

Identity Politics In West Bengal: A Study On Namasudra Community

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ABSTRACT

India's democracy is the largest and most influential in the world. Since independence, it has evolved significantly, transitioning from local governance traditions to a strong national parliamentary system. Over the years, it has adapted to various challenges, showcasing resilience and dynamism in its growth and transformation. The term Identity politics, also mention to as identitarians, is a political approach and analysis based on people prioritizing the idea most relevant to their particular racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual, social, or other identity. In west Bengal the identity-based politics has been increasing base on the caste and religion. The recent time some political party construct new form of identity politics of West Bengal to survive in power. In my writing focused on the role of identity politics in West Bengal, specially focussed on the role of Namasudra community in electoral politics as a most deprive Dalit community. The study also focuses on how the political parties strategically created the caste base identity and ensure the power with help of democratic participation. In writing this article, I used various techniques of historical and comparative methods.

Keywords: Identity, Namasudra, Politics, Democracy, Election, Power

Introduction:

After independence India adapted democratic rule there have equal political right to the entire citizen. The term identity politics has been used in Indian political system since at least four decades (Chandra, 2004). The term Identity politics, also mention to as identitarianism, is a political approach and analysis based on people prioritizing the idea most relevant to their particular racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual, social, or other identity (Jaffrelot, 2019). The identity politics also promote specific group's interests without regard for the interests of other social groups; it is not good for Indian democracy. But in the recent time some political party construct new form of identity politics in India to survive in power (Yadav, 2010). From this perspective, the issues of caste and religion have become increasingly significant in the politics of West Bengal, just as they are in India as a whole (Basu, 2014). Caste based identity politics play an important role in the recent politics of West Bengal. Now a days, in India we find few political and social issues have given birth of discussion about the caste or religion-based thought. In the present time, the Bengali Namasudras (a part of Dalit) are playing an important role in Indian politics as a vote bank. After partition the Maximum Dalit Namasudras are come from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to the Indian state of West Bengal as refugees (Dasgupta, 2016).

All the legal and illegal Namasudras refuge are trying to establish their political and social identity as Indian citizen, through political participation and documentation. Some time our administrations provide this scope for the identity as Indian citizen and after that they are got the voting right (Sen, 2015). From a long time, CPI(M), TMC, BJP all the political parties announced that their government provide national citizenship of the Bengali refugee. Some time the Namasudras are used as a vote bank and played an important role in West Bengal Politics, some Namasudras leader went to a political leader at Thakurbari in Thakurnagar (North 24 pargana) for their political support. Therefore, the identity politics of Namasudras has become important in West Bengal. Sometime members of Namasudra community have been elected as leader and representatives like MP, MLA etc. from many political parties but they still do not get their proper national identity (Chakraborty, 2022). In 2019 loksabha election the Namasudras are played an important role and they

support BJP, as a result the party has done very well in the humble areas. After that, the Modi government took various initiatives for Indian citizenship to the Namasudra Refuges in West Bengal, which became relevant in West Bengal politics (Sarkar, 2023).

Objectives of the study:

Any study and research works have some objectives, so I have some objectives also for completing this work. The important objectives are follows:

1. Who are the Namasudras?
2. What are the identity crises of Namasudras in West Bengal?
3. What is the importance of Namasudra communities in West Bengal politics?
4. What is the present political stand of Matua Mahasangha and Namasudra community in West Bengal?

Methodology of the study:

At first, I have discussed identity politics in Indian politics especially focused on Namasudras as a Dalit community. I have discussed the historical background of Namasudras and their struggle for ethnic identity in colonial Bengal. I have tried to explore the Namasudra identity crises after partition to present day in West Bengal and the role of the Namasudra community in West Bengal politics also in present national politics. I discussed the impact of NRC and CAA 2019 on the Namasudra communities also Matua in West Bengal. In writing this article, I used various techniques of historical and comparative methods. For this work, I took the help of various secondary sources as books, newspapers, journals and government documents, E-books, E-journals, and government official websites etc.

