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## **Matua Religion: Anti-Brahmanical and a Distinct Faith**

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### **Abstract:**

Although the number of religions and religious followers has noticeably increased in the world recently, no one can honestly claim that peace prevails everywhere because of them. Ideally, the situation should have been different. Thus, it can easily be said that while there has been a quantitative change in the number of religions and believers, the qualitative change has been relatively minimal or even absent. However, just as every action has a reaction, protests and resistance against the falsehood, inequality, and inhumanity of various religions have also emerged. However, due to a lack of state support, these movements often fade away; their unique ideologies and identities are destroyed or distorted.

**Keywords: Religion, Sanatan, Matua, Brahmanism, Distinct.**

People who do not believe in religion are very uncommon in the world. Religion encompasses beliefs, practices, and rituals that nurture spiritual strength or enhance material well-being. It exists to meet human needs and interests and can also support the goals of governments. Thus, the world-renowned political philosopher Karl Marx famously stated: "Religion is the opium of the masses." It operates under the dictates of capitalist and state hegemony. Yet, in the Indian subcontinent, where religious traditions dominate lifestyles, out of 1.4 billion people, over 1.15 billion adhere to Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism), making it the world's third largest religion.

Sanatana signifies the eternal, the absolute truth. Just as the five primordial elements—*kshiti* (earth), *ap* (water), *tej* (sun/fire), *marut* (air), and *vyom* (sky/space)—have existed since the beginning, persist today, and will endure eternally, so too does *Sanatana Dharma* claim to embody an everlasting truth for humanity. This tradition upholds the four *ashramas* (stages of life)—*Brahmacharya* (celibate studenthood), *Grihastha* (householder life), *Vanaprastha* (retirement), and *Sannyasa* (renunciation).

However, distortions emerged when *Sanatana* evolved into *Hinduism* under Aryan influence, particularly with the imposition of the fourfold *varna* system—*Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. The *Manusmriti* (31<sup>st</sup> verse) asserts that the Supreme Being created Brahmins from His mouth, Kshatriyas from His arms, Vaishyas from His thighs, and Shudras from His feet. Brahmins were ordained to study the Vedas, perform rituals, and conduct sacrifices; Kshatriyas to govern and protect the kingdom; Vaishyas to engage in trade and cattle-rearing; and Shudras to serve the other three classes.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (9:32) offers a paradoxical concession: "O Arjuna! Even those born in inferior lineages—Vaishyas, Shudras, and women—attain the supreme goal by devoted worship (of Krishna)." (*Mondal, Rakhi, p. 140*). Yet, the *Rigveda* (2.8.71.10) commands Indra: "O Sacrifice-loving Indra! Plunder the wealth of those who revile you, shelter us, and slaughter the *dasas* (Shudras)." (*Biswas, Mrinal, p. 51*).

The *Uttarakanda* of Krittibasi's *Ramayana* narrates how Rama beheaded Shambuka, a Shudra, for practicing asceticism (*Biswas, Mrinal, p. 53*). The *Mahabharata* (Adi Parva) recounts how Dronacharya rejected Ekalavya—son of Hiranyakashipu—declaring, "You belong to a low caste; teaching you would bring infamy," and later demanded his thumb as guru-dakshina (*Biswas, Mrinal, p. 54*).

The *Manusmriti* brands women as inherently corrupting: "Women seduce men into losing self-control; they are the gateway to hell" (*Mallick, Nakul, p. 11*). It reduces women to reproductive vessels—subordinate to fathers in childhood, husbands in youth, and sons in old age. The *Tulsidas Ramayana* advocates beating Shudras and women "like drums," arguing they remain disobedient otherwise (*Bairagya, Pushpa, p. 242*).

Vaishnavism privileges Brahmin Vaishnavas while marginalising other communities, leading to significant social disparities (*Halder, Mahananda, p. 23*). Similarly, Buddhism, despite its claims of egalitarianism, extols Brahmins as the "supreme among varnas" while denigrating Shudras, highlighting the complexities within its moral framework (*Halder, Mahananda, p. 22*). In the case of Christianity, the tradition has experienced fractures between Catholic and Protestant factions, which have contributed to the labelling of women as "imperfect." Furthermore, Islam faces challenges with the perpetuation of Sunni-Shia violence and has been criticised for denying women their souls, further complicating its practices and teachings (*Bairagya, Pushpa p. 243*). These religious traditions, while containing profound spiritual insights, often reflect societal hierarchies and gender biases that impact their followers.

Where, then, is *dharma*? Where is truth? Where is equality?

