



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 4; Issue 1; 2026; Page No. 113-117

Received: 06-10-2025
Accepted: 12-12-2025
Published: 27-01-2026

Education, Dignity and Social Mobility: The Matua Community in West Bengal

Partha Protim Chowdhury

Research Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kalyani, Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19549639>

Corresponding Author: Partha Protim Chowdhury

Abstract

The Matua community holds a significant place in the social history of Bengal because its religious awakening, caste protest, refugee experience, and educational aspirations evolved in a deeply interconnected manner. Emerging in nineteenth century eastern Bengal under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and receiving more organized institutional direction through Guruchand Thakur, the Matua movement viewed education not merely as literacy but as a practical instrument for dignity, self-respect, and collective social advancement. After Partition, large sections of Matua Namasudra families migrated to West Bengal, particularly to Nadia and North 24 Parganas, where displacement, poverty, caste-based stigma, and documentary insecurity significantly influenced educational opportunities and outcomes. This article examines the educational significance of the Matua community in West Bengal through a historical and analytical reading of community histories, official educational records, census-based evidence, and recent studies on gender and higher education. It argues that Matua educational culture has shown notable resilience because community memory continues to uphold schooling as an important path toward social emancipation and collective progress. At the same time, this promise remains only partially fulfilled, as rural inequality, the challenges faced by first generation learners, gendered barriers, and uneven access to institutions continue to restrict sustained educational mobility. The article concludes that education policy in West Bengal must move beyond symbolic recognition and instead prioritize school retention, transition support, women's higher education, scholarships, mentoring, and stronger community linked public institutions.

Keywords: Matua Community, West Bengal, Education, Namasudra, Guruchand Thakur, Social Mobility

1. Introduction

The educational history of the Matua community occupies a significant place in any serious discussion of social mobility in modern Bengal. The Matua movement arose in nineteenth-century eastern Bengal among predominantly Namasudra populations who were subjected to deep caste-based discrimination and social marginalization. Under the leadership of Harichand Thakur, the movement expressed a devotional and ethical critique of caste inequality. Later, under Guruchand Thakur, it assumed a more organized reformist character by connecting dignity, collective mobilization, literacy, and participation in public life ^[1, 4, 5]. In this context, education was not regarded merely as a marker of social refinement; rather, it was understood as an essential means of emancipation ^[1, 4, 5].

This point assumes particular significance in the context of West Bengal. A substantial part of the existing literature on the Matua community has focused on questions of identity politics, citizenship, and refugeehood. Although these concerns are important, such a focus can overshadow the longer history and ethical foundations of the community's engagement with education. For historically marginalized groups, education was never limited to the acquisition of formal qualifications. Rather, it served as a means of resisting social humiliation, negotiating recognition within state structures, accessing emerging opportunities for livelihood, and reshaping the aspirations of both the family and the wider community ^[1, 2, 5].

The article argues that the educational history of the Matua community in West Bengal developed through two closely

related phases. The first phase emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Guruchand Thakur and the broader Matua movement actively promoted literacy, the establishment of schools, and social awakening. The second phase began after the disruptions of Partition and the subsequent migration from East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, which reshaped both the geographical distribution of the community and the material conditions of education in West Bengal^[1, 2]. During this later period, aspirations for education remained strong, yet their realization was repeatedly constrained by poverty, insecure access to land, informal patterns of settlement, inadequate infrastructure, and the disadvantages commonly experienced by first generation learners.

The article draws on documentary and interpretive analysis of scholarly literature, official census publications, recent school policy documents, and studies examining Matua women and higher education^[1-10]. Since current large-scale educational datasets do not identify the Matua community as a separate category, the analysis brings together community-specific scholarship with broader district-level and Scheduled Caste indicators from regions where the Matua population is concentrated. The purpose is not to make claims of statistical conclusiveness, but to present a historically grounded and policy-relevant interpretation of the changing educational position of the Matua community in West Bengal.

2. Education in Matua thought: dignity, reform and collective uplift

Within the Matua tradition, education came to hold a distinctive social significance because the movement emerged in response to caste-based exclusion. Harichand Thakur questioned ritual hierarchies and affirmed the dignity and humanity of oppressed communities. Building on this foundation, Guruchand Thakur transformed this moral critique into a broader social programme. Studies of the movement have shown that he promoted school education, community organization, and social reform as practical means of social advancement^[1, 4, 5]. In historical memory, Guruchand Thakur is remembered not only as a religious leader but also as an educational reformer who understood that structural humiliation could not be addressed through spiritual consolation alone.

