

Thakurnagar as a Political Location: Place Making Practices of Matua Refugees in West Bengal

By

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In the run-up to the Lok Sabha election in 2019, a refugee settlement in the district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal called Thakurnagar drew considerable political attention as Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his poll campaign in the state from here.¹ Modi visited the headquarters of a religious organisation called the Matua Mahasangha, sought blessings from its spiritual head Binapani Debi (reverently referred to as “*Baroma*”), and addressed a rally that was organised by the Mahasangha with support from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In his speech that largely focused on the welfare schemes run by the BJP-led central government, Modi made a targeted appeal to the local audience at the rally on two grounds. First, he emphasised the importance of Thakurnagar multiple times in his address by calling it “a sacred soil” (*pavitra mati*), the land of Matua icons Harichand and his son Guruchand Thakur, and a place that has been “witness to a social movement.”² Second, Modi invoked the memory of Partition of India at the time of independence in 1947 which led to the migration of millions of people in the subsequent decades. He added that the BJP-led central government is committed to grant citizenship to certain groups of refugees such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains who, as he argued, migrated to India from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh due to communal tension in these countries.³ There was noticeable enthusiasm among the Matuas, a religious community of almost exclusively Namasudras, about this event as it was the first-ever visit of a Prime Minister to their religious headquarters.⁴ On the ground, what Modi’s campaign visit really echoed is the growing salience of Thakurnagar as a political location that is integrally connected to the community, identity, and politics of an electorally important Dalit refugee constituency.⁵

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After the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003 by the then BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government, the demand for Indian citizenship became central to Namasudra refugee politics. Under the provisions of the Act, the citizenship status of Namasudra refugees, who migrated to India after 1971, came under legal-official scrutiny. Many encountered arrests, administrative harassment, and the threat of disenfranchisement as they were suspected as “illegal migrants” in West Bengal as well as in other states.⁶ As a result, refugee outfits like Udbastu Kalyan Sangha launched a movement under the banner of the Matua Mahasagha demanding “unconditional citizenship” (*nirshorto nagorikotto*) for East Bengali refugees in India through reamendment of the 2003 Act. Since its inception in the mid-2000s, this movement provided the Matua Mahasangha considerable visibility as an emerging representative institution in rural politics and established its reputation as guarantor of Matua votes in the realm of electoral competition.⁷ Concurrently, it also brought Thakurnagar—“the first Dalit refugee colony in India started by an independent Dalit initiative”—to the mainstream political limelight.⁸ This paper examines the making and transformation of Thakurnagar as a place that has evolved as the epicentre of Dalit refugee activism in contemporary West Bengal. Based on literary and ethnographic evidence, the paper looks at the place making practices of Namasudra refugees in and around Thakurnagar to show why and how did this place develop as a sacred, civic, and political location, and in turn, shape their community and identity in the post-Partition decades. In doing so, the paper reflects on the relationship between caste, refugeehood, and place making in postcolonial India.

Partition, Migration, Caste and Place Making

While the Partition of India in 1947 led to the displacement of millions of people from their homelands, it also necessitated a parallel trajectory of emplacement of these refugees in the newly independent nation states. In postcolonial India, the emplacement of refugees in their new environments were influenced by multiple factors such as their caste and gender identities, differential state action and rehabilitation policies vis-à-vis various refugee communities, harsh geographical conditions of the relocation sites, and periodic changes in citizenship laws.⁹ Writings on migration and rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees, as scholars have pointed out, have largely revolved around the struggles and experience of mostly the upper castes who shifted from East Pakistan in the immediate years after Partition, and relocated in and around the metropolis of Calcutta.¹⁰ The ways in which the lower caste refugees, such as the Namasudras, resettled in mostly unfavourable conditions in Permanent Liability Camps or in forest tracts outside West Bengal, and eventually inscribed their collective identity in these locations over time have received lesser academic attention.¹¹ In other words, little has been explored about the place making practices of lower caste refugees which, as I aim to

show in this paper, have been integral to their community building, identity formation, and politico-cultural activism in the post-Partition decades.

Place making as a conceptual tool in anthropology, urban studies, and migration studies has added to our understanding about the relationship between space, place, community, and identity of a particular set of people living in a given territory. As Phillip Zehmisch puts it, “place making may be defined as the social, cultural, religious, economic and political transformation of spaces into places through naming practices, rituals and institutions.”¹² A space acquires meanings over time, as Gupta and Ferguson have suggested, through a myriad of popular practices, initiatives, beliefs, and assertions, and eventually achieves “a distinctive *identity*” as a place.¹³ To put it differently, places are products of collective human action such as making infrastructural changes to physical environments, finding familiar as well as establishing new social, cultural and political networks, and assigning specific meanings to spaces through memorialisation practices, cultural objects, and institution building.¹⁴ The processes of making a place, in turn, perform a cohesive function of binding a group of people together as a community. In his study on the hill sheep farmers in Teviothead, Scotland, John Gray has argued that place and community emerge together and are “mutually constitutive,” that is, “place-making and the resultant sense of place are an essential part of how people experience community.”¹⁵ Other studies have shown that migrants and refugees from the same racial groups or with shared histories of displacement have different experiences of community based on their respective place making practices in new locations. For example, one can think of the Vietnamese immigrants in the USA whose place making practices in California and Boston shaped their community and identity differently in these two places.¹⁶ The case of Hutu refugees, who settled in contrasting environments—an isolated refugee camp and the Kigoma Township—in rural western Tanzania to escape the genocidal massacre in Burundi in the 1970s, is another example that shows the “radical differences in the meanings ascribed to national identity and homeland, exile and refugee-ness” in these two settings.¹⁷

