

CHAPTER- III

THE MATUA MAHASANGHA: THE STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS

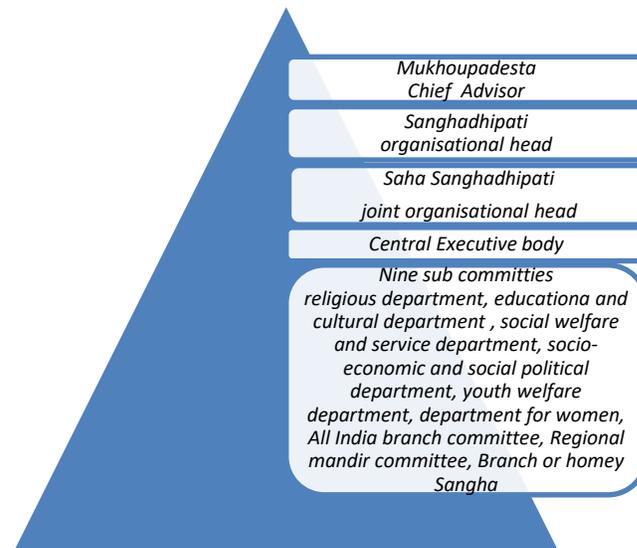
3.1. Introduction

The organisational framework of Matua Mahasangha was conceived as a primary medium for fostering, renewing and expressing religious experience. Further, the organisational framework was designed not simply for the purpose of obtaining benefits for the Matuas but also to enhance their as well as the movement's combat- efficiency in the external world. The organisational framework is extended beyond the central office. The fact that branches have been established in almost all places, where Matuas resided and introduced hierarchal order of office bearers clearly indicate the bureaucratic set up and collective efforts for making sectarian awareness, which has been an essential part and necessity of organisational machinery to sustain sectarian zeal.

It is accepted that any form of inter-institutional feud; attempt to establish individual supremacy, deliberate disregard for Thakurbari and Central organisation, may disrupt the unity within Matua Mahasangha. So it is imperative that every member of the Matua Mahasangha stringently abides by decisions and directives of both

Thakurbari and the Central organisation. Mahasangha stands for three important pillars; these are centralised organisational structure, iron discipline and unity within the organisation.

3.2. Hierarchical Pyramidal Structure of Matua Mahasangha



Mahasangha is characterised by a hierarchical pyramidal structure headed by the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and *Sanghadhipati* (Chief of the Organisation) and *Saha Sanghadhipati* (Joint Organisational Head). All the power be it spiritual or political follows unidirectionally from the apex body.

The *Mukhoupodesta*, *Sanghadhipati* and *Saha Sanghadhipati* are considered as chief administrative heads of Matua Mahasangha. Only members belonging to Thakurbari family are entitled to take over the said posts. The said procedural part of Matua Mahasangha

has been laid down in the constitution in rule number 18. Such posts must be fulfilled by the descendants of Harichand Thakur, no one from outside will be allowed to hold those positions. Mahasangha functions and operates in a way which seems to be a centralised bureaucratic structure.

Ideally as per the constitution of Matua Mahasangha power follows from the centre, this is the representative of a symbolic embodiment of divine spirit. Constitution also states that, *Sanghadhipati* is the official representative of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and his duty is to carry out the latter's instructions. He was in close contact with common devotees and the general public. He guided and supervised the devotees as they went through their daily ritual activities and also observed their conduct in society. The changes which have been come up after the demise of *Mukho Upodesta* and *Sanghadgipati* have been discussed later in the chapter

Till the death of Kapilkrishna Thakur (*Sanghadhipati*) and Baroma Binapani Devi (*Mukho Upodesta*) the Mahasangha was operated as per the guidelines laid down in the Constitution. *Sanghadhipati* usually carried out *Mukho Upodesta's* advice. As per the guide line in constitution *Mukho Upodesta*, who was supposed to be the spiritual Guru of Matuas and subject of supreme order and

reverence. As it has been stressed in the constitution, a religious organisation like Matua Mahasangha cannot run smoothly without proper respect to *sanghadhipati* and *Mukho Upodesta* as well as sharing a harmonious bonding of love and affection among the members.

