or haphazard piles at the local institutions and private collections, with varying degrees of care and no catalogue (Novetzke, 2015). However, some glances at the popularity of music and musical instruments prior to him are found in James Wise's ethnographic study *Notes on the Races, Castes, and Trades of Eastern Bengal*. It Mentions:

Singing is a favourite amusement, and a Chandal crew is rarely without some musical instrument with which to enliven the evening after the toils of the day (Wise, 2017).

The community's songs and musical ties have a long history, and Harichand Thakur utilized them as a key tool to promote societal beliefs and philosophy. The poetic writing of Chandals even draws on a well-known tale of Kanka and Leela that is described in the medieval Bengali literature Mymensing Geetika (Sen, 1958).

Matua Sangeet and Harichand Thakur

Bengali culture has a rich history that has supported local communities' way of life. These folk songs were frequently categorized into subcategories based on caste, although they were not restricted to the name of a society with many classes. Yes, songs are often attributed to everyone and are not exclusive to any particular group. However, whether writing a song for a large audience or in more general categories, individuality is important. These two distinct perspectives on individuals and communal goals are seen in the Matua Sangeet. The social reformers Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur, who belonged to the Chandal caste and are now part of the Namasudra community, are mostly credited with writing these songs.

In order to pursue higher social mobility and to preserve the salvific performance of their community music-making, singing, and dancing rite known as *matam-kirtan*, they set themselves off from the older and more prominent Bengali Vaishnava fold in the first half of the 19th century. Matua practice revolves around the repetition of powerful sounds, such as holy drums (*daṅka*), the syllables of sacred songs (*kirtan*), and mantras that induce trances (*haribol*). Because they eliminate the implicit presumption that beliefs and scriptures make up "real" religion, thinking with such communities of sound forces us to rethink religious groups and the methods by which we research them. Communities of sounds highlight the agentive roles of subaltern and frequently silenced community makers, such as listeners, dancers, ululating women, stateless musicians, peripatetic storytellers, and their participating publics, by provincializing the importance given to institutions, textual specialists, and elite priestly classes (Lorea C., 2024). In a broader sense, they encourage us to consider community as a means of listening; in this way, religious identity is largely determined by what we hear, the stories we are told, the sounds we are socialized to play, and the deeply rooted ways we move our bodies and adjust our emotions in accordance with the kinetoscopes and soundscapes that we inhabit.

In addition to its extensive popularity, the Matua community has achieved great success in achieving its aims and objectives. Nonetheless, a lot of people substituted "religion" for "community," and the argument is still ongoing (Biswas, 2008). But for millions of Bengali untouchables and oppressed people, Harichand Thakur's worldview and actions have established human dignity. In the field of education, it has caused the despised untouchables to stand atop a mountain of injustice. It has inspired them to develop a strong sense of self-control. The reformer was born in 1812 into a Vaishnav family that had been associated with Vaishnavism from the time of Chaitanya. Jashomanto Thakur, Harichand's father, was a Vaishnav devotee who was referred to by many as *bairagi*.

In 1872, Harichand gathered the disadvantaged lower castes and started a campaign against caste discrimination. Thakur visited the houses in the nearby villages of Raut Khamar, Narikelbari, Mallakadi, Ghritakandi, Machhkandi, Orakandi, Lakshmipur, Padmabila, Kumaria, and others while traveling by boat with his faithful followers. (Sarkar, 1987) His traveling followers played a variety of musical instruments and sang. He became much more familiar with the Chandal community's way of life as a result of his travels, and followers congregated along the riverbanks to see Thakur's community's amazing performances. They danced and sang the name of Hari as they made their way to the ill person's home. To assist the host family in planning the *kirtan* and