In India, the categories of space, place, and community are inseparably linked to caste. Based on Dalit autobiographical narratives, historian Ramnarayan Rawat has explained how Dalits’ experience of growing up and living in spatially marked *jati muhallas* (caste neighbourhoods) have historically played a formative role in shaping their “Dalit *jati chetna* (consciousness).”¹⁸ The reproduction of exclusionary spaces along caste-class hegemonic relations have also been done through policies and practices of the State. In her study of making of Chembur on the outskirts of Bombay (now Mumbai) since the late colonial period, Geeta Thatra shows how Dalits were pushed to the fringes of the city, although the question of caste remained invisible behind the veil of “techno-managerial rationality” of modern urban planning.¹⁹ Moreover, practices of Dalits such as organising processions, religious functions, and mass events to make claims over the public sphere have time and again led to violent clashes with the upper castes in different parts of India, thus creating what Karthikeyan Damodaran has termed

“contentious spaces” and have simultaneously bolstered the process of their community and identity formation.²⁰ However, as Rawat has noted, “the constitutive role of space in the institution of untouchability and in Dalit political mobilization has received comparatively less academic attention” compared to other modalities such as occupation and struggle for dignity.²¹ Academic research on the Dalit movement, Rawat thus suggested, needs to pay more attention to the spatial modality of the caste question for a deeper understanding of the histories of caste neighbourhoods, the social experience of living in marked spaces, and the processes of making places and building political solidarities around it.

One of the key factors that impacted the emplacement of Partition refugees in postcolonial India has been the dynamics of caste. As David Turton has argued “displacement is not just about the loss of place, but also about the struggle to *make* a place” that bolsters community formation, and offers migrants and refugees a shared socio-cultural milieu, a sense of security in a new environment, and a platform for collective action.²² Moreover, accounts of place making underscore the agentive role played by migrants and refugees in transforming spaces into places. To understand the emerging political salience of Thakurnagar and its inseparable connection to the Matua electorate, it is therefore necessary to examine the place making practices of post-Partition Dalit refugees in this settlement over these years.

The Birth of Thakurnagar

Thakurnagar is located between Gobardanga and Chandpara along the Sealdah-Bongaon railway route in North 24 Parganas district, bordering Bangladesh. It is roughly 65 km from Kolkata and 25 km from the border at Bongaon. The area comes under Gaighata Block of Bongaon Subdivision and includes the census villages of Gaighata, Ichhapur, Gutri, Bora, Karola, Ganti, Chikanpara, Kaya, Manikhera, and Shimulpur. The cluster of these villages, what came to be known as Thakurnagar since its establishment in 1948, is predominantly the settlements of Namasudra refugees who migrated from East Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly from Khulna, Satkhira, Jessore, Jhikargacha, Barisal, Bhola, and Faridpur.²³ Many Namasudra families moved to these villages in the subsequent years, either from other rehabilitation camps and sites or from Bangladesh after 1971 through religious and caste linkages. In the pre-Partition days, the area was sparsely populated and was part of the Jessore district. Over the last seven decades, there has been a phenomenal growth in population in and around the place. The population under the jurisdiction of Gaighata police station, for example, was 56,558 in 1951; 133,916 in 1971; 267,554 in 1991; and it rose to 330,287 in 2011.²⁴ The area also prospered economically. The main occupation of the people is agriculture and horticulture, which is evident from the big and vibrant sugarcane and flower markets adjacent to the local railway station. A considerable section of people is also engaged in government and other white-collar professions, private and local businesses, or work in the informal sector in various services such as contractual labourers and domestic help. As N.B

Roy, a chronicler of Namasudra history and politics, noted, “Thakurnagar was originally a fallow land overgrown with shrubs and “Ulu” grass but today the place has changed beyond recognition.”²⁵

The chief architect of this refugee settlement was Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (1902–90), a prominent Namasudra leader, the fourth-generation heir of Harichand Thakur (founder of Matua religion), and former head of the Matua Mahasangha.²⁶ At the time of independence, P.R. Thakur was a member of the Constituent Assembly of India with support from the Congress party. Unlike another stalwart leader Jogendranath Mandal, P.R. Thakur advocated the view that Namasudras should gradually migrate to India and resettle here, and even supported the rehabilitation policies of the Congress government of transporting refugees to locations outside West Bengal. His differences with Congress emerged in the mid-1960s when Namasudra refugees, who migrated amidst communal tensions, encountered police repression and denial of administrative assistance such as doles and rehabilitation after migrating to India. Although he quit the party, Thakur remained active in refugee movements through his continued association with multiple refugee organisations. His foremost contribution towards refugee rehabilitation, however, was the making of what Matua writer Kapil Krishna Biswas has described as, “India’s first non-government refugee colony.”²⁷ In December 1947, Thakur founded a company called the Thakur Land and Industries Limited. This company acquired a large tract of land from a local zamindar the next year, which included the Chikanpara, Ganti, Shimulpur, Karola, and Bora *mouzas*, with an objective of redistributing it as plots among refugees to rehabilitate them.²⁸ Thakur wrote to his acquaintances in East Pakistan about his plan of setting up a refugee colony, encouraging them to migrate to India and buy shares of the company in exchange for land.²⁹ Noted Matua preachers like Gopal Sadhu and Bipin Gosai, among others, bought shares of the company and were allotted plots of land.³⁰ These Matua preachers and leaders played a crucial role in building networks and bringing more people to settle in and around the area through their religious influence and connections. Thakur himself relocated to this newly established colony with his family in 1948. The place was subsequently named Thakurnagar after P.R. Thakur.³¹ However, there is another interpretation behind this naming. According to Matua writer Debdas Pande, the place was perhaps called Thakurnagar after its namesake Matua centre at Matiakhali, Khulna.³² Irrespective of interpretations, Thakurnagar became inseparably linked to P.R. Thakur and “stands as a monument to his memory.”³³