The organisation has a number of office bearers as given in the constitution, their powers and functions are as follows:

3.2.1. Mukhoupodesta

When constitution was framed it was done under the direct supervision of KapliKrishna Thakur, and, it was decided that *Baroma* Benapani Devi (1919-2019) shall be the *Mukhoupodesta*. It was believed that *Baroma* Benapani Devi was the supreme source of power and considered a living embodiment of Harichand Thakur's grace. She was the wife of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (the first *Sanghadhipati* of Matua Mahasangha).

She was born in 1919 in Jabdakathi village, Barishal District, (today's Bangladesh). In 1933 at the age of fourteen, she got married to Pramatha Ranjan Thakur. In 1947 along with her Husband and a large number of Matua bhaktas came to India and settled at Thakurnagar. In 1990, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur died,

and she became the First *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Adviser) and matriarch of the Matua Mahasangha.

So it is expected that every Matua bhakta shall pay unconditional homage to the *Mukhoupodesta*. Mahasangha has two important functions. These are, preservation and propagation of doctrines, texts and literature, and secondly formulation of codes of conduct and method of rituals, holding the religious congregation in order to keep alive the precepts and practices of the Matua Mahasangha as laid down by the founding father Hari Chand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur.

To designate the Matua *sadhu* (sage), *Gonsain*¹⁰ and *pagol* (religious fanatics) with suitable titles and honour and distribute *karango kanthohar*¹¹ among devotees was to be under the jurisdiction of the *Mukhoupodesta*. It has also been mentioned that, all committees, sub committees, departmental administrators and members shall be appointed in consonance with the order and permission of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor)). In order to change, enlarge and amend the Matua constitution, the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) has to approve of the same and her decision needed to be endorsed by the members of the central committee.

¹⁰ A title given to common devotees or leaders of the Vaishnava tradition

¹¹ Chain for matua devotees which are made out of the dry coconut shell.

All the *Hari Mandirs* (temple) in Sridham Thakurnagar were to be under direct Supervision of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor). All donations in the form of money or other objects were supposed to be deposited in the personal fund of *Sridham*. If any Matua devoted or devotees constructed a new *Hari Mandir*, only the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) reserves the right to inaugurate the new *Mandir*. If required her chosen representative could also inaugurate the newly constructed *Mandir*.

In November 2018, Binapani Devi was awarded *Banga Bibhushan*, the highest civilian award of West Bengal. On 5 March 2019, Binapani Devi died at age of hundred years, and her funeral was held with full state honours on 7 March and, a gun salute was given to her by the West Bengal state government. Presently this post of *Mukhoupodesta* formally remains vacant, though upon her death, her daughter-in-law Mamata Bala Thakur (wife of Kapil Krishna Thakur) was appointed pro tem Chief Adviser of the Matua Mahasangha but it was denied by Manjul Krishna Thakur (*Saha Sanghadhipati*) who is youngest son of Benapani Devi.

3.2.2. Sanghadhipati (Chief Official)

In absence of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor), the *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) can officiate and take decisions if required. The *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) is the administrative head of Matua Mahasangha. All activities of Matua Mahasangha centres on him. All office-bearers of Matua Mahasangha are to be appointed on recommendation of and approval of the *Sanghadhipati*. The *Sanghadhipati* is the head of the administrative i.e. the Central Executive Committee of Matua Mahasangha. He is the true carrier and bearer of Matua Mahasangha's ideology. The *Sanghadhipati* according to suggestions and advice by the *Mukhoupodesta* is to appoint the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Matua Mahasangha's Central Executive Committee. He is supposed to take cognizance of all the activities and information related to Mahasangha from the General Secretary. The General Secretary is to remain accountable to the *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) for all his activities related to Matua Mahasangha.

The *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) can directly interfere in activities of any department of Mahasangha and can take disciplinary action against any member of the Mahasangha. But in this case he should

take suggestions and advice of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and Secretary of Mahasangha.

In case of emergency, the official should call a meeting of the central committee for detailed discussion and after permission from the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor), the official can take timely suitable action to deal with the emergency situation. The *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) can, with powers vested on him, participate as the constitutional head during the constitution of all committees and appointments of the administrators and members. He can also advice, criticise and evaluate the activities of the committees and its members.

