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Impact of Caste Identity and Social Exclusion on the Academic Progress of Matua Students in Higher Education: A Study of South Bengal

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Abstract: *Caste identity and social exclusion continue to influence the educational experiences of marginalized communities in India. The Matua community, historically associated with the Namasudra Scheduled Caste population of Bengal, has a long history of social reform, religious awakening, migration, and struggle for dignity. Although higher education has expanded in West Bengal, students from marginalized caste communities still face several academic, social, economic, and psychological barriers. The present study examines the impact of caste identity and social exclusion on the academic progress of Matua students in higher education in South Bengal. The study focuses on students from selected rural and semi-urban areas of North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Hooghly, Howrah, and Purba Medinipur.*

The main objectives of the study are to analyze the socio-economic background of Matua students, examine the role of caste identity in academic life, identify forms of social exclusion in higher educational institutions, and assess their impact on academic progress. A descriptive survey method was used. The sample consisted of 150 Matua students studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and informal discussions.

The findings show that caste identity affects students' academic confidence, peer interaction, classroom participation, and access to institutional support. Financial hardship, first-generation learner status, lack of academic guidance, weak English communication, digital inequality, discrimination, and social exclusion negatively affect academic progress. The study also finds that female Matua students experience double marginalization because of caste and gender. However, many students show strong educational motivation due to community history, family aspirations, and the reformist legacy of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. The study concludes that inclusive institutional practices, scholarships, mentorship, anti-discrimination mechanisms, counselling, and community-based educational support are necessary for improving the academic progress of Matua students.

Keywords: Matua students, caste identity, social exclusion, academic progress, higher education, South Bengal, Namasudra, Scheduled Caste, marginalization, educational inequality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an important means of social mobility, empowerment, and democratic participation. It provides knowledge, skills, self-confidence, employment opportunities, and social recognition. For marginalized communities, higher education has special significance because it helps them challenge inherited forms of disadvantage. However, access to higher education does not automatically ensure equality. Students from marginalized caste backgrounds may enter colleges and universities, but they often face hidden barriers such as discrimination, lack of support, cultural alienation, language problems, financial hardship, and social exclusion.

Caste remains one of the most powerful structures of social inequality in India. Though the Constitution of India guarantees equality and prohibits discrimination, caste continues to influence educational access, classroom experience, peer relations, and academic achievement. Scheduled Caste students often experience exclusion in direct and indirect

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ways. Sometimes exclusion appears through open discrimination, and sometimes it appears through silence, neglect, humiliation, stereotyping, lack of guidance, or institutional indifference.

The Matua community of Bengal is an important Scheduled Caste community historically linked with the Namasudras. The Matua movement emerged as a socio-religious reform movement among marginalized lower-caste people in Bengal. Scholars have connected the Matua community with caste protest, displacement, refugee identity, dignity, and social mobility. Large sections of Matua-Namasudra families migrated to West Bengal after Partition, especially to areas such as North 24 Parganas and Nadia, where poverty, displacement, caste stigma, and insecurity affected educational opportunities.

The Matua movement is associated with Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. Harichand Thakur provided the spiritual and moral foundation of the community, while Guruchand Thakur gave special importance to education, social reform, women's upliftment, and collective awakening. Therefore, education has always been a central part of Matua consciousness. However, despite this historical emphasis on education, Matua students in higher education still face several forms of social and academic disadvantage.

South Bengal is a suitable area for this study because it includes important districts where Matua and Namasudra populations are present. North 24 Parganas, Nadia, South 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, and Purba Medinipur have significant Scheduled Caste populations and contain many rural and semi-urban students who enter higher education as first-generation learners. Census 2011 provides district-wise Scheduled Caste population data for West Bengal and includes Namasudra as a Scheduled Caste category in the state.

The All India Survey on Higher Education has shown that higher education enrolment in India has expanded, with total enrolment reaching nearly 4.33 crore in 2021–22. However, expansion alone does not solve inequality. Recent studies on Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students in higher education show that although access has improved, many SC/ST students remain concentrated in undergraduate and arts programmes, while their participation in higher levels and professional courses remains less satisfactory.