spiritual dance with musical accompaniment, the entire neighbourhood would provide food and other materials from nearby homes. Sharing food from the same plate and making kind gestures to one another were regular practices at these cheerful public gatherings, despite strong disapproval and criticism. By fostering an immediate cathartic environment, these social places were strengthening special collaboration in fostering camaraderie within the depressed class. The Chandals were able to celebrate life and overcome numerous social hurdles thanks to an active community life, and the community awareness was raised by the Chandals' widespread support for the movement's inception. Despite the movement's efforts to unite the exiles of the four-fold varna system, the consciousness was not confined to the community (Pandey, Harichand Thakur and the Chandals: Godhood and Socio-Religious Reforms in 19th Century Bengal, 2023). In this way, a significant portion of society was impacted by the movement. They were more conscious of social and economic problems. As a result, it was discovered that 4,600 Namashudras were paying taxes in 1901 and 5,432 Namashudras in 1911. There were 70 Namashudras classified as teachers and 499 as doctors in the 1911 census.

Matuism's neo-ideology brought people together under the crimson flag of Nishaan, which is encircled by white. arranged the gathering as a religious convocation using songs they had written. These songs were composed in the local dialect because the majority of the followers were illiterate, and they greatly aided in understanding the social problems arising in the name of religious rituals. Since social concerns have been a complicated topic since 1500 BC, one should be aware of how hard it is to educate an illiterate person. Following this protracted time, outcasts began to comprehend their rights and the concept of equality in the second half of the 19th century, which served as a crucial benchmark for the changes in society. Unconsciousness in earlier times was undoubtedly caused by illiteracy, which is why the relatively educated Matuas who wrote the theoretical volumes also used straightforward rhetorical language to convey the philosophy. These lyrics were considerably simpler to recall, and both the singer and the audience were deeply committed to and aware of social injustice when they performed these songs. By then, writing songs on current social issues had become a common method of inspiring people. The difficult circumstances of partition, migration, the Liberation War of 1971, and the ensuing stages of migration are observed in the latter period. The history of Namasudras and other outcasts was preserved via these songs, which were known as Matua Sangeet.

Matuas in Cultural Milieu

The crucial question in this societal context is, if Harichand was of Vaishnava descent, why did he create a new religion? Chaitanya's view of caste hierarchy is demonstrated by the Bhakti movement researchers' frequent use of the phrases reform, revolution, and opposition to the caste system. For this reason, the widely held belief that Vaishnavism is anti-caste is called into doubt. Although Vaishnavism, particularly Padavali and *naam-sankirtan*, had a significant impact on the composition of Matua Sangeet, this work does not address this issue. But the question arises: how did Harichand, a member of a Vaishnav family, come to be a key critic of Vaishnavism? He progressively came to understand the distinction between social and spiritual equality in order to respond to this. The idea that everyone is equal in God's eyes is a romanticized concept that does not actually advance social equality. As a result, the poetic and rhythmic resistance

started to oppose the uncertain equality following the departure from Vaishnavism. Although there are some similarities between the songs and the *naam-sankirtan* of Vaishnavism, they are counter works that oppose societal tyranny. Such as the song *Pranomati Shuksari* of Ashwini Kumar (Goswami, 1339 BS) was composed imitating the Vaishnava song *Prabhato Somoye*. Kavigaan, Hari Sangeet, folk theatre, Pala-gaan, which is *astok*, and modern Chetana Sangeet; song of consciousness, these were some forms of Matua Sangeet. Through its theological interpretation of Vedanta on the one hand, and its cultural representation through rituals, music, and literature on the other, Matua religion destabilizes Sanskritization in all these forms. With an emphasis on family welfare and the family at its core, it produces an indigenous kind of religious complexity (Sarkar, 1987).

These songs demonstrate a distinct process of separation that calls for the elimination of Brahminic cultural customs and the introduction of a glossy practice that is easier for the oppressed to uphold. One example of their historical tradition that is distinct from other Brahminic rites is Chetana Sangeet, or mindful music. Garshi, Bastu, and Hanchra all had their own distinctive practices. While the name Bastu shares certain similarities with Brahminic customs, its performance technique differs. They assign the character of the surrounding premises using very basic terms rather than the Vedic or any other mantras. Even now, Namasudras continue to participate in the ethnic custom of *garshi*, a celebration that starts on the final night of Ashwin and lasts until the morning of Kartik, the first day of the next month. While Hanchra puja is similar to Maa Sheetala puja, it differs from other Brahminic ceremonies. The lyrics of these songs for the associated festival were varied and focused on nature, and these customs were evolving with a feeling of social consciousness. The fact that girls used to sing the songs attributed to Hanchra Thakur, the deity of wounds, further demonstrates how simple these songs are. It suggests that songs were written for the lowest members by age, as well as for the awareness of illiterate adults. The community effectively carried out an organized mobilization process among all ages through the use of rhetorical lines.