History of Namasudras:

According to Hindu scriptures, the Namasudra community was previously referred to as Chandala or Chandal, a term that was often regarded with disdain. They existed outside the four-tier Varna system, and as such, were considered outcasts and untouchables by the higher castes in Hindu society (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Some *Namasudra* commentator said that *Namasudra* probably means best among the Shudras. The word *Chandal* was a specific term that was initially used in the Census Report 1871 made by British government in Bengal in the plot of the higher caste. Until this time we know *Namasudras* are known only by "*Namah*". After that the *Namasudra* leader Guruchand Thakur has organised a movement for the removal of *Chandal* name. Finally, in the 1911 census report, by removing the name *Chandal* with the word '*Namah*', the abuser used the word '*Shudra*' meaning "*Namasudra*" (Mukherjee, 2011). According to their ancestors, most of the *Namasudras* belong to "*Kashyap Gotra*". On the other hand, the *Namasudras* were the descendants of Monk *Buddha Kashyap* and they recently called themselves "*Namaswaj*". They usually use the titles of Biswas, Mandal, Howladar, Haldar, Sarkar, Sikdar, Majumdar, Das, Roy etc.

According to Sekhara Bandyopadhyaya, the community was traditionally engaged in fishing and as boatman. After such a long time they make their wetlands eligible for agriculture and they accepted agriculture as a livelihood (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). During this time their economic situation was much poor and rates of indebtedness fully high. Before partition the Namasudras were living at the districts of *Bakarganj*, *Faridpur*, *Jessore* and *Khulna* within the Hindu majority province of Bengal. After partition the Namasudras came to North 24 Pargana, Nadia, Dinajpur, Kuch Bihar etc. districts in West Bengal from the Bangladesh (Chakrabarty, 2015).

Namasudras Struggle for Identity:

Under the British government *Namasudras* struggle against the upper castes for their self-identity as '*Namah*', after a long movement, they achieved *Namasudras* as self-identity in 1911 census report (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). After that, they demanded social identity as an educated person as like higher caste people. With this idea, Namasudra leader Guruchand Thakur started social movement in Bengal for their social identity. *Orakandhi* village in Faridpur district in Bengal was the main point of the social movement. In 1912, they formed '*Bengal Namasudra Association*' for organising and continuing the said movement (Mukherjee, 2010). During that period, they demanded to the British Government for better opportunities of education and Government services for an increase in their economic conditions. They achieved some issues like educational institutions and government services for Namasudras from the British Government with the help of Dr. C. S. Mead (Bose, 2015). On the other hand, the Namasudras demanded some political issues in different elections and more representatives from the autonomous organization. In this case, the British Government was quite sympathetic to Namasudras and provided some opportunities for them. For this reason, Bengali Dalits didn't attend in the *Bangavanga* movement in 1905 against British Government (Chakrabarty, 1998). After that, in 1937 Bengal Legislative Assembly election, 12 numbers of Namasudra candidates won from 30 reserved seats. In 1946 Namasudra leader Jogendranath Mandal took a great initiative for nominating *Dr B.R. Ambedkar* as an elected representative to the constituent assembly from

Bengal (Sen, 2016). During this period Namasudras were struggling for self-social and political identity as like other higher castes in Bengal.

We are deeply looking into the Namasudras struggle for the religion identity in which there are two parts; in the first part, they struggled against caste-based Hindu religion identity. In that time, the upper caste Hindus opposed that the Chandal community not like *Pauttolik Hindu*, they come from the Buddhist faith, and currently practicing Hinduism. In this concept, the upper caste Brahminist influence upon the British colonial government to identify these types of people as Chandal in 1871 at Bengal (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). During this time, they lost their 'Namah' identity as Hindu religion and introduce as Chandal. Then they organised multiple social movements in this region for establishment of a Namah identity under the leadership of *Guruchad Thakur*. After a long time, finally they achieved their identity Namasudra as an untouchable lower caste Hindus (Chatterjee, 2009). At that time the Namasudras were organised under the leadership of *Guruchad Thakur* and make a self religion identity as Matua. Matua is self religion identity difference between Brahminists thought under the Hindu religions. The Matua identities believe all men are equal and they oppose Worship and deny the principle of Vedas. The Matua created a new concept 'Hari' and make a self religious identity under the Hinduism (Mukherjee, 2021).

On the other hand, under the second part Namasudras were struggling with other religion groups to save their religious identity after the partition. After independence, India have been divided into two religions-based countries in which one is Pakistan and all the Namasudra territories are in Pakistan. In this situation majority upper caste Hindus are easily came from Pakistan to India but maximum Namasudras stayed at their territory. After that the Namasudras were victimised by the Muslims and Muslims continued to occupy their home and agricultural land. In 1950, Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal resigned from Pakistan cabinet and came to India for betterment of their community (Bandyopadhyay, 2009). From that period upto present time many Namasudras came to India as refugees by persecuted by Muslims in various ways to save their religious identity. Still now, some Namasudras are struggling to save their religious identity of their territory in Bangladesh and some victim family converted into other religions. Although they are scattered in all over India, they are mainly living in North 24 pargana and Nadia district in West Bengal. Presently the Namasudras are creating a new religious identity under Matua Mahasanga, which makes an important identity in Indian socio-political sphere as well as in West Bengal (Biswas, 2025).