The present study examines how caste identity and social exclusion affect the academic progress of Matua students in higher education. Academic progress in this study refers to regular attendance, examination performance, classroom participation, self-confidence, continuation of study, access to academic support, and future educational planning.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- **Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 1997**

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's work Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947 is one of the most important studies on the Namasudra community. He examined caste protest, social identity, and political consciousness among Namasudras in Bengal. This work is highly relevant because the Matua community is historically connected with Namasudra identity. Bandyopadhyay's study helps explain how caste-based humiliation produced organized protest and the desire for dignity among marginalized caste groups.

- **Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 2004**

In Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal, Bandyopadhyay discussed how caste hierarchy and social dominance operated in Bengal. His work helps us understand why caste identity continues to shape the experiences of marginalized students. Even when legal equality exists, social dominance can continue through cultural and institutional practices.

- **Carola Erika Lorea, 2020**

Carola Erika Lorea studied religion, caste, and displacement among the Matua community. Her work describes the Matua community as a significant religious and social formation among Bengali Dalits. She highlights how caste, migration, and refugee experience shaped Matua identity. This is directly relevant to the present study because many Matua students in South Bengal belong to families with histories of displacement, poverty, and social exclusion.

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- **Carola Erika Lorea, 2020**

In another work on Matua narratives and displaced communities, Lorea explored how Matua religious traditions connect scattered refugee populations. Her work shows that Matua identity is not only religious but also social, cultural, and political. This helps explain why caste identity may affect students' self-perception and educational confidence.

- **Halder and Chakraborty, 2025**

Soumyajit Halder and Aritra Chakraborty studied the ethnicization of the Matua community in West Bengal. Their research discusses changing Matua identity, caste dynamics, and political mobilization in Bengal. This work is important because it shows that Matua identity has become an important marker of social and political assertion. For students, this identity may become both a source of pride and a source of discrimination.

- **Behera, Mohapatra and Behera, 2025**

Behera, Mohapatra and Behera studied higher education among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students in India. Their study notes that higher education is important for socio-economic mobility, but SC/ST participation beyond undergraduate levels remains unsatisfactory. This literature is useful for understanding the wider national context of Matua students' academic progress.

- **Recent Study on Participation of Scheduled Castes in Higher Education, 2024**

A recent study on Scheduled Caste participation in Indian higher education discusses how social exclusion creates a gap in access to quality education for marginalized groups. This supports the present study's argument that admission into higher education is not enough; students also need inclusive academic environments.

- **Study on Casteism in Higher Education, 2026**

A recent study on casteism and higher education critically examines grievance redressal mechanisms for caste-oppressed communities in Indian higher education. It found that grievance systems often function symbolically and suffer from poor legal awareness, procedural opacity, and weak institutional support. This is relevant because Matua students may experience exclusion but hesitate to report it.

- **Study on Vertical Mobility and Mental Gap of Scheduled Caste Students in West Bengal, 2024**

A 2024 study on Scheduled Caste students in West Bengal discusses vertical mobility and psychological barriers. It shows that SC students may gain access to education but still experience mental gaps and confidence-related problems due to social disadvantage. This is useful for understanding academic progress beyond marks and attendance.

Research Gap

The literature shows that scholars have studied Namasudra identity, Matua religion, caste protest, displacement, Scheduled Caste education, women's education, and social exclusion. However, fewer studies specifically examine the impact of caste identity and social exclusion on the academic progress of Matua students in higher education in South Bengal. The present study attempts to fill this gap through a field-based descriptive survey with numerical tables.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the study are:

1. To study the socio-economic background of Matua students in higher education in South Bengal.
2. To examine how caste identity influences the academic self-confidence of Matua students.
3. To identify the forms of social exclusion experienced by Matua students in higher educational institutions.
4. To analyze the impact of social exclusion on academic progress, including attendance, classroom participation, and examination performance.

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5. To examine gender differences in the experience of caste identity and social exclusion.
6. To assess the role of institutional support, scholarships, teachers, and peer groups in improving academic progress.
7. To suggest measures for reducing social exclusion and improving academic progress among Matua students.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study follows a **descriptive survey research design**. This design is appropriate because the study aims to describe the relationship between caste identity, social exclusion, and academic progress among Matua students.

4.2 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in selected districts of South Bengal, including North 24 Parganas, This district was selected because they include rural and semi-urban areas with Matua/Namasudra populations.

4.3 Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of Matua students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate courses in colleges and universities of South Bengal.

4.4 Sample Size

The sample consisted of **150 Matua students**.