Matua sangeets that were specifically credited to Harichand Thakur distinguish between equality in society and devotion. The Bhakti saints rhetorically declare that each devotee is equal in God's eyes and emphasize individual devotion to God. However, these songs propagated the anti-caste narrative of the Bhakti saints, which showed that Vaishnavas and Brahmins supported each other in their quest for *varnasrama*. The concept of Nirguna practice emerged within the community as a result of the debate over social hierarchy and equality. This Nirguna practice is fundamentally unique since both the *saguna* and the Nirguna are part of Hinduism.

In the Bhakti movements, the Nirguna tradition placed a strong focus on individual formless gods and spiritual reverence devoid of idolatry. Nonetheless, Matuas and the Ravidassia group in Northern India have parallels in their devotional practices. Because they thought that both types of Bhaktis had their origins in Brahminic philosophy, the Matuas never thought of a spiritual or superstitious form as their devoted deity. In the second part of the nineteenth century, the Matuas' high level of consciousness inspired them to reconsider their long-held conviction in Brahminic devotion. Ashwini Kumar Goswami, a modern poet and composer, described Harichand as destroying the Namasudras' subconscious (Goswami, 1339 BS). Therefore, the social

reformer Harichand Thakur became their worshipful god, a human despite any other gods they practised.

Matuas organized a number of dol groupings, each of which had a *dolopoti*, or leader. Dolopoti and his/her members attended the weekly Harisabha that was held in their respective villages on Wednesdays. The Sabha began with the song Vandana, which is credited to Harichand Thakur. The song Hari Sangeet, which is exclusive to Matuas, came next. These religious events sought to improve communication by offering a platform for talking about the oppressive landlords and indigo growers, in addition to music and singing. The Matuabaad ceremonies and the symbols used to perform them are two noteworthy aspects. Matam, Dhol, Dangkha, Kasar or Kashi, Nishan, Festoon, and garlands made of split coconut shells are among the religious rituals, musical instruments, and other essential elements found in Matuabaad. In this belief system, each of them has a unique symbolic significance. The followers started crying as they thought of Harichand's tireless efforts to free the vast number of oppressed people from long-standing discrimination; this is how Harichand came to be known as the saviour of the underprivileged.

Tarak Chandra Sarkar was a famous person in Kavigaan, a type of music that falls under numerous Matua sangeet categories. Sarkar used the opportunity to commend Harichand during a conversation with two skilled folk singers. These oppressed people's cultural customs were already influenced by Brahminism. Most of the people he preached to, even in Bengal's Gaud area, had become Vaishnavites. Building on Vaishnavism, the new untouchable-led sect was continuing the work of the past, which had already condemned orthodox Brahmin priests for their personalist monistic view of God, which was similar to the Islamic view of God, and tended to convert caste Hindus, Muslims, and untouchables to a reformed Hinduism. Through a discussion of the scriptures, Tarak was able to convince them that Rama and Krishna were the same, that Krishna had appeared (reborn) as Gauranga Chaitanya to save sinners, giving everyone, including untouchables, the name Hari, and that Gauranga had reappeared as Harichand Thakur in Orakandi (Walker, 1999).

