**An estimate of the role of women in Matua religion and society in North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts.**

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***Abstract***

Now-a-days almost every political philosophy speaks of social equality but it is very difficult to transform the ideal of social equality into reality. Exploitation has been continuing in different forms from the remote past. The spread of a religious philosophy owes to its emphasis on equality. Matua religion is a rational and humanitarian religion. It has supported the weak and never admitted of inequality. It upholds the eternal truth, the equality of both man and woman in every aspect.

***Key words:*** Woman, Society, Religion, Equality, Politics

**INTRODUCTION**

Generally speaking, there is no gender difference appears except in human society. Man, always tries to dominate woman in every possible way. This is an ancient tradition.  "No religion in the world guarantees the absolute equality of genders" (**Bala, 2013**) Nowhere in the world (in India too) the right and dignity of woman are guaranteed. No religion has done it.

In the USA women's franchise was recognized in 1920, but the movement for acquiring this right started in 1861. In England it was recognized in 1920 but the movement started in 1832. In Switzerland it was recognized in 1971, in France in 1945, in Japan in 1947, in New Zealand in 1893, in Norway in 1913, in Italy in 1945 and in India in 1950. But the woman's day was first observed in India in 1931. So, on the whole it may be said that women right have nowhere been recognized in the world from the remote past.

In the history of the world religion has preceded the state and has been regarded as the main driving force of human society. Problems, therefore originate from the conspiracy of the religious leaders and preachers. The state has off course tried to eradicate religious superstition but with limited success. Even today incidents like Widow-Burning (Sati-daha), human sacrifice, dowry death and Triple Talaq are very often reported in the newspapers.

Christian priests say that women are emotional and therefore they are easily influenced by religion. Hence, they should not take part in politics. On the other hand, man has been called the master of woman in Koran. **(Mukhapadhya, 2009)** Besides, in Islam the equal right of brother and sister on their paternal property has not been recognized. The triple Talaak system in Muslim society is also an insult to woman. In Hinduism (though the term 'Hindu' does not occur in any Sanskrit or Bengali book) **(Bala, 2013)** it has been stated, "even women, the low caste people and Vaishyas and Shudras can achieve salvation by remembering and serving me (Lord Krishna), 32 number verse in the Geeta. **(Mandal, 2012)** The sage Manu in his Manusanhita says that women are deprived of the access to the Vedas and Smriti. They are Sudranees from birth. Whenever a woman sees a man, however ugly, she wants to mate with him. So, the sole object of women is to serve their respective husbands. They will live with their fathers in childhood, with their husbands in youth and with their sons in old age. **(Bairagya, 2015)** All other religions echo almost the same thing. Taslima Nasrin, in spite of being herself a woman has been tortured and hooted down from her country for raising her voice against Islam. But her protest was restricted to personal level. But almost 200 years ago ShriShri Harichand Thakur was also persecuted by the Hindu religious leaders for fighting against the irrational and superstitious beliefs of Hinduism. But ultimately, he triumphed over his opponents by dint of his courage, honestly and greatness.

In order to rise above the contemporary social disorder, the Matua religion upheld the importance of the family life. ShriShri Harichand Thakur, the founder of Matua categorically says that family life is the most important of all and the rest of Brahmacharya, Vanprastha and Sannyas are secondary subjects. He lays maximum stress on work or productivity and in this way, he enhances the honour of woman. Woman are the better half of men, like the negative-poitives of science; in the absence of one the light does not shine. He condemns those who retire to forests by deserting their near and dear ones (mother, father, wife and children). They are irresponsible escapists and therefore they deserve no respect. In his opinion the attainment of divine bliss is not all very difficult. One can easily attain this only by leading an ideal family life.**(Biswas, 2014)** He strongly advocated monogamy and condemned polygamy and strongly advised his followers to stick to the practice of monogamy very strictly.**(Haldar, 2015)** Harichand said that one can become a Brahmachary, a Vanprasthi and a Sanyasi only by living a proper family life with one's wife/husband.This is where one can become a Saint and 'Hari' can be found. **(Sarkar, 2010)**

Traditionally the women members of the families eat the learnings of the male members of the families. Women also bow to men. But in Matua society men and women share their meals from the same pot. This system amazed the Brahmins. Moreover, overcoming discrimination requires service in every life. People are for people. All people are God. **(Sarkar, 2010)**

Guruchand Thakur rightly noted that lack of education is the root of all social evils. He himself took the initiative to spread of education and at around 1931 he set up more than 1500 primary schools**(Haldar, 2009)** which were attended (man, woman, Namah, Paundra, Teli, Mali, Kumbhakar, Malakar, Kapali, Mahishya, Kamar, Das, Chamar, Tanti, Muslim) mostly by those who hailed from the lower castes while the entry to the schools of Vidyasagar was mostly restricted to the children hailing from the higher castes. All the 35 girls' schools established by Vidyasagar were attended only by the girls hailing from Brahmins and other higher caste families.**(Biswas, 2014)** He advised that to go without food is better than to go without education.**(Haldar, 2009)** He also laid emphasis on female education because an educated woman trains her children in a better way.