4.5 Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling technique** was used to select Matua students from selected colleges and universities. Within selected institutions, respondents were chosen through convenience and snowball sampling because caste-community identity is not always publicly available in institutional records.

4.6 Tools of Data Collection

The following tools were used:

1. Structured questionnaire
2. Interview schedule
3. Informal discussion
4. Observation
5. Academic progress sheet prepared by the researcher

4.7 Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected from Matua students. Secondary data were collected from books, journal articles, research papers, Census data, AISHE reports, and government sources.

4.8 Variables of the Study

Independent variables: Caste identity, social exclusion, gender, family income, parental education, rural/urban background, first-generation learner status.
Dependent variable: Academic progress.

4.9 Indicators of Academic Progress

Academic progress was measured through the following indicators:

1. Attendance

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2. Examination performance
3. Classroom participation
4. Assignment completion
5. Confidence in academic discussion
6. Continuation of study
7. Future educational planning

4.10 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through frequency, percentage, cross-tabulation, and mean scores. Results are presented through numerical tables.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Gender-wise Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Male	78	52.0%
Female	72	48.0%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The sample included 78 male and 72 female students. The nearly balanced gender distribution helps compare the academic experiences of male and female Matua students.

Table 2: Family Income of Respondents

Monthly Family Income	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Below ₹8,000	42	28.0%
₹8,001–₹15,000	56	37.3%
₹15,001–₹25,000	34	22.7%
Above ₹25,000	18	12.0%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The table shows that most respondents come from low and lower-middle-income families. About 65.3% of students belong to families earning below ₹15,000 per month. This shows that economic disadvantage is an important background condition affecting Matua students' academic progress.

Table 3: Parental Education of Respondents

Parental Education Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Both parents illiterate	31	20.7%
One parent literate	43	28.7%
Parents studied up to secondary level	51	34.0%
Parents studied higher secondary or above	25	16.6%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The table shows that many respondents are first-generation or near-first-generation learners. Only 16.6% of respondents have parents who studied up to higher secondary or above. This has a direct impact on academic guidance, career planning, and confidence.

The socio-economic background of Matua students reflects a combination of caste marginality, rural disadvantage, and limited family educational capital. Students from poor families often struggle to buy books, pay examination fees, afford transport, or access private coaching. First-generation learners often lack academic guidance at home. Therefore, their academic progress depends heavily on teachers, scholarships, peer support, and institutional guidance.

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Table 4: Caste Identity and Academic Confidence

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Caste identity gives pride and motivation	52	34.7%
Caste identity creates hesitation in institution	39	26.0%
Caste identity has mixed effect	44	29.3%
No effect	15	10.0%
Total	**150**	**100%**

The table shows that caste identity has different effects on students. For 34.7% of respondents, Matua identity creates pride and motivation. These students connect their education with the reformist legacy of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. For 26%, caste identity creates hesitation, especially when they feel judged by peers or teachers. About 29.3% said caste identity has a mixed effect: it gives community pride but also exposes them to social stigma.

Table 5: Academic Confidence by First-Generation Learner Status

Student Category	High Confidence	Moderate Confidence	Low Confidence	Total
First-generation learners	18	46	29	93
Non-first-generation learners	24	26	7	57
Total	**42**	**72**	**36**	**150**

The table shows that first-generation learners have lower academic confidence than students whose families already have educational experience. Among first-generation learners, 29 students reported low confidence. Among non-first-generation learners, only 7 students reported low confidence.

Caste identity can work in two opposite ways. It can create collective pride because the Matua movement has a history of struggle and self-respect. But it can also create hesitation when students enter higher educational institutions dominated by socially and economically privileged groups. Many students reported that they hesitate to speak in class because they fear being judged for their caste, rural background, language, or poor English communication.

Table 6: Forms of Social Exclusion Experienced by Respondents

Form of Social Exclusion	Number of Respondents Reporting	Percentage
Feeling ignored by classmates	61	40.7%
Stereotyping because of caste/community	49	32.7%
Hesitation to reveal caste identity	46	30.7%
Lack of teacher guidance	55	36.7%
Exclusion from peer study groups	38	25.3%
Humiliation due to language/English weakness	57	38.0%
Feeling uncomfortable in college environment	43	28.7%
Direct caste-based remarks	24	16.0%

The table shows that social exclusion is not always direct. Only 16% reported direct caste-based remarks. However, indirect forms of exclusion were more common. These include being ignored, being excluded from study groups, feeling uncomfortable, or being stereotyped. Humiliation due to language or weak English communication was reported by 38% of respondents.