Table No. 1 Namasudra population in West Bengal as per Census 2001 and Census 2011:

Year	Total nos. of SC population	Total nos. of Namasudras population	% of Namasudras among the SCs	% of Namasudras Among the total state population
2001	18452555	3212393	17.41	4.01
2011	21463270	3504642	16.33	3.84

Source: 2011 Census of India

Table No.2 District-wise Namasudra Population of Major Districts in West Bengal as per Census, 2011:

Name of the District(s)	SC population	Namasudra population	Percentage of District Scheduled Caste Population
Nadia	1546917	903186	58.39
North 24 Pargana	2169084	856371	39.48
Jalpaiguri	1458278	341261	23.40
Burdwan	1033140	246586	11.65
South 24 Pargana	2464032	147600	5.99
Hoogly	1344021	125194	9.31
Kolkata	241932	49058	20.28

Source: 2011 Census of India.

Citizenship Identity, NRC and Namasudras in West Bengal:

We know that the Namasudras were come from Bangladesh to India as legal or illegal refugee from independence to till date. The maximum Dalit refugees have no legal documents for Indian national citizenship; they are suffering in emotional thoughts on this issue (Chakrabarty, 2019). The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 1986, established that being born in India alone was not sufficient to acquire Indian citizenship. To be recognized as a citizen at birth, at least one parent had to be an Indian citizen. This marked the first time the national identity of Namasudra refugees came into question. Later, in December 2003, the Parliament of India passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2003, which introduced and defined the term "illegal migrant." Under this Act, illegal immigrants were disqualified from obtaining citizenship through registration or naturalization. Additionally, the Act mandated the creation and maintenance of a National Register of Citizens (NRC). These amendments deepened the citizenship crisis for Namasudra refugees in

West Bengal, prompting widespread social and political movements led by Dalit refugee communities. (Basu, 2021).

The NRC is a registry maintained by the Government of India that contains names and relevant details for identifying original Indian citizens (Government of India, 2019). Following a Supreme Court order, the NRC update process began in Assam in 2013, requiring nearly 33 million residents to prove their Indian citizenship as of March 24, 1971. The final NRC list, released under the Supreme Court's supervision on August 31, 2019, excluded over 1.9 million applicants (Chakraborty, 2019). Under the list maximum disqualify person are belonging to Hindu religion especially Bengali Dalit refugees. The BJP government was taking a strong decision of the national citizenship issue. The NRC would be extended to the whole country, announced by Home Minister Amit Shah during parliamentary session on 20th November 2019. This issue has a greater impact on all the Namasudra refugees and then, they opposed the NRC, because this issue makes identity crises of the community in West Bengal. In this time the Dalit refugees was protest the NRC issues and demand citizenship without any conditions on the road with the help of All India Matua Mahasangha and others organisation (Das, 2021). The central government, also topmost BJP leaders are insured to Hindu religious people including Namasudras to protect their citizenship identity. Finally, the Modi government is provided the national citizenship to all the Hindu refugees in India including Namasudras in West Bengal (Government of India, 2020).



(A rally organised by Matuas to protest the NRC and demand citizenship in Thakurnagar on 30/12/2019.)

Source: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/matuas-hold-processions-against-caa/cid/1731631> retrieved 24th January, 2025

Namasudra Identity and Electoral Politics in West Bengal:

Identity politics is making a new dimension of any social group in the present institutional politics in India. Without political participation any social community unable to reach at the power and don't fulfil their economic and political demand from the state. For this reason, the Namasudras have a long history of participation in various political issues. But we deeply experienced our institutional politics; the way to achieve the political power is so narrow that very few people of the lower castes have entered it. In the course of history, it can also be seen that many of their justified claims have remained incomplete because they were not in the circle of power (Omvedt, 1994). We have seen that the Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal was a devoted supporter of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar but ultimately aligned with the Muslim League, believing that this would benefit the Scheduled Castes (Dalits). As a leader of the Scheduled Castes, he joined Pakistan's first cabinet as the Minister of Law and Labour. In 1950 Mandal came back to India as a victimised leader (Bandyopadhyay, 1997). After partisan another leader the great-grandson of Harichand Pramatha Ranjan Thakur came in West Bengal and in 1948 he founded Thakurnagar to rehabilitate thousands of Partition refugees. In 1962 West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections Pramatha Ranjan Thakur was elected as a member of the Indian National Congress from the Hanskhali constituency. After some time, he was victimized by upper caste political leader, he was moved out of the congress party and started work for the restructuring of his Matua Mahasangha (Bhattacharya, 2017).