This educational vision was practical and community oriented. It did not treat learning as the private achievement of a small number of exceptional individuals; rather, it understood education as a collective necessity for a community historically excluded from equal access to social institutions. In this context, the stress on schooling among the Namasudra and Matua populations carried clear political significance. Literacy enabled ordinary people to engage more effectively with law, administration, and markets, reduced dependence on dominant caste groups, and expanded occupational opportunities as well as social aspirations^[3, 4, 5]. Historical scholarship on Namasudra educational development likewise shows that education was closely connected with a broader struggle for dignity, equality, and social recognition, rather than with individual mobility alone^[3, 4].

A further significant aspect of Matua educational thought lies in its relevance to gender. Subsequent scholarship on

Matua women indicates that the tradition articulated a normative understanding of women's dignity and collective participation, although its actual social practice was not always consistent with these ideals^[9, 10]. This internal discourse is important because it provided a moral basis for challenging the exclusion of women from education as contrary to the community's own emancipatory principles. In this way, Matua thought presented not only a critique of caste hierarchy but also a broader framework for social reform.

The educational significance of the movement also lies in its continuity over time. Even amid shifts in political conditions, migration experiences, and forms of community organization, the idea that education is closely linked to dignity and self-respect has remained deeply embedded in Matua public culture. This enduring historical consciousness helps explain why educational aspiration continues to be strong even in contexts where actual outcomes remain limited. For this reason, the educational history of the Matua community should not be interpreted through a deficit perspective, but rather through the ongoing tension between aspiration and structural constraint.

3. Partition, displacement and the relocation of educational aspiration to West Bengal

Partition significantly reshaped the educational trajectory of the Matua community. Originating in eastern Bengal, the community experienced profound disruption as large numbers of Namasudra Matua families migrated to India in successive phases. Studies on displacement and the politics of Bengal indicate that many of these families resettled in borderland regions and refugee dominated areas of West Bengal, particularly in Nadia and North 24 Parganas^[1, 2]. The transition from homeland to camps, colonies, and insecure settlements weakened the social and material conditions necessary for stable access to education.

For displaced families, education often had to be pursued alongside the urgent demands of rehabilitation. Housing insecurity, poorly paid employment, difficulties in obtaining legal documentation, and limited access to reliable public services frequently disrupted regular school attendance. In this context, a new tension emerged in the educational history of the Matua community. Although education continued to hold strong moral and social significance, the conditions necessary for sustained educational continuity became increasingly uncertain. Many parents valued schooling deeply, yet they lacked the land, income, transportation, and institutional support required to ensure their children's long term educational advancement^[1, 2, 5].

The refugee experience should not be understood merely as a short-term disruption. It produced long term effects on settlement patterns, occupational distribution, and access to education. Thakurnagar and its surrounding areas emerged as significant centres of Matua organization and collective memory, yet the wider process of resettlement also led to the concentration of refugee communities in economically fragile regions^[2, 5, 8]. Over time, these locations were marked by uneven access to quality schooling, private coaching, digital facilities, and institutions of higher education. In this way, the educational impact of migration was shaped not only by social disadvantage but also by spatial inequality.

West Bengal presents a particularly important case because displacement did not dissolve community identity; instead, it reconfigured it in new historical and social settings. Education remained a powerful medium of hope, aspiration, and social mobility, but it now operated within the realities of refugee life shaped by insecure citizenship, caste-based marginalization, and class vulnerability. This layered historical experience helps explain why the present educational condition of the community cannot be interpreted only through contemporary enrolment statistics. Rather, it must be understood in relation to collective memory, patterns of migration, and the still incomplete process of social rehabilitation.

4. Contemporary educational profile in West Bengal: progress with continuing inequality

Official educational statistics in the present period do not identify the Matua community as a separate category, which makes direct assessment difficult. Nevertheless, district-level and caste-based indicators offer an important basis for understanding their likely educational position. Nadia, a district closely associated with Matua settlement, reported an overall literacy rate of 74.97% in Census 2011. The district handbook further indicates that literacy among Scheduled Castes was lower in rural areas than in urban areas, highlighting the combined influence of caste and location on educational outcomes ^[6]. This pattern is especially significant because many Matua households continue to live in rural and semi-urban settings, where educational disadvantage is often shaped by peripheral social and geographical conditions.