Exile and a Sacred Place

The making and transformation of Thakurnagar as a place happened broadly on three axes: firstly, the residence of P.R. Thakur as well as memorialisation practices revolving him; secondly, the Matua religion and its rituals; and thirdly, Dalit refugee politics and activism. This section will focus on the first two aspects while the discussion on refugee politics and activism will follow in the later sections. The house of P.R. Thakur, also popularly known as the

Thakurbari, is perhaps the most high-profile residential building in Thakurnagar. It is at this house where Modi came to meet P.R.Thakur's wife, Binapani Debi, during his visit to the Matua Mahasangha's headquarters in 2019. Many other leaders across political parties like Subhash Chakraborty and Mamata Banerjee have frequented this house to seek blessings from the Matua matriarch over the last two decades, particularly before elections. The house, quite interestingly, was named "The Exile" by P.R.Thakur [Fig.1]. Being the residence of the heir of Matua preceptors Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, it shares an affective bond with the Matua refugees. Kapil Krishna Biswas, a noted Matua writer, described the house as "the shelter of the fearless commander of the underprivileged people's liberation movement."³⁴ Although Thakur held the opinion that Namasudras should gradually migrate to India after Partition, his decision to call his residence "Exile" at a time when he was planning to build a refugee colony around it reflects, to borrow a conceptual expression from Edward Said, a "contrapuntal" awareness.³⁵ On one hand, the permanent sense of loss caused by Partition and displacement—"the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home"³⁶—is evident from Thakur's naming of his house as "Exile"; while on the other, there is also a corresponding sense of commitment in him towards emplacement of fellow refugees in a new environment for which he purchased land and founded a company. Following Said, it can be argued that the processes of emplacement of migrants, i.e., building "habits of life, expression or activity" in a new environment "inevitably occurs against the memory of this things in another environment."³⁷ The rapid transition of Thakur's residence into a public space called *Thakurbari* and the refugee colony of Thakurnagar into the *Sreedham* (a sacred place) of the Matuas in India, as discussed below, exemplifies this contrapuntal process that represents not only the loss of place but also the efforts of the refugees and the role of memory in making a place.



Fig. 1: "The Exile," also called *Thakur Kutir* is the house built by P.R. Thakur after he migrated to India after Partition. At the top of the entrance door, the name "P.R. Thakur" is engraved. Binapani Debi is sitting inside her room and there is an image of P.R. Thakur in the background, © Author, Thakurnagar, 2013.

Soon after moving to Thakurnagar in 1948, P.R. Thakur and his wife constructed a *Harimandir* (temple of Harichand Thakur and his spouse, Shanti Debi) next to their house on the eve of the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur, the most auspicious day in the Matua calendar.³⁸ The construction of this temple not only transformed P.R. Thakur's residence into a space for public sociality, but it also simultaneously reminded the local Matua residents of the ancestral home of the Thakur family at Orakandi (now in Bangladesh). The temple eventually became the nucleus of the larger refugee settlement. In fact, it is this *Harimandir*, next to P.R. Thakur's family residence, that has built the reputation of Thakurnagar as "Sreedham" among the Matua refugees. From the beginning, the architectural planning of the Thakurbari compound and the religious-cultural activities held there resembled that of their counterparts in Orakandi. Currently, the Thakurbari compound consists of the residential buildings of the family members, the *Harimandir* and other temples, a pond called *Kamana Sagar* (literally meaning, the sea of wishes), a ground for mass events, and office of the central Matua organisation. Drawing parallels between Thakurnagar and Orakandi—the two main centres of the Matua religion in a Partitioned Bengal—is extremely common in the Matua public discourse, particularly in Matua literature. In his preface to a book on Orakandi and Thakurnagar, for example, Matua writer-turned-political leader Kapil Krishna Thakur writes about how the religious festivals which are organised at Thakurnagar were started following similar practices at Orakandi.³⁹ For the Matuas, Orakandi signifies the original *Sreedham* in memory of which *Sreedham Thakurnagar* was built. In addition to its religious-cultural significance, Orakandi also occupies an influential position in the larger context of contemporary Matua politics. The relevance of Orakandi became evident in two recent events: first, when a Matua delegation from Orakandi led by Thakur family scion Padmanabha Thakur attended Modi's rally at Thakurnagar in 2019; and second, when the Indian Prime Minister visited the *Harimandir* at Orakandi during his official trip to Bangladesh at the time of West Bengal State Assembly Election in 2021. At the later event, Modi promised to upgrade a school and set up another at Orakandi as part of the diplomatic dialogue between India and Bangladesh.