*"jetha satya nai, shetha dharma nai*

*shekhane unnati kise?" (Halder, Mahananda, p. 157)*

In the early 19th century, Shri Shri Harichand Thakur appeared in 1812, followed by Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur in 1846. A new movement began to protest for the fallen and oppressed people. This was known as the pure Sanatan movement. It is focused on reason and later became known as the Matua religion. Matua religion = Buddhism + Vaishnavism +

combined form of Sanatan religion (Roy, Prashanta, pp. 58-61). Matua means movement - education movement, peasant movement, social dignity movement, economic movement, and the combined culmination of all these movements is political struggle, freedom struggle (Biswas, Sukritiranjana, p. 11).

*"manabkule ashiye, jashomanta suta hoye,  
janma nilo sphullanagari.  
pracharilo gudhgamya, sukshma sanatana dharma,  
janailo e jagat bhari."* (Sarkar, Tarak, p. 2)

The Matua religion rises above all divisions and places all beings, the humanity of humankind, on the seat of supremacy. In this world, those who know reality, who have fully realized their own existence - they become the greatest here, where elders-juniors, women-men all are equal (Halder, Mahananda, p. 460, p. 201). "Century after century, through the efforts of upper-caste Hindus, the thirty-six degraded castes had fallen into ruin. Harichand Thakur on one hand gave them organizational strength (Sarkar, Tarak, p. 224), while Guruchand Thakur said..."

*"Kandakandi dholadholi koto kal kore eli  
kiba phol peli tate bol?  
Kormo chhere kande jei tar bhagye mukti nei  
habi naki bairagir dol?"* (Halder, Mahananda, p. 208)

So,

*"Jatir unnati jodi koribare chao,  
to ensure human welfare, follow that path..."* (Halder, Mahananda, p. 360)

This naturally raises the question: what does 'human welfare' truly mean? Eminent essayist Dr. Anil Ranjan Biswas, in his article 'The Role of Guruchand in the Renaissance of Bengal's Marginalized', notes that in 19th century Bengal's social system, the Matua faith stood as the sole refuge for oppressed classes—a space that outright rejected caste hierarchy and Brahminical dominance. (Biswas, Anil Ranjan, p. 35)

Harichand Thakur went against Vedic rituals and said, "If necessary, I am willing to eat even a dog's leftovers as prasad, but I cannot follow the Vedas' instructions and their illogical purity practices." (Sarkar, Tarak, p. 104) Guruchand Thakur also opposed Vaishnava religious practices. In his opinion, giving up work, shaving one's head to pretend to be an ascetic and beg for alms signifies bad habits and dependence on others. A proper household life is the mark of self-reliance. If husband and wife together remember or pray to 'Hari' with simple devotion in their own home, one can attain God. (Halder, Mahananda, p. 208, p.574) But conventional religious practices give birth to absurd, lazy God stories, which are unhealthy, superstitious and universally harmful. Throughout its history, Hinduism has expanded its framework with the goal of maintaining hierarchical control, often converting others into its fold. (Halder, Mahananda, p. 152) So,

*"Shono Meed ami jaha bali.*

*Tomake bishwas kori achi tab bhab dhor*

I renounce the Hindu religion..." (Halder, Mahananda, p. 315)

Harichand-Guruchand Thakur gradually began leading the Namahshudras and other backward communities away from so-called Hindu religious culture, establishing through the refined

Sanatan or Matua faith distinct rituals for ceremonies like Annaprashan (first rice-feeding), marriages, funerals, and worship with unique mantras. (*Biswas, Anil Ranjan, p. 60*)

**Autonomy in education:** From the twelfth century, through King Ballal Sen's Kulin system reforms, centuries of discrimination, hatred, and deprivation were spread throughout society. In protest against this, from the eighteenth century onward, under the leadership of Hari-Guruchand Thakur, continuous movements began emerging across various fields.

When Guruchand Thakur attempted to build a high school in the underdeveloped Orakandi area, he initially received assurances of financial support from Girish Basu, a wealthy upper-caste man. However, in the end, intimidated by the threatening gaze of the Bhattacharyas of Fukra Union (Kashiani Upazila, Gopalganj), Basu withdrew his support. In frustration, Guruchand Thakur declared,

*"Barna Hindu jara Modere tahara*

*Nahi loy kono krome..*

*Mora shiksha pai Tahara sobai*

*Kabhu na ashay kore."* (*Halder, Mahananda, p. 161*)