From 1980 onwards all Namasudras were organised under Matua Mahasangha as a religious organisation but internally there had a political view point. P.R. Thakur thought this organisation will make a political identity of Namasudras (Dalit) in feature. In 1990, P. R. Thakur died, after that Binapani Devi Thakur popularly known as "Boro Maa" became the chief adviser and matriarch of the community (Das, 2017). In 2009 Lok Sabha election, Namasudra identity politics make an important issue under the Matua Mahasangha at Thakurnagar. During this time, TMC and CPI (M) both political parties demanded Namasudras support for their political power in West Bengal. In December 2010, in a meeting of Matua Mahasangha one interesting

incident happened that on a single dias Goutam Chakraborty from CPI (M) and Mukul Ray from TMC both were present for the political support. After that, Binapani Devi supported TMC from Namasudras and projected Mamata Banerjee as future Chief Minister of West Bengal for the betterment of the Dalit communities (Choudhury, 2021). At that time, Matua Mahasangha had a main target to abolish the Citizenship Amendment Bill 2003. In 2011 West Bengal Assembly election, Mamata Banerjee appealed for Matua votes in her support in as many as 74 out of 295 Assembly seats in West Bengal. Banerjee knew that the Namasudras vote were more important to win the seats at Nadia and North 24 pargana district. In this election, Boro Ma's youngest son Manjul Krishna won by Trinamul ticket from Gaighata and he was taken a ministerial charge of state Refugee Relief & Rehabilitation in the government of West Bengal (Mukherjee, 2022). In 2014 Lok Sabha Election, Kapil Krishna Thakur won with the support of 70 per cent voters from the Bongaon Lok Sabha constituency by Trinamul ticket. At that time, Matuas created a new identity in West Bengal politics and some development works were completed in Thakurnagar, but the citizenship question was not solved.

After that, in 2015, Manjul Krishna Thakur resigned from the West Bengal government and, along with his son Subrata Thakur, joined the Bharatiya Janata Party. In 2019 Lok Sabha Election, Sri Santanu Thakur has been elected with BJP ticket from Bongaon Constituency. During this election Santanu Thakur says, for the last seven decades, Namasudra community has been incessantly deprived by the governments. All political parties have applied us as their vote bank but have performed nothing for our benefit. We are votes, but some time we are not calculated as Indian citizens. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in West Bengal's Thakurnagar on 2nd February 2019, Modi spoke on the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill to provide citizenship to the Matua refugees. On the other hand, the Prime Minister has ensured to Namasudras (Dalits) that his government is ready to provide all the benefits for their development. In this election BJP achieved political support from the Namasudras and finally they won 18 seats out of 40 assembly seats from the Matua belt in West Bengal. Today, the Namasudras vote is an important matter for West Bengal politics; because the Matuas have created an identity politics with the question of Social and National citizenship issues.

Table 3: Scheduled Caste MLAs of Assembly Elections (1952–2016) in West Bengal

Year	Total Number of MLAs	Total Number of SC MLAs	Total Number of SC MLAs Elected from Reserved Seats	Total Number of SC MLAs Elected from General Seats
1952	238	47	41	06
1957	252	52	42	10
1962	252	59	42	17
1967	280	60	54	06
1969	280	55	54	01
1971	280	56	54	02
1972	280	60	54	06
1977	294	65	59	06
1982	294	62	59	03
1987	294	63	59	04
1991	294	66	59	07
1996	294	68	59	09
2001	294	62	59	03
2006	294	66	59	07
2011	294	72	68	04
2016	294	69	68	01
2021	292+2	80	66	14

Source: (Election commission of India & <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/is-there-a-second-wave-of-dalit-upsurge-in-west-bengal>) retrieved 20th May, 2021.