Social exclusion in higher education often appears in subtle ways. Matua students may not always face open caste abuse, but they may experience social distance, silence, lack of friendship, academic isolation, or negative assumptions about their ability. Such exclusion affects their confidence and academic participation. Recent research on casteism in higher education shows that grievance redressal systems may remain weak or symbolic, making students hesitant to report caste-related issues.

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Table 7: Social Exclusion and Attendance

Level of Social Exclusion	Attendance Above 75%	Attendance Below 75%	Total
Low exclusion	39	9	48
Moderate exclusion	41	23	64
High exclusion	16	22	38
Total	**96**	**54**	**150**

The table shows that students who experience high social exclusion are more likely to have lower attendance. Among students with high exclusion, 22 out of 38 had attendance below 75%. This indicates that social exclusion can reduce regular participation in college.

Table 8: Social Exclusion and Examination Performance

Level of Social Exclusion	Below 45% Marks	45%–59% Marks	60% and Above	Total
Low exclusion	4	17	27	48
Moderate exclusion	12	33	19	64
High exclusion	15	17	6	38
Total	**31**	**67**	**52**	**150**

The table shows that students with low social exclusion perform better academically. Among students with low exclusion, 27 out of 48 scored 60% and above. Among students with high exclusion, only 6 out of 38 scored 60% and above.

Table 9: Social Exclusion and Classroom Participation

Level of Social Exclusion	Regular Participation	Occasional Participation	Rare Participation	Total
Low exclusion	26	17	5	48
Moderate exclusion	21	31	12	64
High exclusion	7	17	14	38
Total	**54**	**65**	**31**	**150**

The table shows that social exclusion affects classroom participation. Students who feel excluded are less likely to ask questions, join discussions, or present ideas in class. This reduces academic engagement and learning outcomes.
Academic progress is not only determined by intelligence or hard work. It is shaped by social environment. Students who feel included attend classes more regularly, participate more actively, and perform better in examinations. Students who feel excluded may avoid classes, remain silent, and lose interest. This finding supports the idea that higher education institutions must create inclusive learning environments for Scheduled Caste students.

Table 10: Gender-wise Experience of Social Exclusion

Gender	Low Exclusion	Moderate Exclusion	High Exclusion	Total
Male	29	34	15	78
Female	19	30	23	72
Total	**48**	**64**	**38**	**150**

The table shows that female students reported higher levels of exclusion than male students. Among female respondents, 23 out of 72 experienced high exclusion, compared to 15 out of 78 male respondents.

Table 11: Specific Problems Faced by Female Matua Students

Problem	Number of Female Respondents Reporting	Percentage among Female Respondents
Household responsibilities	43	59.7%

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Family restriction on mobility	34	47.2%
Safety concerns while travelling	31	43.1%
Early marriage pressure	24	33.3%
Hesitation to participate in class	29	40.3%
Financial dependence	38	52.8%

The table shows that female Matua students face multiple barriers. Their academic progress is affected not only by caste identity but also by gender expectations. They are expected to help with household work, maintain family honour, avoid long travel, and sometimes discontinue education for marriage.

Female Matua students experience double marginalization. They face the disadvantage of caste/community background as well as gender-based restrictions. This finding is similar to recent work on Matua women students in North 24 Parganas, which identified financial constraint, socio-cultural restriction, institutional limitation, and gender discrimination as major barriers to higher education.

Table 12: Institutional Support Received by Respondents

Type of Institutional Support	Number of Respondents Receiving	Percentage
Scholarship support	74	49.3%
Teacher guidance	58	38.7%
Remedial classes	31	20.7%
Career counselling	26	17.3%
Anti-discrimination awareness	21	14.0%
Mentoring support	29	19.3%
Digital learning support	35	23.3%

The table shows that scholarship support is the most common form of institutional support. However, academic and psychological support remains weak. Only 17.3% received career counselling, and only 19.3% received mentoring support. Anti-discrimination awareness was reported by only 14%.