Therefore, through the efforts of Guruchand Thakur, the first *pathshala* (primary school) was established in 1880 at the Chaudhuri house of Orakandi. Gradually, with the support of Matuas, a total of 1,067 *pathshalas* and schools were built by 1931 across all castes in Dhaka Division alone. (*Halder, Mahananda, p. 8*) During Guruchand Thakur's lifetime, approximately 5,000 schools were established in total - a rare feat in world history. Since 1856, Harichand Thakur initiated the "Education for All" or "*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*" campaign,

which finds similarity with today's '*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*' (Education for All) program. (*Sarkar, Jiban Kumar, pp. 190-191*)

**Autonomy in the field of Grants:** Though primarily an agrarian and simple community, most Matuas did not own cultivable land. The majority were impoverished sharecroppers who worked on lands owned by upper-caste Hindu zamindars, jotedars, and gantidars in Jessore, Khulna, and Faridpur districts. Guruchand Thakur stood firmly with Bengal's landless peasants, spearheading the historic 'Te-Bhaga' (Two-Thirds Share) movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the Pirojpur Peasant Conference (Barisal, June 1922), chaired by Guruchand, the demand for radical land reforms was first raised. By 1933, he became the keynote speaker at the Bengal Provincial Peasant Conference (Medinipur Ghatal), emerging as the visionary of the peasant liberation movement and the father of the Te-Bhaga struggle. (*Halder, Paramananda, p. 10*)

Despite a handful of Matuas acquiring education against all odds, discriminatory policies barred them from government jobs. After persistent deputations by Guruchand Thakur, the British government finally granted opportunities under the 1907 Proportional Representation of Communities in Public Employment Act. Pioneers like Shashibhushan Thakur (Sub-Registrar), Mohanlal Biswas (Daroga), Radhanath Mondal & Siddheswar Halder (Kanungo), Dr. Tarini Ball (Government Doctor), and Kumudbehari Mallik (Deputy Magistrate) broke caste ceilings in employment, igniting self-reliance among the oppressed. (*Biswas, Sukritiranjana, p. 51*)

Guruchand Thakur promoted ethical trade and investment by showing how communities could lend money to each other at low interest. He created a way to collect and use money without relying on traditional banks, helping people start new businesses. This idea of community lending was innovative and happened in rural Bengal 150 years before banking

became common in India. (Halder, Sukumar, p. 40) His assertion that "economic power is the nucleus of all transformation" parallels Karl Marx's materialist dialectic, revealing a proto-socialist economic vision.

**Autonomy in the field of Cultural Aspects:** Gradually, the Matua religious culture began to unite and strengthen, showing a growing determination to organize their own beliefs and path. While Indian literature has a history of over two and a half thousand years, its religious texts often describe common people as *Shudras*, untouchables, or *Chandalas*—terms loaded with disrespect. Just as the elite are shown reverence, women and *Shudras* face the opposite treatment. (Das, *Karunasindhu*, p. 36). Guruchand Thakur criticised Hindu scriptures, saying,

*"Brahmon rochito joto obhinob grotho*

*'Brahmon prodhan' marka biggapan jontro..*

*Tontro montro bhelki bhoj rochi dine dine*

*Gudhartho bahir kore swarthher sondhane.." (Halder, Mahananda, p. 23)*

After the passing of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the Matua community – comprising the downtrodden and Dalits – developed their own distinct religious scriptures in the *Chandali language* (the native tongue of the Chandals/untouchables). These texts, namely *Shri Shri Harililamrita* and *Shri Shri Guruchand Charit*, emerged within a century or less of their founders' deaths. These works unambiguously declare...

*"Dine dine Hindu dharm hoibe nirmul*

*Keho nahi bujhe iha koto boro bhul..*

*Aaj jara ghrina kore agamite tara*

*Ghrinito hoibe sabe hoye man-hara.." (Halder, Mahananda, p. 148)*

**Autonomy in the field of Health:** During Harichand Thakur's lifetime, India saw little advancement in health awareness or medical science. What limited progress occurred was concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural regions with virtually no access to modern medical facilities. This made healthcare a matter of life and death for Harichand. He personally treated patients, developed innovative treatment methods, and provided preventive health guidance. His medical approach first focused on alleviating patients' fears - a technique later adopted by Guruchand Thakur, who dedicated himself to cultivating healthy habits among Matua followers. Their comprehensive health teachings emphasized personal hygiene (clean clothes, clean surroundings), disease prevention (boiling water during epidemics, proper waste disposal), nutritious diets, herbal remedies, and responsible lifestyle choices (delayed marriages, disciplined sexuality, avoiding adultery and intoxication). They actively discouraged superstitions and dependence on ritualistic "holy water/oil" cures. To institutionalize modern healthcare, Guruchand Thakur collaborated with Dr. Mead to establish a medical center at Orakandi. Guruchand Thakur declared...