The making of Thakurbari, in particular, and Thakurnagar, at large, as a sacred place involved a host of other "platial practices" initiated and continued by Matuas in consultation with the Thakur family.⁴⁰ This includes: a] organisation of mass events such as the *Baruni Mela* (a fair, also called the Matua Dharma Mahamela), *Rathiyatra* (chariot festival), *Gosai Sammelan* (meeting of Matua preachers) and collective prayer meets; b] revival of the Matua Mahasangha and expanding its network; and c] imagination and depiction of Thakurnagar as a sacred place in Matua popular culture, particularly in vernacular print literature. Let us first look at the mass events. The *Baruni Mela*, an annual congregation held on the eve of Harichand Thakur's birth anniversary till date, was the first mass event that was started at the Thakurbari in 1948. It is a week-long celebration that is attended by thousands of devotees from different parts of India, and many from Bangladesh. The activities include traditional dances and prayers at the

Harimandir, holy dip in the Kamana Sagar, community feasts, and spending leisurely time at a fair organised next to the Thakurbari premises. The fair consists of book stalls of Dalit literature, ornament and garment shops, fast food joints, and recreational outlets. The next year, in 1949, another annual event viz. *Rathyatra* was started. However, the Matua *Rathyatra* held in Thakurnagar is different from its conventional Hindu counterpart. The idols of deities that are placed in the chariot are not that of Hindu gods Jagannath-Balaram-Subhadra but of Matua icons Harichand Thakur and his wife, Shanti Debi. At the time, the Matua leadership, particularly Binapani Debi, also decided to organise monthly prayer meetings called *Shanti Sabha*, named after Shanti Debi. These meetings, primarily led by the women, played a formative role in mobilisation of Matua devotees who resettled in and around Thakurnagar. The devotees engaged in activities such as conducting these meets, collection of donations, preparation of food, purchase of musical instruments, and so forth. The standard itinerary of a Shanti Sabha includes *puja* (prayer, worship), performance of devotional songs, followed by distribution of *prasada* (holy offerings). A striking feature of these meetings is the prevalence of a larger popular practice of making *maanat* (prayer vow), that is, a belief system where a devotee makes a wish to the God with a condition and vows to give donation (money, jewellery, food grains, etc.) to the temple upon fulfilment of the wish (such as cure of illness, appointment in jobs, and similar private issues). Apart from the local residents, the practice of making *maanat* at the Shanti Sabhas attracted Matuas from outside Thakurnagar to attend these meetings. On one hand, these initiatives became an important source of revenue for the Thakurbari, and on the other, these practices assigned specific meanings to the settlement of Thakurnagar and shaped its “distinctive identity” as a place that is sacred. In modern South Asia, mass events and prayer practices have historically functioned as key factors behind the formation of a “political community” and collective identity of religious groups.⁴¹ The case of the Matuas is no different from this larger political phenomenon. However, as the case of Thakurnagar demonstrates, these popular initiatives also function as crucial platial practices for refugees and migrants that make them simultaneously reinvent their place, community, and identity in a new environment.

The organisation of mass events, however, necessitated the presence of an institution. The religious organisation of the Matuas was first established in 1932 under the supervision of Guruchand Thakur. Initially, it was called the Sri Sri Harichand Mission and was renamed the Matua Mahasangha a year later in 1933.⁴² P.R. Thakur, Guruchand Thakur’s grandson, became the first *sanghadhipati* (institutional head) of the Matua Mahasangha. However, the political developments at the time of Partition led to the decline of the Namasudra movement in Bengal, including the organisational politics of the Matuas.⁴³ After migrating to India, P.R. Thakur tried to revive the Mahasangha. But it remained an organisationally weak outfit for a long time because of factionalism within the Matua leadership. In 1965, Mahananda Halder, a prominent Matua leader, and a few others formed a separate organisation called the Harichand Seba Sangha due to his differences with P.R.

Thakur.⁴⁴ More than a decade later, in 1980, the two organisations were finally merged under the initiative of Matua leader Susil Kumar Biswas and was named the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha.⁴⁵ In 1986, the working committee of the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha renamed it as the Matua Mahasangha.⁴⁶ Two years later, it was officially registered as the main organisation of the Matuas in India with its headquarters in Thakurnagar. Although interrupted by many ups and downs over a period of four decades, the processes of making and consolidation of the Matua Mahasangha in its current form institutionally connected the *Thakurbari* to the larger Matua refugee population dispersed in different parts of India. The organisation gradually expanded its network through membership drives, setting up its local branches in Namasudra-dominated neighbourhoods, or bringing under its umbrella the existing local Matua outfits that operated in the multiple refugee settlements in West Bengal and in other states like Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh), Malkangiri (Odisha), Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and elsewhere.

Thakurnagar has also been consistently represented as a sacred place in Matua print literature and other mass media platforms. Consider the following lines from a poem by Jagadish Chandra Halder, a Matua poet:

Thakurnagar the Holy pilgrimage
Lakhs and crores of devotees come here
Maddened in Thy name
Forgot the Vedas-Vedanta – their tearful eyes
Call Hari Guruchand.⁴⁷

Interestingly, the poet not only imagines Thakurnagar as a pilgrimage visited by millions of people, but also characterises the devotees as those who forgot the foundational Hindu scriptures by being maddened in the name of Harichand-Guruchand. The imagination of Thakurnagar in this poem is enmeshed with the anti-caste character of Matua religion and its followers. There are many examples of thematically similar poems and songs that depict Thakurnagar as a *tirtha* (pilgrimage) of the downtrodden masses. Moreover, Thakurnagar has developed as a Matua cultural centre.⁴⁸ The Matua Mahasangha publishes a magazine called the Matua Mahasangha Patrika and a wide range of religious and organisational texts. Book stores and other shops, particularly those in the Thakurbari premises, are deeply involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of Matua literature, art, music, and cultural objects. Apart from the key religious texts and the official publications of the Mahasangha, visitors can buy books and magazines on Matua religion and Namasudra history, society and politics, photographs and idols of Matua and Hindu deities, music CDs, and religious ornaments of the Matuas in these stores.