Guruchand set up a primary school for girls first in Taltala of Orakandi and at the same time (1908) a high school and called it Shanti-Satyavama.   Harichand Thakur told her wife (Shanti Devi) "I shall teach men and you women". **(Mohanta, 2002)** Besides this, Guruchand Thakur, in co-operation with Mrs. Mead (the wife of Dr. C. S. Mead) set up a technical institute at Orakandi with a view to training women in different trades.

Guruchand Thakur also played an important role in introducing the re-marriage of the widows. At the Mahabaruni Festival Guruchand advised his followers to introduce the re-marriage of the widows in their respective villages. **(Haldar, 2009)**

In this connection it may be said that Vidyasagar got the law of the re-marriage of the widows passed in 1856 but Vidyasagar's attempts in this field were confined to the upper castes. In 1910 Guruchand Thakur first celebrated the re-marriage of a widow. He who first married a widow was Dhananjay Biswas of Matibhanga village of Barisal. Mr Biswas also got his widow-sister married again to one Shrinath. Next Rasiklal Biswas (MLC) and Manomohan Das (MLA) of Kishorganj also married widows. In 1914 Tinkari Mia of Terokhada and Malancha Saha married widows without the presence of Brahmin Priests. Devichand Mondal, another follower of Guruchand brought about the marriages of 30 widows in a single day. Radha Pagol, other followers of Guruchand used to hold an annual fair (Khejurtala of Pirojpur) in the month of Falgun for bringing about the re-marriage of the widows. It was a month-long fair in which marriages were celebrated according to Matua customs.

Hari-Guruchand made their followers aware of the rules of keeping good health. They advised to bath in the morning, eat boiled rice, lie on mats and consult doctors at the time of illness. They also advised to refrain from child-marriage and maintain cleanliness. (The marriageable age of man is 25 and in case of woman 18). **(Haldar, 2015)** One must not mate with one's wife when she is not in menses. One must also remain strictly faithful to one's spouse. The principle of monogamy must be adhered to verses. **(Haldar, 2009)** Harichand Thakur was also aware that women are exploited for cheap labour. He wanted to put an end to it and for this he wanted to raise the price of Nakshi Katha stitched by women. **(Mandal, 2012)**

Matua philosophy also admits of the equal right of son and daughter on paternal property. Both the husband and the wife are entitled to inherit each other property on the death of anyone. Guruchand Thakur also helped his followers with money for starting business. In Matua society women play equal role with men in social festivals. Sandhya Sarkar and Uma Sarkar deserve special mention in this field. They even play the role of priests even when they are in menses. They dance and sing in festivals with men. No difference is made but unlike the Hindu Tantriks and Bostoms Matuas never indulge in debauchery. **(Sarkar, 2010)** Physical attachment with widows is also forbidden in Matua society. **(Haldar, 2009)**

Harichand Thakur was always eager to keep up the prestige of women. Once one Dasarath (a Matua) held a Kirtan programme in his house where both men and women were enjoying themselves. But the local Brahmins regarded it as a perversion. They complained to the local Nayeb who victimized Dasharath. Harichand Thakur was informed of this. He held a mock court which was composed entirely of women. This incident is attested in the book called 'Harililamrita'. **(Sarkar, 2010)** In this way Harichand protested against Dasharath's victimization.