*"Swastyahin jati Nahi pay gati*

*Atmoshakti kor roksha.*

*Shiksha swasthya pele - Ojeyo bhutole*

*Aar kiba lage bhikkha?" (Halder, Mahananda, p. 131)*

Today, the renowned Chandshi treatment for piles, fistulas, and sinus wounds across India traces its origins to the Namahshudra community of Chandshi village (Gournadi Upazila, Barishal District) - the actual innovators of this healing method. (*Byapari, Manoranjan, p. 149*)

**Autonomy in the field of Politics:** In undivided Bengal, the so-called lower-caste people spent most of their lives in poverty. They remained weak in education, health, culture, and political participation. The dominant upper-caste Hindu political leadership played little positive role in strengthening their marginalized position. Rather, in most cases, they directly or indirectly supported their continued oppression and deprivation. As a result, the Dalits distrusted and avoided upper-caste political ideologies. They stayed away from movements like the Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi, and Non-Cooperation, recognizing these as contrary to their interests. These movements were controlled by Brahminical upper castes, and during the Swadeshi era, extremists revived nationalism by relying on ancient Indian religious traditions. The Swadeshi propagandists were primarily upper-caste landlords and moneylenders—the very classes that exploited lower castes. Guruchand Thakur strongly objected to their practice of taking oaths on the *Gita* while promoting Swadeshi ideals. Before 1920, the Indian National Congress never included any plans for backward class development or untouchability issues in its national movement programs. (*Biswas, Manoshanto, p. 254*)

When Brahmins and upper-caste Hindus became the dominant force controlling all aspects of society and state, this system came to be called "Brahmanism." It was for this reason that Guruchand Thakur declared...

*"Orthoniti, rajniti, bidya kimbha mane,*

*Uchcho Hindu jure bose ache sobkhane.."* (*Halder, Mahananda, p. 414*)

At the Khulna Conference in 1923, Guruchand Thakur declared in a resounding voice:

*"Bidya chai, dhon chai, boson bhushon chai,*

*Hote chai judge-magistrate..*

*Sagar dingate chai, dekhi shetha kiba pai,*

*Keno rabo matha kore heto.."* (Halder, Mahananda, p. 442)

According to him, without political empowerment, there can be no progress in caste, religion, education, health, culture, or economy. Therefore, he demanded governmental control and power (Halder, Mahananda, p. 349). On October 31, 1906, Sir Lancelot Hare, the Governor of Bengal Presidency, submitted a draft proposal to the Viceroy of India, Lord Minto, for the development of backward classes. By 1909, the Morley-Minto Reforms Act granted special opportunities in education and employment for 31 backward communities in Bengal, along with reserved seats—one elected and one nominated—in the Bengal Legislative Council. No other presidency or province had such provisions at the time. It was first in Bengal, due to the Matua movement led by Guruchand Thakur, that these 31 communities were collectively recognized as the "Bengal Depressed Classes" (Halder, Paramananda, p. VIII).

Under the Government of India Act, 1935, 30 reserved seats were allocated for lower castes in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. The 1937 general elections revealed that 32 members from Scheduled Castes were elected—13 of whom belonged to the Namahshudra community and were direct or indirect followers of Guruchand Thakur. This clearly shows that until 1937, the Namahshudra movement—and by extension, the Matua movement—had evolved into a distinct political force in Bengal (Biswas, Manoshanto, p. 243).

Here are some notable differences between Hinduism and the Matua religious movement worth considering:

1. Hinduism has no single founder, and its exact origins remain unclear. The most authoritative Hindu scripture is the Vedas, a Sanskrit text composed by the Aryans. Scholar Ramendra Sundar Trivedi called Hindu society "Veda-following society" because it adheres to Vedic authority. The Vedas are intertwined with Aryan culture,

Brahminical traditions, and Indus Valley heritage. In contrast, the Matua faith has a definite founder. Its origins trace back to the birth (1812) and subsequent works of Harichand Thakur, as documented in the book *Shri Shri Harililamrita* by poet Tarak Chandra Sarkar.