The Development of the Refugee Colony

While the presence of the *Thakurbari* provided Thakurnagar its symbolic significance as a sacred place, the infrastructural transformation of the refugee colony is a parallel yet different story of place making, i.e., the ways in which

the physical environment of the area from a large expanse of mostly marshy land developed into a refugee township through institution building, memorialisation practices, negotiations with the State. P.R. Thakur, and subsequently the Matua Mahasangha leadership are quite rightfully the protagonists of this story. The first educational institution set up in Thakurnagar in 1949 was a boys' high school [Fig.2]. It was established under the initiative of P.R. Thakur. Two years later, in 1951, he received a grant of Rs.80,000 from the state government for developing roads and drinking water facilities and providing each family a sum of Rs.200 and two bundles of corrugated iron for building houses.⁴⁹ The local railway station also came up in the same year. In 1956, a girls' high school was established. Other essential institutions such as health centres, post-office, and markets were set up in the initial years after Partition. The rapid infrastructural development of the place thus led to a huge influx of refugees in the area. An estimate of roughly fifty thousand Dalit refugees resettled in and around this colony within the first ten years of its establishment.⁵⁰



Fig. 2: The entrance gate of Thakurnagar Higher Secondary School, established in 1949, © Author

As already mentioned, practices of memorialisation lie at the heart of place making. In any given place, the names of institutions and spaces of public interest, the memorials and statues on the streets, the graffiti on the walls, and visible acts of commemoration of chosen icons speak a lot about its people, history, and politics. For example, most of the post-Partition refugee colonies that came up in and around Kolkata like Netaji Nagar, Bapujinagar, Chittaranjan Colony, Baghajatin Colony, Sucheta Colony, and many others were named after freedom fighters and nationalist leaders like Subhash Chandra Bose, M.K. Gandhi, C.R. Das, Jatin Das, Sucheta Kripalani, and others. These names, as Anwasha Sengupta has noted, were “homage to the freedom movement” by refugee leaders of these colonies and acts of “placing

the refugees within the narrative of the nationalist movement.”⁵¹ Not all colonies, as Sengupta also points out, were named after national icons. Colonies like Bijoygarh, Azadgarh, and Ramgarh which were built on lands, occupied forcefully (*jabardakhal*) by the refugees from the local landlords, had the term “*garh*” (fortress) in their names that signifies “memories of refugee resistance and their politics of representation” in a new environment.⁵²

Thakurnagar was established in the same year as Bijoygarh colony of Kolkata. However, unlike the colonies of Kolkata, this rural refugee settlement offers a very different narrative of memorialisation and naming practices. The icons of this place are not the upper caste nationalist figures, but Dalit saints and leaders. Since the beginning, the commemorative practices of Matua refugees in and around Thakurnagar revolved around the icons of Harichand Thakur, Shanti Debi, Guruchand Thakur, and his wife Satyabhama Debi. For example, it is common practice among people in this area to name their commercial establishments such as shops after the Matua icons. Moreover, in contrast to the urban, upper caste refugees who resettled in colonies in Kolkata and viewed their acceptance of Partition as a moment of “sacrifice for the Indian nation,”⁵³ there is no such explicit rhetoric of sacrifice or signs of identification with the nationalist freedom movement in the place making practices of Dalit refugees who resettled in Thakurnagar. Rather, Partition, the decision to migrate, and start anew generated a permanent sense of loss. The most glaring example of this, as discussed above, lies in the name of P.R. Thakur’s house “Exile.”

After the death of Thakur in 1990, the memorialisation practices in Thakurnagar took a new turn. The emergence of a new iconography around the architect of this refugee colony dotted the entire landscape of Thakurnagar. This is evident from popular initiatives as well as institutional efforts undertaken in the area since the 1990s. On the first day of my visit to Thakurnagar, I came across an outfit called the P.R. Thakur Samaj Kalyan Samiti at Ganti. It was established in 1990 to commemorate Thakur. An activity of this outfit, as I noticed in an advertisement banner on the street, was offering free coaching to students for a scholarship examination [Fig.3]. Local residents have also constructed busts and temples of P.R. Thakur. A few years after his death, in 1993, for example, the locals constructed a bust of P.R. Thakur near the local health centre that was unveiled by Binapani Debi. Another prominent memorial of Thakur is right outside the railway station. If one steps out of the railway station and walks towards the Thakurbari, two memorials attract the visitor’s eyes. The first one is a bust of former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the foundation stone of which was laid by P.R. Thakur in 1984. The second one is a temple of P.R. Thakur that was constructed with donations from the local vendors’ union and residents and inaugurated by Binapani Debi in 2006. The Matua Mahasangha also played an active role in the making and promotion of this new iconography. A temple called P.R. Thakur Smriti Mandir was constructed where P.R. Thakur was cremated within the Thakurbari premises. The dais at the *nata mandir* (community hall in front of the *Harimandir*) has been recently renovated and named P.R. Thakur Mancha with his image in the background. In 1994, the

Matua Mahasangha took a decision to donate some land for the construction of a school called P.R.Thakur Bidyapith. The foundation stone was laid by Binapani Debi, and the school was established in 1997.



Fig. 3: The office of a local organisation called P.R.Thakur Samaj Kalyan Samiti in Ganti, Thakurnagar. The organisation is advertising its initiative to provide free coaching to school children. © Author.