The *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) or his approved representative can raise the flag or deliver lecture either in Sridham or in any Matua religious festival or ceremony. Through the help of the media the *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) can preach Sree Hari-Guruchand's ideals or principles. But after the demise of Kapil Krisna Thakur in 2014, the said post of Sanghadhipati (Chief Official) has also remained vacant till today.

3.2.3. Saha Sanghadhipati

No clear cut description has given in the constitution about the power and functions of *Saha Sanghadhipati* (Joint Organisational

Head). It may be expected that he may perform the same duty in absence of *Sanghadhipati*.

3.3. Central Executive Committee

Rule no 10 in the constitution has outlined functions of the central executive committee which is the highest administrative wing of Matua Mahasangha. This committee works under the direct supervision of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official). The tenure of the central executive committee is one year and members are chosen or elected by operational heads of Matua Mahasangha—*Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati*. This committee in Matua Mahasangha is to remain in charge of administrative responsibilities of all other committees or agencies.

The *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati* are to remain head of the central committee. The *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) is to appoint the President and General Secretary of Matua Mahasangha's Central Executive Committee while seeking advice from the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor). Later the president of the Central Committee can appoint other members of the central committee following the orders and the approval of *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official) and *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor). This Central

Committee is the highest and single most powerful organisation. All other agencies of Mahasangha's work under this Committee. For convenience of daily activities, the central committee appoints members of the All India Branch Committee, Central Subcommittee, *Mandir* Committee, *Sangha* Branch Committee to work in unison on the state, district, block and regional level.

No decision can be passed without the approval or consent of 2/3rd of the members present in the meeting of the Central Committee that is Central Executive Committee. However, in case of primary branch unit, decision can be approved with presence of 1/3rd of the members. In regard to notice for meeting it has been laid in the constitution that notice for All India branch committee meeting has to be given before the meeting. As for other committee or departmental meetings, a notice should be issued 15 days before the actual meeting.

The General Secretary should call a meeting of the Central Executive committee with a notice seven days prior to the meeting. This rule should be applied to all forms of executive committee. At the end of five years tenure of the all India branch committee, one month's notice has to be given prior to the appeal for a religious conference. The Central Executive Committee on behalf of the All

India branch committee is to evaluate the activities of the past and also present written document containing the future work plan for the next five years.

3.3.1. President of Matua Mahasangha's Central Committee.

The President of Matua Mahasangha is a distinguished rank holder and one of loyal and devoted persons of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and *Sanghadhipati* (Chief Official). The President is to have depth in and command over Matua philosophy. He should be capable enough to officiate in any Matua religious congregation and speak on relevant religious topics. It has been expected that selected President must have enough knowledge and ability to participate in critical dialogues engaging Matua *dharma* along with other religion and have the ability to interpret Matua *dharma* and Matua constitution and besides he has to be an apolitical person. He must officiate in all the meetings of the Central Executive Committee after its formation. He can call for an emergency meeting whenever it is required.

3.3.2. Vice President of Matua Mahasangha's Central Committee

The Vice President like the President of Matua Mahasangha is also a distinguished rank holder, he can officiate in any meeting in

absence of the President and in case the post of President remains vacant he takes all the responsibilities of the President and acts accordingly.

3.3.3. General Secretary of Central Committee

The General Secretary is an important rank holder and is loyal to the Mukhoupodesta. The Mukhoupodesta and Sanghadhipati takes a collective decision to nominate him and he must be a person who has complete devotion and allegiance to Matua *dharma*. Protecting Matua *dharma*, *Sridham Thakurbari* and Matua Mahasangha are his main objectives. He implements all the programmes of the committees, sub-committees and departmental committees of Matua Mahasangha.

The General Secretary should be an apolitical person. He is to take under his supervision the notice book of the Central Executive Committee, book of resolution, other documents and records; he should call for meetings of Central Executive Committee and other committees at regular intervals. He should look into implementation of work plan, monetary transaction approved by the accountant; keep a regular check on requisite purposes. He should present the record of the balance of accounts with the Matua Mahasangha in every annual conference and should also present the detailed

activities in a written report. He is supposed to strive to construct *Hari Mandir*, schools, all developmental works taking into confidence the President, Vice President, Assistant Secretary and also other members. The General Secretary can keep his observation in any conference across India.