2. Hinduism believes in multiple deities and idol worship. But the Matua faith acknowledges only "Hari" as God and rejects idol worship.
3. Hinduism upholds the caste system, the *kulin* (lineage) tradition, *sati*, *gauridan* (ritual offerings), animal sacrifice, and untouchability, denying equal dignity to all. The Matua faith rejects caste distinctions and untouchability, declaring: "All Matuas are one." It upholds human dignity.
4. Hinduism has numerous sects and guru traditions. The Matua faith recognizes only one Guru—no alternate spiritual leaders. For them, "Hari" or Harichand Thakur is the sole object of worship.
5. Hinduism clings to spirituality and past traditions, prioritizing abstract ideals over material life, making it conservative. The Matua faith emphasizes action (*karmabad*), values household life, and prioritizes practical, rational living over spirituality, making it a progressive, reformist religion.
6. Hinduism does not grant women equal status to men. The Matua faith advocates for gender equality.
7. Hinduism is rigidly ritualistic, focused on sacrifices (*yagna*), concepts of this life and the afterlife, and superstitions. The Matua faith opposes Brahminical rituals, rejects superstitions, and follows simple principles.
8. In Hinduism, temples are not accessible to all castes. In the Matua faith, anyone can enter temples.

9. Hinduism promotes scriptures like the Vedas, Gita, Manusmriti, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. The Matua faith opposes these texts, as they preach violence, division, exploitation, and oppression among people. *(Biswas, Mrinal, pp. 221-236)*
10. Hinduism preaches renunciation before enjoyment. The Matua faith states that renunciation comes only after fulfilment. For those who have nothing to renounce, talk of sacrifice is meaningless. Thus, from the beginning, the Matua faith stands in direct opposition to the self-serving Brahminical ideology operating under Hinduism’s name. *(Halder, Mahananda, p. 442)*

Leaving aside the question—"Is Matua Dharma a branch of Hinduism or an independent religion?"—a survey was conducted between 2019-22 among 200 Matuas (equal numbers of men and women) in North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts.

**Distribution of Respondents on the Basis of difference between the Hindu religion & the Matua religion**

Hindu religion & Matua religion	24Pgs.(N.)			Nadia			Total	
	M%	F%	T%	M%	F%	T%	200	%
Yes	28	11	39	17	09	26	65	32.5
	56	22		34	18			
No	22	39		33	40			
	44	78	61	66	80	73	134	67
Don't know	00	00	00	00	01	01	01	0.5
	00	00		00	02			

<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>		
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The above table reveals that while 56% of men in North 24 Parganas district believe in the distinct identity of Matua Dharma, only 34% of men in Nadia district share this belief. Conversely, women in both districts largely reject this distinction—78% and 80% respectively—viewing Matua Dharma instead as a branch of Hinduism. This indicates that while traces of separatist sentiment persist among men in North 24 Parganas (home to West Bengal’s Matua religious headquarters), women across both districts hold diametrically opposing views.

The data clearly shows that the Matua philosophy is not fully reaching women. This could be due to weak leadership in the movement or strong Hindu customs that dominate their daily lives. As a result, Matua women may struggle or choose not to express their unique identity. Many mix up Hindu and Maori practices. Further fragmentation occurred during the 1947 Partition, which severed Matuas from their spiritual epicentre, Orakandi (now in Bangladesh’s Gopalganj district)—the birthplace of Harichand-Guruchand Thakur. This rupture weakened the collective unity of the original 36 oppressed castes that formed Matua Dharma. Displaced as refugees across Indian districts or struggling to rebuild urban lives, Matuas underwent socioeconomic transformations—education, livelihoods, and cultural preferences diverged as communities scattered.

The hereditary guardians of the Thakurnagar temple, once trusted by Bengal’s Matuas, have shifted their beliefs. Many now support Hindutva or strong Hindu nationalist politics. However, devoted Matua followers (pagols, gosais) still chant traditional mantras during rituals. However, recently Mamata Thakur (elder daughter-in-law of P.R. Thakur and Bina Pani Thakur, All India Matua Mahasangha President, Chairperson of Matua Development Council, Rajya Sabha MP of Trinamool Congress, and organizational district chairperson of Bangaon

for Trinamool) has described Matua Dharma as anti-Brahmanical and a distinct religion, while simultaneously asserting that Matuas are not Hindus. Across West Bengal, India, and around the world, the sounds of Matua victory cries (jaydhwani), Hari chants, and the loud noise of nishan flags, madals, mridangas, trumpets, and drums continue to be heard.

Finally, it can be said that the handful of scholars and laypersons now attempting to mix oil and water—to blur Matua Dharma’s boundaries—must remember this faith was born rejecting Hinduism’s falsehoods, inequalities, and inhumanities. Harichand-Guruchand Thakur encouraged a clear and broad idea of independence from the start. He promoted a distinct identity for Matua Dharma, similar to what Sikhism stands for.

*"Apan adarshe gore Matua samaj,*

*Tai sarba niti jane Matuara aj."* (Halder, Mahananda, p. 338, p.369)

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