Apart from these local popular initiatives, a key demand of the Matua Mahasangha towards the government has been the official recognition of the Matua icons through the naming of institutions or public spaces after them. Over the last two decades, the Mahasangha has quite successfully negotiated with the political parties and the government in terms of its demands. In 2007, for instance, a road in Thakurnagar was named P.R. Thakur Sarani by the Gaighata Panchayat Samiti. After 2009, the Thakurnagar station has also been upgraded and the ticket counter was remodelled to resemble the Harimandir at Thakurbari. In 2013, a government college named after him was set up by the State Government, and more recently, in 2018, a state university called the Harichand Guruchand University was established in Thakurnagar. These decisions of successive governments vis-à-vis the demands of the Matuas in the recent past reflect the growing importance of the community as a crucial vote bank and the increasing closeness of different political parties with the Matua Mahasangha.

The Movement for Citizenship and Political Contestations

The recent attention that Thakurnagar has received as a political location, as mentioned at the outset, is the result of the movement of Dalit refugees against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2003. After the enactment of this law, the Matua Mahasangha in collaboration with refugee outfits organised a hunger strike at the Thakurbari premises. They demanded the reamendment

of the 2003 Act and unconditional citizenship rights in India for refugees from Bangladesh. Twenty-one people, including top Matua Mahasangha leaders, participated in the hunger strike. The decision to organise the protest at Thakurnagar under the banner of the Mahasangha, as a prominent refugee leader during our interview revealed, was taken because of the organisation's "network" (*sangathan*) and "religious appeal" (*dharmiyo abeg*).⁵⁴ On the fifth day of the strike, a confrontation between the police and the protestors took place as a contingent of the former reached Thakurbari to disperse the latter. The visit of the police to the Thakurbari angered the local Matuas and they gathered in large numbers compelling the forces to retreat. On the seventh day, Ramdas Athwale, a Member of Parliament (MP) and the leader of the Republican Party of India visited Thakurnagar as the representative of the Central Government and promised to address the demand of the Matuas. The strike was thereafter withdrawn. But the protest decisively transformed the image of the Matua Mahasangha from a religious to a political representative organisation of Dalit refugees. Simultaneously, Thakurnagar gained visibility as a political location for Dalit refugee activism apart from being a sacred place.

First, the protest led to the direct engagement of the Matua Mahasangha in strictly political activities such as organising periodic agitations, submitting deputations to the government authorities to look into the interests of the Bengali Dalit refugees, and negotiating with the police and the local administration in case of arrests or other forms of harassment. In 2005, for instance, a delegation of Matua Mahasangha visited the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to discuss their demands. A decade later, in 2014, the Mahasangha leaders organised another hunger strike at the Thakurbari compound on the citizenship issue. This strike was withdrawn after BJP leader Krishnamurti Bhandi visited Thakurnagar and reassured the leaders to resolve their demand. Moreover, different refugee organisations and other outfits such as the Joint Action Committee for Bangali Refugees, the Purba Banga Dharmio Sankhalaghu Udbastu Kalyan Parishad, the Bangiya Lokokobi Sanstha, and the Bangla Bachao Nagarik Mancho have worked closely and in consultation with the Matua Mahasangha leadership from time to time over these years on their shared political agenda. In other words, the emergence of the Matua Mahasangha as a crucial stakeholder in contemporary Dalit refugee politics since the mid-2000s transformed Thakurnagar into a site of political activism.



Fig. 4: A temporary gate, with images of Matua preceptors, Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, along with that of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. The gate was installed at the entrance of the *Thakurbari* premises before Home Minister Amit Shah's visit in 2021. The gate-cum-poster is a call for a public meeting at *Sreedham Thakurnagar Thakurbari* in the run-up to the West Bengal Assembly Election the same year, © Author.

Second, the movement brought the Matua Mahasangha close to the political establishment [Fig.4]. Not only did the leaders of all the major political parties frequented Thakurnagar to seek support from the leaders, but multiple members of the Thakur family and other Matua leaders have been nominated as candidates in elections by different political parties. In 2011, P.R. Thakur's youngest son, Manjul Krishna Thakur, won the Gaighata constituency seat in the State Assembly election and was appointed the Minister for Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation. Between 2011 to the present day, five members of the Thakur family have become either MLA or MP. In 2021, Thakur family scion Shantanu Thakur became a Union Minister in the incumbent BJP government. Moreover, political parties donated considerable sums of money for the development of Thakurbari and Thakurnagar in general in the last one and a half decades. Engagement with electoral politics has bolstered the political significance of Thakurnagar. Most recently, in June 2023, a physical confrontation broke out between the supporters of Shantanu Thakur and those of TMC leader Abhisekh Banerjee when the latter visited *Thakurbari* to campaign before the panchayat polls.

Finally, let us look at the most recent development in the politics around this place. After coming back to power in 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 was passed by the Modi government. While the passage of this Act led to nationwide protests and has been challenged in the Supreme Court; this law, if implemented, will partially meet the longstanding

demand of the Matuas. The BJP's position on the citizenship issue thus has brought the party closer to the dominant Matua Mahasangha leadership. A section of the Matuas, nonetheless, remains dissatisfied with the 2019 Act for two reasons: a) it fails to meet the original demand of "unconditional citizenship" because of the mentioned cut-off date; and b) the delay in notifying the rules of the Act by the BJP government. However, the 2019 Act and the political campaign around it, particularly since 2014, on the one hand, has communalised the citizenship issue by positing the polarising binary "*udbastu banam onuprobeshkari*" (refugee versus infiltrator); and on the other, it has acted a tool of political engineering for the BJP and its Hindutva allies to integrate the Matuas, the followers of an anti-Brahminical faith, within the Hindu majoritarian establishment. This politics of communal polarisation and thereby integrating Dalits within the Hindu fold has serious political implications for Thakurnagar as a place. In August 2020, for instance, the Matua leader and BJP MP Shantanu Thakur sent soil and water from Thakurnagar to Ayodhya (in Uttar Pradesh) before the *bhumi puja* (ground-breaking ceremony) of the upcoming Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid.⁵⁵ This act also led to a controversy as a section of the Matuas alleged that the soil from Thakurnagar was rejected. These contestations over Thakurnagar and attempts to assign newer meanings to this place among political actors further indicate its growing political salience.