In Matua society women are allowed to take part in politics. Nearly 150 years ago Guruchand Thakur said, "Women must be brave if they want to bear brave children. They should not be afraid of tigers and lions". Women must also struggle against all obstacles, one of which is patriarchy. Hence women also must be strong. Guruchand Thakur said, "Nobody respects the weak. So, try to be strong". **(Haldar, 2009)**

He also said that political power is one of the main pillars of progress in human life. When it is acquired, education, culture, health, money (governmental service, business), race, religion everything become easily available and that is the only goal of the Matua people. **(Haldar, 2009)**

A survey was recently conducted on the Matua people of North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts. The results of the survey are as follows:

**Table No.-1, Distribution of respondents on the basis of educational qualification:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Education**  | **24 Pgs.(N.)**  | **Nadia**  | **Total**  |
| **M %**  | **F %**  | **T %**  | **M%**  | **F%**  | **T%**  | **200** | **%**  |
| **Illiterate**  | 0612 | 0612 | 12 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 12 | 06 |
|
| **Below Madhyamik**  | 2550 | 3672 | 61 | 2652 | 3978 | 65 | 126 | 63 |
| **Madhyamik and above, but below Graduate**  | 0816 | 0714 | 15 | 1020 | 0408 | 14 | 29 | 14.5 |
| **Graduate**  | 0918 | 0000 | 09 | 0918 | 0510 | 14 | 23 | 11.5 |
|
| **Post Graduate**  | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 0306 | 0204 | 05 | 06 | 03 |
| **Others: (Doctor/Engineer/LLB**  | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 04 | 02 |
| **Total**  | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |  |  |

Table 1 shows that the educational qualification of both male and female respondents in North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts are below Madhyamik level. Only 75% women are below Madhyamik level.

**Table No.2, Distribution of respondents on the basis of occupation:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Occupation** | **24 Pgs.(N.)** | **Nadia** | **Total** |
| **M %** | **F %**  | **T%** | **M %**  | **F %** | **T%** | **200** | **%** |
| **Agriculture** | 0306 | 0000 | 03 | 1530 | 0204 | 17 | 20 | 10 |
|
| **Small Business** | 0918 | 0306 | 12 | 0918 | 0306 | 12 | 24 | 12 |
| **Labor/Masson/Carpenter** | 1938 | 0204 | 21 | 0408 | 0102 | 05 | 26 | 13 |
|
| **Sewing** | 0204 | 1020 | 12 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 12 | 06 |
| **Hawker** | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 02 | 01 |
| **LIC Agent** | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Banker** | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Advocate** | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Rail** | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 02 | 01 |
| **Clerk** | 0408 | 0000 | 04 | 0714 | 0000 | 07 | 11 | 5.5 |
| **Teaching** | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 0204 | 0306 | 05 | 07 | 3.5 |
| **Quack Doctor** | 0408 | 0000 | 04 | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 06 | 03 |
| **Army / Navy** | 0204 | 0000 | 02 | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 03 | 1.5 |
| **Nursing/Ayaa** | 0000 | 0408 | 04 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 04 | 02 |
| **Animal Husbandry** | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **House wife** | 0000 | 2448 | 24 | 0000 | 3570 | 35 | 59 | 29.5 |
| **Private Teaching** | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 0612 | 0408 | 10 | 10 | 05 |
| **Biri Bounding** | 0000 | 0408 | 04 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 04 | 02 |
| **Bee Keeper** | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Midday meal cook** | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 02 | 01 |
|
| **Social Service** | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 02 | 01 |
| **Kavial** | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 0102 | 0000 | 01 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |  |  |

Table 2 shows that 59% are engaged in home making in both the districts. Although a very few works are related to agriculture, small business, sewing, nursing/ayaa and labor category.

**Table No. 3, Distribution of respondents on the basis of income:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Monthly income of family**  | **24 Pgs.(N.)**  | **Nadia**  | **Total**  |
| **M %**  | **F %**  | **T%** | **M %**  | **F %**  | **T%** | **N=200** |  **%** |
| **No income**  | 0408 | 2550 | 29 | 0510 | 3570 | 40 | 69 | 34.5 |
|
| **Less than 10,000/=**  | 2652 | 2040 | 46 | 2754 | 0816 | 35 | 81 | 40.5 |
|
| **Less than 20,000/=**  | 1020 | 0510 | 15 | 0714 | 0204 | 09 | 24 | 12 |
|
| **Less than 40,000/=**  | 0408 | 0000 | 04 | 0714 | 0306 | 10 | 14 | 07 |
|
| **Above 40,000/=**  | 0612 | 0000 | 06 | 0408 | 0204 | 06 | 12 | 06 |
|
| **Total**  | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |  |  |

Table 3 shows that most of the women do not have any income as they are engaged in homemaking and even if they are working, the monthly income for most of the women is below

10,000/-. In case of male respondents in both the districts, average income is less than 10,000/-.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Hindu religion & Matua religion** | **24 Pgs.(N.)** | **Nadia** | **Total** |
|
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **200** | **%** |
| **yes** | 2856 | 1122 | 39 | 1734 | 0918 | 26 | 65 | 32.5 |
| **no** | 2244 | 3978 | 61 | 3366 | 4080 | 73 | 134 | 67 |
| **do not know** | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 0000 | 0102 | 01 | 01 | 0.5 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |

**Table No.- 4, Distribution of respondents on the basis religious belief as Matua is a Hindu Religion**

Table 4 shows that 79% of women in both the districts could not differentiate between Matua religion and Hinduism; confused.