Earlier scholarship on Namasudra educational development also documents significant long-term progress. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, literacy levels among Namasudras in West Bengal had improved considerably, indicating that the community's commitment to education was both genuine and sustained ^[3]. This serves as an important correction to stereotypes that associate social marginalization with a lack of educational interest. The central issue in Matua education, therefore, is not an absence of aspiration, but the unequal conversion of that aspiration into durable educational mobility ^[3].

Recent school policy documents indicate that this point of transition is especially vulnerable. The Project Approval Board minutes for Samagra Shiksha in West Bengal for 2025–26 reported that the state's transition rate from secondary to senior secondary education was 64.2%, lower than the national average of 71.5%, and recommended greater attention to the factors influencing student progression ^[7]. This gap in transition is particularly significant for historically marginalized communities, as the period after Grade 10 is often when continued schooling comes into tension with wage labour, household responsibilities, early marriage, constraints on mobility, and the direct and indirect costs of education.

From a Matua perspective, the central concern extends beyond initial access to primary education and includes the ability of learners to continue successfully into secondary and post-secondary levels. Many first-generation learners are able to enter school, but their transition to higher secondary education, college, and professional courses is often marked by considerable difficulty. In households

where educational capital is limited, students frequently do not receive adequate academic guidance, timely information about scholarships, digital assistance, or sustained mentoring. Under such conditions, even small interruptions in educational progression may gradually lead to dropout or to a decline in educational aspirations and attainment.

Educational exclusion should therefore be understood in a broader sense. It refers not only to non-enrolment, but also to weak educational progression, unequal quality of learning, restricted subject options, and the limited capacity of schooling to produce lasting social and economic opportunities. This wider perspective closely reflects the historical Matua view of education as a means of dignity, self-respect, and empowerment, rather than simply as attendance in a classroom.

5. Women, higher education and first-generation mobility

Gender most clearly exposes the constraints on educational mobility within the community. Although the normative framework of Matua reform contained important elements that affirmed women's dignity and participation, and subsequent studies of Matua social thought have shown that women were never wholly absent from the movement's moral and social vision ^[9, 10], present-day evidence indicates that Matua women still face distinct obstacles in progressing from school education to higher education.

A recent study on Matua women students in North 24 Parganas identified several major barriers to access and persistence in higher education, including financial hardship, family responsibilities and expectations, transportation difficulties, limited awareness of government support schemes, and experiences of institutional discrimination ^[10]. Although these challenges are not exclusive to the Matua community, their combined impact becomes more pronounced in contexts where caste disadvantage, rural location, and first-generation learner status intersect. As a result, educational aspirations may be present within families, but the likelihood of successful completion often becomes uncertain when financial pressures and social vulnerabilities intensify ^[10].

Women's higher education serves as a crucial indicator of the depth and substance of social change within a community, as it reveals whether modernization has progressed beyond public discourse into lived reality. When girls are able to access schooling but are unable to advance to college or professional education, the broader goals of educational reform remain incomplete. The significance of women's education extends far beyond individual attainment, as it influences family health practices, educational values within the household, age at marriage, patterns of employment, and the aspirations cultivated for the next generation. From this perspective, the education of Matua women should not be treated as a peripheral dimension of the wider educational question. Rather, it occupies a central place in determining the future social mobility and collective advancement of the Matua community.

The category of first-generation learners is equally significant. A considerable number of Matua students are still the first members of their families to navigate board examinations, college admissions, digital application

processes, scholarship portals, and university procedures. In many cases, these students bear the responsibility of managing their educational progression largely on their own. In the absence of strong local mentoring and sustained institutional support, formal inclusion may obscure deeper and more persistent forms of disadvantage. Educational policy, therefore, must acknowledge that equality of access does not automatically ensure equality in the educational journey.

6. Institutional recognition, policy response and future directions

A significant development in West Bengal has been the establishment of Harichand Guruchand University under the Harichand Guruchand University Act, 2018. The university is situated at Thakurnagar, Gaighata, in North 24 Parganas, as noted on the official institutional website [8, 11]. The naming of the university after Harichand and Guruchand Thakur is of considerable symbolic importance, as it affirms the rightful place of the community's intellectual, social, and reformist legacy within the broader framework of higher education in the state [8, 11].

However, symbolic recognition should not be interpreted as sufficient educational transformation. A university may stand as an important public symbol of dignity and collective aspiration, but meaningful social change depends on the development of a comprehensive educational continuum. This includes early childhood support, quality neighbourhood schooling, sustained participation at the secondary level, safe transportation, scholarships, counselling services, digital access, bridge courses, and clear pathways to higher education and employment. In the absence of such an enabling ecosystem, students from marginalized communities may gain entry into institutions but still remain inadequately supported in their educational journey (add citation here).