3.3.4. Assistant Secretary

The main function of the Assistant Secretary is to help the General Secretary and help him in all possible manner and to officiate in absence of the General Secretary. To carry the responsibilities entrusted upon him by the General Secretary.

3.3.5. Organisational Secretary

The Organisational Secretary advises, administers and helps in all forms of organisational and constitutional matters. If there is any confusion with the interpretation of the roles of the constitution, he is supposed to try to resolve the raised problem in consultation with the General Secretary and Central Committee and also supervise and instruct the Secretary of the sub-committee. He also helps the General Secretary in preparing the organisational report and advise the General Secretary to call for a Chief Executive Committee meeting.

3.3.6. Office Authority

The office authority has the responsibility to preserve the documents, records, and files of the Matua Mahsangha. Detailing the activities of the office, exchange of letters to the General Secretary and maintaining office of the secretary shall be main function of the office authority.

3.3.7. Secretary of the Departmental Committee

The Secretary of Departmental Committee acts according to the instructions and advice of the General Secretary, Organisational Secretary and Central Committee. He can however implement work plan and see it enacted in his respective field.

3.3.8. Treasurer

The treasurer keeps records of the amount collected, and deposits it with the bank. He checks the record of accounts every year and places it at the Matua conference and gets it endorsed. He obeys the instructions of the General Secretary and acts as his assistant.

3.3.9. Accountant

The accountant keeps a check on whether the cash received back is properly preserved, whether transaction of the money is in order

and gives suggestions and helps the treasurer in collection and spending through voucher.

3.4. Functional Divisions of Matua Mahasangha

With regard to structural and functional divisions of Matua Mahasangha, it has been claimed in rule no 7 of Constitution that Matua Mahasangha is to be considered as a social service oriented religious organisation. Therefore to discharge necessary socio-religious duties, next to Central Executive committee, different sub committees have been formed .These committees are:

1. Branch Committee.
2. Hari Mandir Committee.
3. Householder Sangha.
4. Education and Cultural Committee.
5. Social welfare and service Committee.
6. Student and Youth welfare Committee.
7. Department for Women.

Each committee works like a department and the secretary of each department/committee is appointed by the central executive body with the consent of *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati*. It is laid down in the constitution in such a way that no kind of opportunistic, selfish and impious ideology can eclipse the sectarian

spirit of Matua Mahasangha. Since Matua dharma is the religion to salvage the fallen and the downtrodden hence it is imperative that the department heads must obey basic tenets of Sangha as given in the Constitution.

The decisions and instructions of the central committee formed at the behest of the *Sridham*, Thakurnagar, Thakurbari, the spiritual and administrative head of Matua Mahasangha, are to be stringently followed by all members belonging to different committees. They can seek a solution from the central committee if necessary and when a problem arises.

The central committee's instructions and reconsiderations should be considered final and must be carried out without fail. From the very beginning, Mahasangha wanted to function under a centralised authority and several subcommittees.

3.4.1. Branch Committee

There are some specific rules in the constitution in regard to the formation of branch committees. Each registered branch is to organise a religious conference every year. They would have to form a new committee and elect a new secretary and that must be sent to Thakurbari for final approval. It has also been mentioned that Chairman of each religious conference in different branches shall be

either *Mukhoupodesta* or *Sanghadhipati*. In case of their absence any nominated person can preside over the meeting.

*Madhya swatya jamindari dharmokhetro nai
Bhinno bhinno dal keho karo na gosain (Harileelammrita)*

‘Central rights of jamindari are useless; in a holy place
Gonsai (friend) don’t create different sects while in holy embrace’
(Harileelammrita)

This message of *Sree Harichand* is used as a fulcrum around which the aforementioned arrangements are organised.

3.4.1.1. Functions of the Branch Committee

Rule 13 in the constitution of Matua Mahasangha, has laid down functions of the all India branch committee, regional Mandir committee, and Sangha branch, these are,

1. All Matua devotees, *Sadhu* (sage), *Gonsai* (friend), and all the learned and knowledgeable believers must compulsorily be members of any committee, subcommittee, departments or units of all India branch committee of the sangha.
2. The members must have faith, belief and respect for Matua religion, *Matua Mahasangha*, and Sridham Thakurbari. None of the members can be office-bearers of any political party.