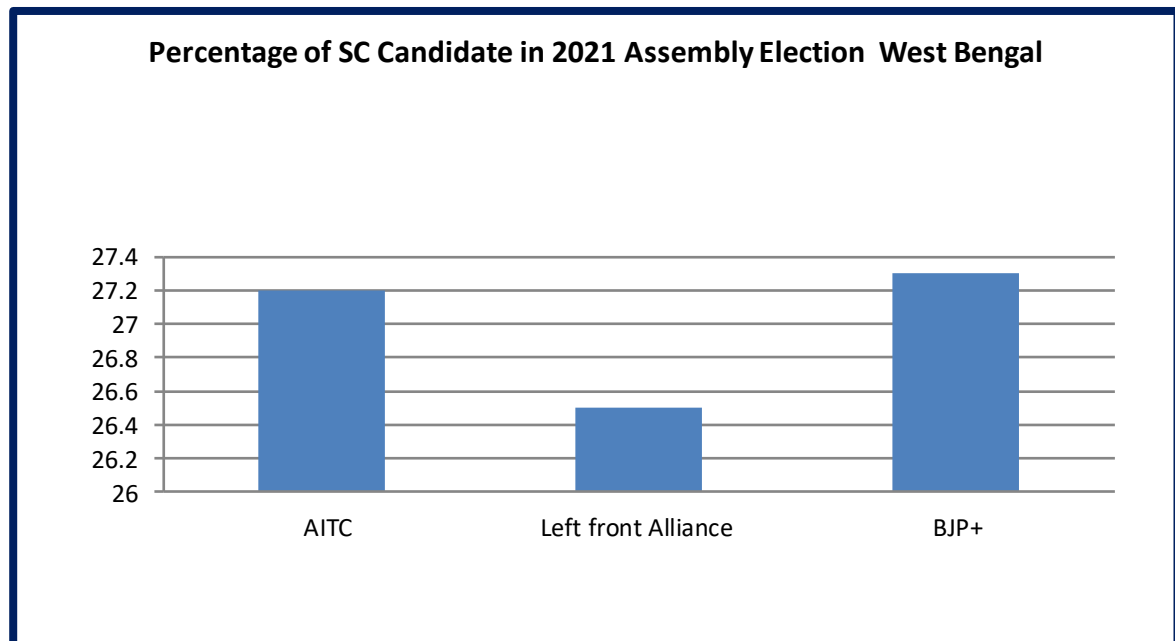
Table 4: Scheduled Caste MPs from West Bengal in Lok Sabha Elections (2004–2024)

Year	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
Total Number of Elected SC MPs	9	10	10	10	10
Number of SC MPs Elected from Reserved	8	10	10	10	10

Seats					
Number of SC MPs Elected from General Seats	1	0	0	0	0

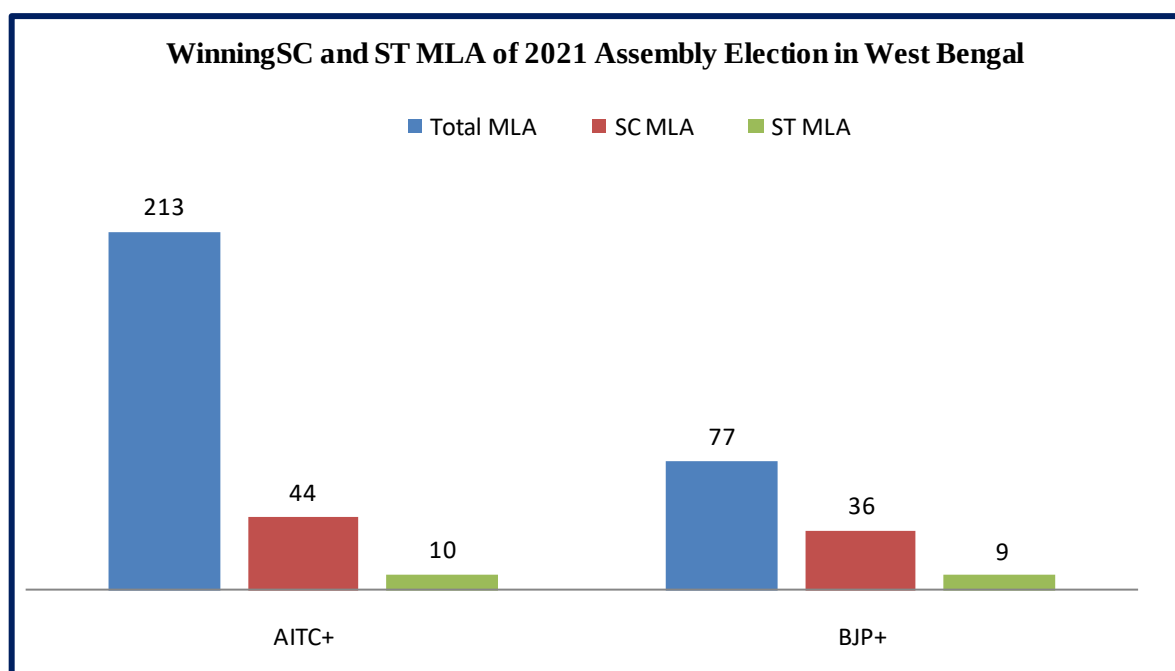
Source: (Election Commission of India's Statistical Reports on General Elections, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019 & 2024) retrieved 22nd February, 2025.