In Matua-concentrated areas of West Bengal, several policy priorities require careful attention. One of the most urgent concerns is the transition from secondary to higher secondary education, a stage at which the risk of dropout becomes more pronounced [7]. Equally important is the need to support girls and young women through targeted financial assistance, mentoring mechanisms, access to hostels, and more effective dissemination of scholarship-related information [10]. Institutions of higher education located in Matua-majority regions should also adopt stronger measures to assist first-generation learners, particularly through orientation programmes, remedial teaching, and structured student advisory support. At the same time, educational planning must engage more seriously with community memory and local leadership rather than interpreting educational disadvantage as a reflection of weak interest or low aspiration. Historical evidence suggests quite the opposite: the pursuit of education has long been a central and enduring feature of Matua social life [1, 4, 5].

For Matua-concentrated areas of West Bengal, several policy priorities require sustained attention. There is a pressing need for more disaggregated research on the educational condition of the Matua community. Existing official datasets seldom identify the community separately, which limits any precise assessment of learning outcomes, participation in higher education, digital disparities, and

access to scholarships. Future research should therefore integrate district-level statistics, institutional records, and qualitative fieldwork in Matua settlements in order to develop a stronger evidence base for policy formulation and informed public discussion.

7. Conclusion

The Matua community's engagement with education in West Bengal may be understood as a long historical process shaped by aspiration as well as structural limitation. From the reformist initiatives associated with Guruchand Thakur to the hardships of refugee rehabilitation in the post Partition period, education has been viewed as a vital means of securing dignity, citizenship, and collective social advancement [1, 2, 4, 5]. This historical commitment continues in the present. It is reflected in the social respect attached to schooling, the persistent pursuit of upward mobility, and the enduring symbolic significance of institutions linked to community reformers [1, 2, 4, 5].

At the same time, this historical trajectory also explains why educational progress has remained uneven. Displacement, caste-based exclusion, rural disadvantage, weak transition rates, gender related barriers, and the burdens experienced by first generation learners continue to influence educational outcomes [6, 7, 10]. For the Matua community today, the central question is not whether education is valued, but how the social and institutional conditions necessary for sustained educational continuity can be strengthened. The community's own history does not support the view that marginalized groups lack educational aspiration. Rather, it demonstrates that aspiration becomes effective and enduring only when supported by institutions, adequate resources, and public recognition.

For these reasons, the educational question of the Matua community deserves a central place in discussions of equity in West Bengal. It brings into focus the interconnected issues of caste, refugee experience, public education, women's advancement, and the democratic ideal of social justice. Examining the educational life of the Matua community does not mean studying a marginal social group in isolation. Rather, it offers an important lens through which to understand how education has functioned as a means of asserting human dignity in modern Bengal.

8. References

1. Lorea CE. Religion, caste, and displacement: the Matua community. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History. 2020 Feb 28.
2. Chatterjee SS. Dalit Namasudras in colonial and post-colonial period: culture and politics in Bengal. NSOU Journal of Social Sciences. 2022;5:109-127.
3. Biswas AK. Status of educational development of the Namasudras in West Bengal: problems and prospects. International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews. 2017;4(2):172-176.
4. Biswas P. Historical development of the education of the Namasudras. Journal of Advanced Scholarly Research in Allied Education. 2017;13(2):267-272.
5. Lahiri A. Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal: sociological study of religious organisation [doctoral dissertation]. Darjeeling: University of North Bengal; c2020.

6. Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal. Census of India 2011: District Census Handbook, Nadia. Kolkata: Government of India; c2015.
7. Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Education, Government of India. Project Approval Board minutes, Samagra Shiksha, West Bengal, 2025-26. New Delhi: Government of India; c2025.
8. Government of West Bengal. The Harichand Guruchand University Act, 2018. Kolkata: Government of West Bengal; c2019.
9. Halder K. Matua women: understanding their position in Bengal (1990-2011). *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*. 2019;7(2):1516-1524.
10. Biswas P. Barriers to higher education: a study on the challenges faced by Matua women students in North 24 Parganas. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology*. 2025;5(8):40-47.
11. Harichand Guruchand University. Official website. Thakurnagar, Gaighata, North 24 Parganas: Harichand Guruchand University; c2026.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. This license permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.