3. Members of the branch committee shall be wholly committed to the formation of a new branch committee in their area. The branch committee shall act as a bridge between the devotees and *Matua Mahasangha*.

4. The functions of the branch committee shall also include encouraging all the heads, who have not yet managed to form new branches to constitute them so that they may conduct meetings in the most befitting manner and disseminate news of all upcoming events in *Sridham* and keep a keen watch on all the activities.

5. The principal task of the branch committees shall be to construct the *Sree Mandir* (temple), all-embracing in nature, in their respective regions. Besides the committee members along with the regional heads and the devotees shall arrive at the temple compound at a specific time or on the second or third Wednesday of the month and actively participate in *Harinam Sangkirtan* (collective devotional song), lecture and discussion of *Sree Sree Harileelamrita*, *Guruchand Charit* and *Sree Sree Hari-Guruchand Charit Sudha* in order to create inspiration in the minds of the devotees and also decide on the roles and regulations for developmental activities.

6. The responsibility of appointing *Sebayat* (attendant priest) shall be on the best of the members of the branch committee and sangha

branch, under the instruction of the Mukhoupodesta (Chief Advisor) of Sridham Thakurbari and by the approval of *Matua Masangha*. An accountant has to be appointed by the Sangha branch to keep the accounts of the said temple.

3.4.2. Hari Mandir Comittee

Construction of the *Hari Mandir* (temple of *Sree Harichand*) in different places is the tenth command of religious instructions that comes under twelve commands of *Sree Hari-Guruchand*. The *Mandirs* are constructed in different regions. The *Mandir* committee is formed by the collective effort of All India branch committee members, branch and house holder committee members following the instructions and due approval of *Mukhoupodesta*, *Sanghadhipati* and the central committee. All members of the temple committee need to be *Matuas* by religion and must be a member of either the Sangha branch or the All India committee. This committee is to function in accordance with advice made by the Mahasangha. If any person wants to donate land or wealth for the construction of the community temple, the aforementioned wealth has to be registered in the name of *Sree Hari-Guruchand* as *Debottar* (property belongs to God) property. This *Debottar* property cannot be registered in the name of a person.

3.4.3. Householder Sangha

Householder sangha is the basic foundation of Matua Mahasangha. Any of these Sanghas can be formed with five members in a village or town of a particular area; they are branch organisation of the Mahasangha.

A householder Sangha is usually constituted with a president, secretary, accountant and other members. A Matua Mahasangha branch is formed by depositing subscription, collected from at least five families, in the central office. Disorganised or scattered Matua devotees living in different places who are unable to form a branch organisation can directly communicate to the head office. They can avail the opportunity to be a member of the Matua Householder Sangha.

All members of this sangha branch have to be Matua in religion and cannot be office bearers of any political party. All its members are required to fill an application form and are given a membership card with a photo for identification. This certainly gives the idea of a modern voluntary association. Matua dharma stands for the family, it may be considered as the house holder religion. Hence to participate in this Householder activity one's economic condition is equally important. A person who is economically solvent can devote

himself for the benefit and overall development of his fellow human beings, society as well as nation as required. Engaging in the spiritual act and work of God they do not face any problem. Hence to lead a comfortable and solvent life, the Matuas require to be efficient workers. A person who does not work is considered as a blemish as per Matua *dharma*.

All the Matuas have to participate in trade and commerce, in agriculture, administration, in the fields of medicine and engineering in order to be a part of greater civilised society. It has been clearly mentioned that action less spiritual life may go against the Matua ideology.

3.4.4. Education and Cultural Committee

Guruchand Thakur paid the highest importance to education. He recognised that education can be the only way to uplift the degraded Namasudra Matuas. Thus he established the first school for them in 1880 at Orakandi and the first teacher of his school was Raghunath Sarkar of Dhaka (at present in Bangladesh). Gradually he established 1812 schools altogether because, he too realised that 'Education, Wealth and Political Power' were the keys that can only help the Namasudra Matuas to lead a human life.

It has been laid down in the constitution that Matua Mahasangha shall materialise the educational vision of *Sree Guruchand*, giving the educational policy top priority. In this regard one eminent educationist from Matua community had been given responsibility to spread the educational vision of *Sree guruchand* among the down trodden Matua masses across India. That assigned person is asked to keep in constant contact with all the writers, litterateur, who are respectful to the Matua religion and choose from them a few of names and present their list to *Sanghadhipati*.