Table 13: Institutional Support and Academic Progress

Institutional Support Level	Good Academic Progress	Average Academic Progress	Poor Academic Progress	Total
High support	27	12	3	42
Moderate support	23	34	10	67
Low support	5	18	18	41
Total	**55**	**64**	**31**	**150**

The table shows that students who receive strong institutional support show better academic progress. Among students receiving high support, 27 out of 42 showed good academic progress. Among students receiving low support, only 5 out of 41 showed good academic progress.

Institutional support plays a key role in reducing the negative impact of caste identity and social exclusion. Scholarships help financially, but students also need academic mentoring, counselling, language support, digital access, and anti-discrimination mechanisms. AISHE and other higher education studies show expansion in enrolment, but this must be matched by inclusive support systems.

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Table 14: Suggestions Given by Respondents

Suggested Measure	Number of Respondents Supporting	Percentage
More scholarships and timely payment	116	77.3%
Mentoring for SC/first-generation learners	104	69.3%
Career counselling	101	67.3%
Anti-discrimination awareness programmes	92	61.3%
Remedial English and communication classes	89	59.3%
Digital learning support	83	55.3%
Strong grievance redressal system	78	52.0%
Peer study groups	72	48.0%
Special support for female students	84	56.0%

The table shows that students demand both financial and academic support. The most common suggestion is more scholarships and timely payment. Mentoring, career counselling, anti-discrimination awareness, English support, and digital support are also strongly demanded.

These suggestions show that Matua students are not lacking motivation. Rather, they need an inclusive academic environment. Institutional support can reduce fear, hesitation, dropout, and underperformance. Peer study groups can reduce social isolation. Strong grievance systems can help students report discrimination. Special support for female students can reduce gender-based dropout.

VI. MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of the study are:

- Most Matua students in higher education come from low-income and lower-middle-income families.
- Many respondents are first-generation learners.
- Caste identity has both positive and negative effects. It gives pride and motivation to some students but creates hesitation and stigma for others.
- Social exclusion is experienced more often in indirect forms than direct forms.
- Common forms of exclusion include being ignored by classmates, exclusion from peer study groups, stereotyping, and humiliation due to weak English communication.
- Students experiencing high social exclusion show lower attendance.
- Students experiencing high social exclusion show weaker examination performance.
- Social exclusion reduces classroom participation.
- Female Matua students face double marginalization due to caste and gender.
- Institutional support improves academic progress.
- Scholarships are helpful but not sufficient.
- Mentoring, counselling, English support, digital access, and anti-discrimination awareness are also necessary.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that caste identity and social exclusion have a significant impact on the academic progress of Matua students in higher education in South Bengal. Although many Matua students are motivated to study and improve their social position, their academic progress is affected by economic hardship, first-generation learner status, caste-based stigma, social exclusion, language barriers, weak digital access, and lack of institutional support.

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Caste identity has a complex role. On one hand, it provides pride, community belonging, and historical consciousness. The reformist legacy of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur continues to inspire many Matua students. On the other hand, caste identity may become a source of hesitation when students feel judged, stereotyped, or excluded in higher educational institutions.

The study shows that social exclusion directly affects academic progress. Students who experience greater exclusion have lower attendance, weaker classroom participation, and poorer examination performance. Female Matua students face additional barriers related to household work, family restrictions, safety concerns, financial dependence, and early marriage pressure.

The study also finds that institutional support can reduce the negative effects of caste identity and exclusion. Students who receive scholarships, teacher guidance, mentoring, and academic support show better progress. Therefore, higher educational institutions must go beyond formal admission and reservation policies. They must create inclusive, supportive, and discrimination-free academic environments.

The study finally concludes that academic progress among Matua students depends not only on individual effort but also on social equality, institutional sensitivity, family support, and community empowerment.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Scholarships should be increased and paid on time.
- Colleges should identify first-generation learners and provide special mentoring.
- Anti-discrimination cells should be made active and student-friendly.
- Career counselling should be organized regularly.
- Remedial English and communication classes should be provided.
- Digital learning centres should be established in rural and semi-urban colleges.
- Teachers should receive sensitization training on caste and social inclusion.
- Peer study groups should be formed to reduce social isolation.
- Female Matua students should receive special support such as safe transport, hostel facilities, and counselling.
- Community organizations should encourage higher education among Matua youth.
- More field-based studies should be conducted on Matua students in different districts of West Bengal.
- Higher educational institutions should regularly monitor dropout, attendance, and performance of marginalized students.

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