The narratives vary in the historical specifics of Dick Sahib's summoning. According to Sarkar, the local Nayeab, a powerful person who is often from higher Hindu castes in Bengali villages and in this instance appears to be antagonistic to the Matuas, complained about the Matua songs and dances, which triggered the journey to Jonasur (Sarkar, 1987). In contrast, Manoranjan Byapari states in his biography of Harichand Biswas that Harichand took the initiative to go in order to protest the tyranny of the Nayeab (Byapari & Mukherjee, 2018). According to Sudhir Rajan Halder's shorter book, Harichand went to the indigo planter's home at Jonasur, close to Gopalgunj, and begged him to stop oppressing the farmers. The wildness of the "dance" and the significance it adds to the voyage itself are what are consistent throughout these many stories. The protest of Nayeab might be a result of cultural assimilation and mobilization of Matuas beyond the distance, as Lorea discussed the cultural bridge through the song between Matuas of the central land and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Lorea, 2018).

Migration and Political Mobilization

In the cultural memory of the Matua (Namasudra) group, Matua Sangeet on migration has a significant position. The emotional, social, and historical anguish connected to

Partition (1947), the establishment of East Pakistan, the Liberation War of 1971, and the ensuing waves of forced migration to West Bengal and other regions of India are all captured in these songs, in addition to the physical relocation. Because there were no documented histories, Matua Sangeet developed into a living archive that told the story of the community's hardships, resiliency, and continuity. Matua songs with a migration subject convey sorrow, loss, and nostalgia on one level. The villages of Faridpur, Khulna, Barisal, Gopalganj, and Orakandi, the homeland, are frequently mentioned as places of recollection, fields, rivers, and community life. The songs bemoan the dissolution of family ties, being cut off from one's original homeland, and the unpredictability of life as a refugee. Strong metaphors of uprooting include images of rivers crossed, vessels full of families, and abandoned courtyards.

These songs express caste-specific vulnerability during migration on a deeper level. Even after crossing borders, Matuas, an already marginalized community, continued to experience several forms of oppression, including social exclusion, economic hardship, and religious instability. Matua Sangeet illustrates how ancient hierarchies were perpetuated in refugee camps, colonies, and resettlement areas, pushing Namasudras to the periphery once more. Therefore, migration is depicted as a continuation of struggle under new political conditions rather than as freedom on its own. Importantly, Harichand Thakur's theory is never uprooted from migration in Matua Sangeet. Songs show migration as a social struggle rather than an individual failing, invoking him as a moral compass and defender throughout dislocation. These songs' commemoration of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur preserved communal solidarity in strange places, turning faith into a means of social organization and emotional survival.

Additionally, Matua Sangeet served as a protest and adaptation tool. The songs promoted self-respect, togetherness, and labour dignity in new settlements while also lamenting the loss of the country. They described the process of creating new lives via physical labour, agriculture, and teamwork, transforming adversity into determination. Migration songs, therefore, served as a bridge between the past and present, connecting desires for justice and recognition in post-migration settings with recollections of tyranny in East Bengal. The allegorical perspective on migration so transcends emotional nostalgia. It is a subaltern account of forced migration, caste-based marginalization, and tenacity. These songs maintained historical awareness, bolstered collective identity, and made sure that the experience of migration remained essential to the Matua story of struggle, survival, and self-assertion through straightforward lyrics and group performance.

In the political arena, Matua Sangeet played a crucial role in the transformation of the Matua community from a socially marginalized caste group to a self-aware and politically active one. These songs served as a mass medium that fostered political consciousness, communal identity, and resistance against structural oppression among primarily illiterate communities, far from being limited to the realm of devotion or ritual. The conversion of ideology into palatable cultural forms was at the heart of Matua's political mobilization. Simple, repetitious, and emotionally stirring lyrics included the philosophical concepts of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, such as equality, dignity of labour, rejection of the caste system, and self-respect. Without the need for formal schooling, listeners internalized political connotations via song. Matua Sangeet developed into a

collective pedagogy that taught the masses about injustice, rights, and social power through village meetings, Harisabhas, and traveling performances.