These writers keep them engaged in writing the biographies of the eminent devotees and their glorious lives. The *Sanghadhipati* in consultation with the central committee appoint them for the education and cultural unit of the organisation. The president, vice president, chairman, vice-chairman, sub-editor, accountant and other members are chosen from these members, in consonance with the decision of the *Sanghadhipati* and in consultation with the central committee members.

The central committee members remain as chief of the educational and cultural department. The principal job of this department is to establish school, college, hostel for students in consonance with the ideals of *Sree Hari-Guruchand Thakur*.

The aim is to create an ideal atmosphere of an ashram for the education of men and women. In addition also to pursue research, look for research related materials and information and outreach, drive away illiteracy, establish educational campus for social awareness and organise exhibitions. They also encourage and help the young talented achiever, along with the distressed and orphaned students, and adopt modern forms of education for the spread of *Sree Thakur's* name and fame.

3.4.5. Social Welfare and service Committee

*Jibe daya name ruche manushete nistha
Eha chara ar yato sab kriya vrasta (Harileelammrita)*

Kindness to animals, penchant for good name and devotion to man, all other actions are but banal (*Harileelammrita*)

Showing love and kindness to animals and all other forms of life is an essential duty of the Matuas. To adhere to the aforesaid maxim of *Sree Harichand*, the *Matua Mahasangha* has formed a social welfare department. One of the members of the executive committee has been given the responsibility of the social welfare department. He is supposed to hand over a list of names of people, who are Matua in religion, to work as social workers across India.

Members of the central committee work as chief supervisor of this department. One of the members of the central committee acts as the ex-officio secretary of the social welfare department.

3.4.6. Student and Youth Welfare Committee

The youth student volunteer department has been constituted by appointing the Matua devotees, following the ideology of *Sree Hari-Guruchand*. These youths would be considered honest, fearless and persons of direct action. The functions and activities of these volunteers include participation in different projects of Matua Mahasangha like managing the religious congregation, training the youths and students, rendering service to maintain a healthy environment of Matua Mahasangha. The youth student wing or welfare departments are constituted in the way the other departments are formed.

3.4.7. Department for Women

Department for Women is constituted by the Matua women devotees to fulfil the aims and goals of Matua dharma. This committee is named '*Shanti Satyabhama Nirvana Committee*'. Though the committee is exclusively formed by women, to manage the committee a man aged 50 years or more (married), a Matua devotee and a man of honest character, is appointed in consonance

with the unanimous decision of all women members on the said committee. His appointment is approved by the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor).

This committee works under the direct supervision of the Matua Mahasangha, and follows the order and instruction of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor), the acting head of this committee. The role of the committee is to ensure self-determination and self-reliance of women and to look after the expansion and outreach of women's education. Running of night schools, launching campaign against dowry violence, taking part in *kirtan* (devotional song), preaching of Sree Thakur's messages through *jatra*¹², setting up cottage industries for orphan girls are some of the major objectives of this committee.

3.5. Duties Performed by the Matua Devotees

Any man or woman irrespective of caste, colour, etc. following Matua Mahasangha's constitution, is directed to follow the

¹² "A folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre." As Sarkar (1975) mentioned that '...it may have sprung from an ancient form of folk-drama but prior to the emergence of the Chaitanya movement in sixteenth century Bengal, Jatra could not boast of any definite shapes. Around the sixteenth century, Jatra became the most popular entertainment, having pushed the musical narration-cum-puppet dance to the background. Chaitanya (1486-1533) and his associates, astute propagandists as they were, were the first to employ the performing arts (dance, music, play-acting) for the furtherance of their faith. Jatra represents palas which dealt in religious themes and were instructive and moralistic in tone, i.e., the Bengali versions of miracle and morality.' (see Sarkar Pabitra, 1975. 'Jatra: The popular traditional theatre of Bengal', Journal of South Asian Literature, vol-10, No 2/4, pp. 87-107.

Sangha's instructions and abide by the Matua religious philosophy, work ethics and ideology. They are supposed to actively participate in their outreach programme, paying regular membership fees and complying with the guidelines set by the central body. Only then s/he would be considered as a member of Matua Mahasangha.