Conclusion

"Place" argued Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "can and does operate as an anchor, a platform, and an organizing device" for migrant communities.⁵⁶ This is evident from the above discussion on Thakurnagar where Namasudra refugees have inscribed their collective identity in the post-Partition decades through a series of platial practices, primarily around an anti-caste faith, religious organisation, iconography, and movement to assert their demands on citizenship, recognition, and representation. The making and transformation of Thakurnagar happened at two overlapping levels. At one level, it developed as a sacred-civic place, akin to Orakandi, through popular initiatives such as temple construction, organisation of mass events and prayer meets, memorialisation practices, as well as economic activities and building of institutions such as schools, railway station, post-office, health centres, and markets. At another level, it evolved as a political location which is a site of political contestations and where the presence of the Matua Mahasangha headquarters and leadership continue to provide a sense of security and protection to the displaced Dalit refugees in a new environment. After the passage of the 2003 Act, the political salience of Thakurnagar became stronger because of the Matua Mahasangha's movement for citizenship rights at a time when many Dalit refugees encountered police and bureaucratic harassment for being suspected as "illegal" migrants. For example, the Matuas consider and frequently use the Matua Mahasangha identity card issued at Thakurbari as an important document to avoid administrative heckling.

Moreover, Thakurnagar provided a distinctive sense of community to the local Matuas. In contrast to the Matua refugees who resettled in the Andamans and whose “place-making processes embeds the narrative of refugee rehabilitation...within the nationalist master narrative of Mini-India” and are marked by a “loss of relevance of Partition”⁵⁷; the Matuas of Thakurnagar express a contrapuntal awareness as they kept the sense of loss caused by Partition and memories of home alive in their platial practices such as naming. This consciousness has been central to their political activism and the formation of community identity. In the recent past, the house of Manjul Krishna Thakur and his family within the Thakurbari compound was named “The Expulsion.” This family currently heads the dominant faction of the Matua Mahasanga.⁵⁸ Like “Exile,” the name of this next-door house too echoes the permanent sense of loss. Additionally, the name also characterises the present politics of the Matuas as it reflects how Dalit refugees continue to struggle to prove themselves as Indian citizens even after seventy years of Partition. However, it is undeniable that the place making practices and assertions of the Matuas in Thakurnagar over these years have made this place the seat of Dalit refugee activism in the changing political landscape of West Bengal.

All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

Notes

¹ Prasun Chaudhuri, “Matuas: Nobody's people, Everybody's Votebank”, *The Telegraph*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/matuas-nobody-s-people-everybody-s-votebank/cid/1686964>.

² Bharatiya Janata Party, “PM Shri Narendra Modi Addresses Public Meeting in Thakurnagar, West Bengal,” *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjj_9uSNTbw.

³ The BJP-led union government introduced the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2016 in the Lok Sabha. The highlights of this Bill are: a) it makes religion for the first time a criterion for acquiring Indian citizenship by removing people of six religious communities (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians), who migrated to India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before an extended cut-off, from the definition of “illegal migrants”; and b) it reduces the number of years required for the acquisition of citizenship by naturalisation. The Bill, however, did not pass in the Rajya Sabha and was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee. In 2019, the BJP once again made the citizenship question a key poll campaign issue. After coming back to power, the Modi government passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019. The passage of the law led to country-wide protests. See, Syantani Chatterjee and Natasha Raheja, “India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): Citizenship and Belonging in India,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review (Forum)*, September 7, 2020, <https://polarjournal.org/2020/09/07/indias-citizenship-amendment-act-caa-citizenship-and-belonging-in-india/>.

⁴ The Namasudras, an “ex-Untouchable” caste, constitute the second largest Scheduled Caste community in West Bengal. A large section of the Namasudras are

followers of the Matua sect which was introduced in the late nineteenth century by Harichand Thakur as an anti-caste religion.

⁵ I use the word “Dalit,” meaning “broken” or “crushed,” in the context of the Namasduras and Matuas because it is popularly used as a self-referential term. The other terms that the Matuas use to identify themselves are *patit* (fallen), *nipirito* (oppressed), and *pichiye pora manush* (the backward people).

⁶ Vasudha Chhotray, “Nullification of Citizenship: Negotiating Authority without Identity Documents in Coastal Odisha, India,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no.2 (2018): 175–90; Praskanva Sinharay, “To Be a Hindu Citizen: Politics of Dalit Migrants in Contemporary West Bengal,” *South Asia* 42, no.2 (2019): 359–74.

⁷ Praskanva Sinharay, “A New Politics of Caste,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 34 (August 25, 2012): 26–27.

⁸ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, “In Search of Space: The Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal after Partition,” *Policies and Practices* 59 (2014): 13, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP59.pdf>.

⁹ Pradip Kumar Bose, “Refugee, Memory and the State: A Review of Research in Refugees Studies,” *Refugee Watch* 36 (December 2010): 1-30, <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rw/%20files/RW36/1.Pradip.pdf>; Joya Chatterji, “Dispersal and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no.5 (September 2007): 995–1032.