Additionally, Matua Sangeet functioned as a counter-discourse against aristocratic and Brahminical myths. These songs affirmed a different political imagination based on subaltern reality by rejecting Sanskritic language, priestly mediation, and Vedic ritualism. It was a daring political move in and of itself to exalt Harichand Thakur as a human social reformer rather than a legendary divinity. It represented the shift in power from upper-caste dominance and heavenly abstraction to actual human struggle and communal leadership. On the other hand, these songs increasingly addressed material realities and collective complaints during colonial and postwar times. Performative traditions like Kavigaan and Hari Sangeet contain references to exploitation by landowners, indigo growers, local Nayebs, and state authorities (Sarkar, 1987). These performances gave the downtrodden a public forum to express their disapproval, humiliate their oppressors, and foster unity among themselves. Thus, music functioned as a kind of non-written political communication that got beyond elite dominance and institutional control.

Political mobilization was further reinforced by Matua Sangeet's performative structure. In order to create the conditions for real political development, through the lyrics and music, Thakur and his supporters liberated the Chandals' minds and spirits by rebuilding their society and religion (Ambrdkar, 2014). Cultural events were turned into areas of communal visibility and solidarity through group singing, rhythmic clapping, dancing, and the employment of symbols like the *nishan* (white flag with red border). Participation became a political act in and of itself, strengthening the feeling of being a part of a greater movement as opposed to a distinct caste identity. Political awareness was maintained and passed down through the generations thanks to these frequent performances. Gradually, sangeets performed a revitalized mobilizing role in the backdrop of migration and refugee relocation. Songs strengthened calls for land rights, citizenship, and social recognition while fostering togetherness in new settlements by drawing on shared histories of injustice and displacement. The Matua community's involvement in official politics, including discussions with colonial authorities and then with democratic institutions in independent India, was eventually made possible by this cultural mobilization. Thus, the inference says, Matua Sangeet essentially served as a cultural infrastructure for political mobilization. It transformed communal memory into political action, faith into resistance, and passion into organization. The Matua movement demonstrated how folk culture can become a potent catalyst for subaltern political awakening by integrating politics into song, ensuring that mobilization remained inclusive, ongoing, and deeply ingrained in daily life.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that traditional Matua Sangeet is not merely a cultural or devotional expression but a comprehensive socio-cultural force that shaped identity, consciousness, and collective action among the Matua (Namasudra) community. Emerging from the lived realities of caste oppression, migration, and exclusion, these songs functioned as a dynamic archive through which history, memory, protest, and aspiration were preserved and transmitted across generations. In the absence of written

records and institutional representation, Matua Sangeet became the most effective medium for articulating subaltern experience. The analysis reveals that Harichand Thakur's intervention marked a critical departure from the limitations of Bhakti's devotional egalitarianism by foregrounding social equality and human dignity. Through simple, accessible, and emotionally resonant lyrics, Matua Sangeet translated complex philosophical and political ideas into a collective pedagogy that empowered an otherwise marginalised and largely illiterate population. By rejecting Brahminical ritualism, Sanskritization, and mythological authority, these songs established an alternative cultural and ethical framework centred on labour, family, community solidarity, and self-respect. Furthermore, Matua Sangeet played a crucial role in navigating historical ruptures such as Partition, forced migration, and refugee resettlement. Migration-themed songs documented trauma, loss, and nostalgia while simultaneously fostering resilience and unity in unfamiliar socio-political landscapes. In this context, music acted as a bridge between past and present, transforming displacement into a shared narrative of survival and continuity.

Equally significant is the role of Matua Sangeet in political mobilisation. Through collective performance, symbolism, and participatory rituals, songs converted faith into resistance and emotion into organisation. They created public spaces for dissent against landlords, colonial authorities, and caste elites, thereby laying the cultural foundation for later engagement with formal political processes. Participation in singing itself became an act of political assertion, reinforcing a sense of collective identity beyond caste subordination. Eventually, Matua Sangeet represents a powerful example of how folk culture can function as a site of resistance, reform, and social transformation. It challenges dominant historical narratives by foregrounding subaltern voices and demonstrates that cultural practices are not peripheral but central to understanding movements for dignity, equality, and justice. The socio-cultural legacy of Matua Sangeet thus remains indispensable for comprehending the broader history of anti-caste consciousness and popular mobilisation in Bengal.

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