SC Candidate of 2021 Assembly Election in West Bengal



Source: Election commission of India

Winning SC and ST MLA of 2021 Assembly Election in West Bengal



Source: Election commission of India.

Concluding Observation:

The Namasudra is a different social group from other Dalit people in India, because there have a lot of experiences to struggle for their identity from colonial period to this modern India. Namasudras were struggling to recover their religion and ethnic identity in colonial Bengal, besides that, they struggled against the system of untouchables and their poor socio-economic conditions. After the partition, the Bengali Dalits faced a new challenge and the maximum Namasudras were come into West Bengal as a refugee. During that time, they struggled for their better rehabilitation programme at West Bengal under the leadership of P.R Thakur. Thakur has organised all the Namasudras for creating a socio-political identity and he visited the maximum refugee camps in West Bengal with the help of other accompanies. At that time, due to lack of political importance, Namasudra leaders moved away from politics and try to unite their community under the Matua Mahasangha. After a long time in 2009, we saw that the Namasudras have created a new socio-political identity in West Bengal and they reminded that the Congress and leftist parties could not fully express their plight. At this time, major political parties went to Binapani Debi at Thakurnagar for their political support, it was a new opportunity for the Namasudras to make a political identity under the form of Matua. In December 2010, popular CPIM leader Goutam Deb and TMC leader Mukul Roy were attended a meeting and shared a stage with leaders of the Dalits that was organised by Matuas at Thakurnagar. Only 3.84% of West Bengal's total population comprises Namasudras, while in the two adjacent districts of Nadia and North 24 Parganas, they make up nearly 50% of the total population. All concern people know that above mentioned numbers is important to West Bengal politics. In 2011 assembly election, Namasudras was played an important factor and supported to TMC and after. After 2014 Lok Shaba election, BJP party has tried to manage the political support of Dalit refugees including Namasudras. During 2019 Lok Shaba election, maximum Dalits supported BJP, because TMC could not do justice with regard to their national citizenship. At the election campaign top most BJP leader Shri Narendra Modi came to meet Matua leader Binapani Debi at Thakurnagar in North 24 Pargana and said that he and his party are trying to save the citizenship identity of the Matua refugees. So, all the above facts indicated that the Dalit are created a new identity politics in West Bengal

In this article, I have tried my best to find out Dalit identity politics in West Bengal especially the Namasudra society. All the Bengali Dalits are organised under the Matua to make their political identity in 2011 and 2016 state assembly elections and in 2019 Lok Shaba election the bengali Dalits including Namasudras discovered a new political phenomenon in West Bengal. After 2019 citizenship amendment Act create a new curiosity of the Dalit refugees especially Namasudras to politics and political power that also impacted in 2021 assembly election in West Bengal. On the other hand, some political leaders and scholars trying to establish that West Bengal have not any discrimination on caste, but we deeply seen these issues there have new form of discrimination. We deeply seen any labour list of MGNREGA their Maximum people are belong to Dalit, Other backward class and minority, beside to agriculture there have same scenario. On the other hand, in political field maximum political leader belong to upper caste, in industry and business sector maximum controlled under upper caste. In the educational field maximum Dalit student are reading under government schools and those students belong to higher castes they are studying on reputed institutions. So, all the Dalits especially Namasudras are going on in poor socio-economic conditions, after that in this condition the Namasudras community are trying to best presence in politics. Anyway, I present this conclusion as an informed hypothesis that warrants further empirical research on Dalit identity politics, particularly concerning the Namasudras in West Bengal.

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