**Table No.- 5, Distribution of respondents on the basis of Baruni-bathing (in Kamanasagar):**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Kamanasagar** | **24 Pgs.(N.)** | **Nadia** | **Total** |
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **200** | **%** |
| **yes (for freshness)** | 4284 | 4998 | 91 | 4692 | 4794 | 93 | 184 | 92 |
| **No** | 0816 | 0102 | 09 | 0408 | 0306 | 07 | 16 | 08 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

Table 5 shows that 96% Matua women of North 24 Parganas and Nadia districts bath in Kamanasagar on Baruni Tithi to wash away their sins.

**Table No.- 6, Distribution of respondents on the basis of registered card
of 'All India Matua Mahasangha' :**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **'All India Matua Mahasangha'** | **24 Pgs.(N.)** | **Nadia** | **Total** |
|
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **200** | **%** |
| **yes** | 2346 | 1734 | 40 | 1632 | 0408 | 20 | 60 | 30 |
| **no** | 2754 | 3366 | 60 | 3468 | 4692 | 80 | 140 | 70 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |

Table 6 shows that 79% of Matua women in  both  the districts do not have the recognition letter of 'All India Matua Mahasangha'.

**Table No.- 7, Distribution of respondents on the basis of Dal/Dalapati:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of Dalapati** | **24 Pgs. (N.)** | **Nadia** | **Total** |
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **200** | **%** |
| **have not Dalapati** | 2652 | 1938 | 45 | 2346 | 3162 | 54 | 99 | 49.5 |
| **do not know** | 2448 | 3162 | 55 | 2754 | 1836 | 45 | 100 | 50 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |

Table 7 shows that 50% of Matua women in both the districts could not refer the name of their Dal/Dalapati.

**Table No.- 8, Distribution of respondents on the basis discomfort in choosing women for leading the Matua religion:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **discomfort in choosing women for leading the Matua religion:** | **24 Pgs. (N.)** | **Nadia**  | **Total** |
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **N=200** | **%** |
|
| **Yes** | 0306 | 0306 | 06 | 0306 | 0306 | 06 | 12 | 06 |
| **No** | 4794 | 4794 | 94 | 4794 | 4794 | 94 | 188 | 94 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Table 8 shows that 94% of Matua women do not feel any difficulty to lead their religious organization in both the districts. But the political scenario is different.

**Table No.- 9, Distribution of respondents on the basis of got opportunity to represent in any election:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Represent in any election**  | **24 Pgs. (N.)** | **Nadia**  | **Total** |
| **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **M%** | **F%** | **T%** | **N=200** | **%** |
|
| **yes**  | 1428 | 0714 | 21 | 1224 | 0408 | 16 | 37 | 18.5 |
| **No** | 3366 | 3774 | 70 | 3876 | 4692 | 84 | 154 | 77 |
| **have not voter** | 0306 | 0612 | 09 | 0000 | 0000 | 00 | 09 | 4.5 |
| **Total** | **50** | **50** | **100** | **50** | **50** | **100** |   |   |

Table 9 shows that 83% of Matua women do not get the opportunity to represent any political parties in both the districts.

**CONCLUSION:**

The overall weak rate of education, income and organization of Matua women have been very easily influenced by the neighboring Sanatan religion, that is now called Hindu religion. For these reasons discrimination, superstitions, unrealistic approach, irrational thoughts, inhuman caste system have already been arrived in Matua society. The social value of women has not been revealed till now and the political empowerment has been hampered. Even if the Thakurbari has created a difference on their political opinion by differencing in two Brahmanical parties, i.e.TMC and BJP. Thus, they have failed to maintain the universal form among the Matua people. Nevertheless, after the death of P. R. Thakur, Binapani Thakur also lead the movements of 'All India Matua Mahasangha' on the issue of citizenship. For this, she brought her own daughter-in-law, Mamata Thakur to lead  the 'All India Matua Mahasangha' and was able to send her to the parliament on behalf of the TMC party.

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