¹⁰ Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel, “‘I Am Not a Refugee’: Rethinking Partition Migration,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no.3 (July 2003): 551–84.

¹¹ There are exceptions to this larger trend in the existing scholarship. For example, scholars such as Ross Mallick, Jhuma Sen, Phillip Zehmisch, and Madhumita Mazumdar have tried to look at the rehabilitation processes, policies, and sites related to lower-caste refugees. See, Ross Mallick, “Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 1 (1999): 104–25; Jhuma Sen, “Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives,” in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015), 102–27; Phillip Zehmisch, “Between Mini-India and Sonar Bangla: The Memorialisation and Place-Making Practices of East Bengal Hindu Refugees in the Andaman Islands,” in Churnjeet Mahn, and Anne Murphy (eds.), *Partition and the Practice of Memory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63–88; Madhumita Mazumdar, “Dwelling in Fluid Spaces: The Matuas of the Andaman Islands,” in *New Histories of the Andaman Islands: Landscape, Place and Identity in the Bay of Bengal, 1790–2012*, eds. Clare Anderson, Madhumita Mazumdar, and Vishvajit Pandya (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 177–178.

¹² Zehmisch, “Between Mini-India,” 74.

¹³ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no.1 (February 1992): 6–23.

¹⁴ David Turton, “The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement: Lessons from Long-Term Field Research in Southern Ethiopia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 3, (2005): 258–80.

¹⁵ John Gray, “Community as Place-Making: Ram Auctions in the Scottish Borderland,” in *Realizing Community: Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments*, ed. Vered Amit (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.

¹⁶ Karin Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

- ¹⁷ Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no.1 (February 1992): 35.
- ¹⁸ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Occupation, Dignity, and Space: The Rise of Dalit Studies," *History Compass* 11, no.12 (2013): 1059–67.
- ¹⁹ Geeta Thatra, "Dalit Chembur: Spatializing the Caste Question in Bombay, c. 1920s-1970s," *Journal of Urban History* 48, no.1 (2022): 63-97.
- ²⁰ D. Karthikeyan, "Contentious Spaces: Guru Pujas as Public Performances and the Production of Political Community," in *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Institutionalising Minorities in South Asia*, eds. Hugo Gorringe, Roger Jeffery, Suryakant Waghmore (New Delhi: Sage, 2016), 178–200.
- ²¹ Rawat, "Occupation, Dignity, and Space," 1060.
- ²² Turton, "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movement."
- ²³ Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* (Delhi: Sage, 1999), 98.
- ²⁴ Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 98; Also see Census of India 2011 West Bengal District Census Handbook North 24 Parganas, Series 20, Part XII-B, (Directorate of Census Operations, West Bengal), 26.
- ²⁵ N.B. Roy, *A People in Distress*, vol. II (Calcutta: B. Sarkar and Co., p.250).
- ²⁶ For a discussion on P.R. Thakur and his political career, see. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.); Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space."
- ²⁷ Kapil Krishna Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi, Thakurnagar O Matua-der Nana Prasanga* (Thakurnagar: Nikhil Bharat Prakashani 2010), 66.
- ²⁸ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 66; Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 96.
- ²⁹ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 69–70.
- ³⁰ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 69–70.
- ³¹ Roy, *A People in Distress*, 250.
- ³² Debdas Pande, *An Approach to Matuamism* (Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha, 2008), 112.
- ³³ Roy, *A People in Distress*, 250.
- ³⁴ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 66.
- ³⁵ Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 186.
- ³⁶ Said, "Reflections on Exile," 173.
- ³⁷ Said, "Reflections on Exile," 186.
- ³⁸ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 67.
- ³⁹ Kapil Krishna Thakur, Prasanga Katha, in Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 8.
- ⁴⁰ I borrow the term "platial", meaning "the action of place making," from Aguilar–San Juan. For details, see, Karin Aguilar–San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) xxv-xxvi.
- ⁴¹ Sandria B. Freitag, "Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a "Hindu" Community," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no.4 (1980): 597–625; P Sanal Mohan, "Creation of Social Space through Prayers among Dalits in Kerala, India," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2, no.1 (2016): 40–57; Karthikeyan, "Contentious Spaces."
- ⁴² Pande, *An Approach to Matuamism*, 106–07.
- ⁴³ Partha Chatterjee, "Historicising Caste in Bengal Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVII.50 (2012): 69–70.

⁴⁴ Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

⁴⁵ Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

⁴⁶ Pande, *An Approach to Matuatism*, 113.

⁴⁷ Biswas, *Sreedham Orakandi*, 71.

⁴⁸ Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

⁴⁹ Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

⁵⁰ Bandyopadhyay, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, "In Search of Space," 13.

⁵¹ Anwesha Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata: History, Politics and Memory," *Sahapedia*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.sahapedia.org/refugee-colonies-kolkata-history-politics-and-memory>.

⁵² Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata."

⁵³ Sengupta, "The Refugee Colonies of Kolkata."

⁵⁴ Interview with leader of a prominent refugee organisation, Madhyamgram, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, October 25, 2013.

⁵⁵ Indrajit Kundu, "BJP MP's Bid to Send Soil from Matua Community in Bengal for Ram Temple in Ayodhya," *India Today*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bjp-mp-s-bid-to-send-soil-from-matua-community-in-bengal-for-ram-temple-in-ayodhya-1706189-2020-07-31>.

⁵⁶ Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons*, xx.

⁵⁷ Zehmisch, "Between Mini-India and Sonar Bangla," 86.

⁵⁸ In 2015, the Matua Mahasangha was divided into two factions due to a rift within the Thakur family.