Every member is a part of unit and should follow the instructions of his/her respective unit. For getting new membership a person has to apply to the Sangha's branch committee filling up the appropriate form. Scattered or isolated Matua devotees from different places, who are unable to form branches or are facing various difficulties, can directly collect membership form from the Sangha's head office.

As per rules regarding the membership as laid down in Rules no 4 of the constitution of Matua Mahasangha, the head of the family who seeks to accept membership of the Mahasangha can be included along with all of his family members through the prescribed membership form.

It has been clearly mentioned that half of the subscription collected from one family shall be deposited with the central office and the remaining half can be retained for the branch.

It is imperative on part of every Matua family to emplace a *Mangal Ghat* (well-being pot) in the house and deposit at least one handful of rice in the pot before every meal in a day. The amount of rice collected at the end of the month should be sold and the portion of the money received out of the sales should be used as a subscription. Subscription could either be sent through the branch or directly to the head office.

*Pabitra, satya bakya, manusher biswas
Tin ratna yar ache hari tar bash (Guruchand Charit p. 547)*

Purity, true words, faith in humanity
One that possess these three gems, is close to divinity. (*Gurucha3d Charit p. 547*)

Being a member of Matua Mahasangha one is supposed to perform certain duties (Guruchand Charit, P. 547).

1. All Matua bhaktas are to maintain the highest ideals of *Sree Harichand* and *Sree Guruchand* in their lives at any cost. No other ideals will be entertained in the name Matua. To maintain its sectarian ideology, devotees should comprehend that it is their paramount duty to maintain the purity of the name of *Sree Harichand* and *Sree Guruchand*.

2. Women, men of any race or colour, all members irrespective of their status of birth shall have the same rights and must share equal responsibility.

3. All members without any hesitation must fully comply with the instructions of *Sridham* Thakurnagar, Thakurbari and the Central Committee of the Matua Mahasangha.

4. Every member during the Sangha's meeting can express his or her opinion freely and openly. But the decision taken or resolution passed should be observed compulsorily.

6. *Sree Harililamrita, Sree Sree Guruchand Charite* and *Sree Sree Hari-Guruchand Charitra Sudha* should be followed along with regular reading. Every member must remain well informed about Matua ideology as given by *Sree Hari-Guruchand*.

7. Proper education has to be provided to children of every devotee.

8. The Matua must remain bound to one another in the bond of brotherhood; no step-motherly attitude should be seen in the behavior of the devotee.

The major mode of inclusion into the order of Matua is guided by certain conditions and, prescriptions to follow while embracing the Matua dharma. Presently anyone can accept Matua dharma. The strictures that only lower caste people could join in Matua dharma has been dispensed with. After the change of constitution in 2005, anyone can be a member of Matua Mahasangha if he or she

expresses real reverence to Harichand, Guruchand. Because they are considered the real embodiments of supreme power in *Kaliyuga*. The member of the Thakur family is revered as a divine spirit and they are kept isolated from the rest of the community. They should not be counted along with other common Matua devotees.

Matua religion is the religion of *Bhakta* (devotees), *Sadhu* (sage), *Gonsain* (friend) and *pagol* (frenzied in name of Hari). Along with the four major sub divisions as referred in Sree Guruchand Charit, there is another set of local congregational leaders called *Dalapati* (leader of Matua devotees in each area or villages). They are selected by the head office; it chooses some names of preachers and *gonsain* across the country and maintains a list of record of dalapatis in Matua Mahasangha. They are the main medium to disseminate and propagate Matua dharma in the respective area.

3.5.1. Guidelines Relating to Discipline and Punishment of the Members of the Mahasangha

Rule number 17 of Matua Mahasangha's constitution has laid down the following guidelines relating to discipline and punishment of its members

1. Warning: Any action which is against Matua Ideology, done mistakenly or without knowledge by a member, should be taken

into cognizance and the concerned member should be warned at the outset. Warning is the first step towards disciplining the members of Matua Mahasangha.

2. Admonition: Despite repeated caution and warning, if a member commits the same mistake, it should be considered that the person may lack any serious desire to rectify himself or the person may have some hidden motive or serious lack of capability. In that case the concerned member has to be admonished in presence of the other members of the committee.

3. Suspension: Even in spite of several admonitions or punishment according to penal laws, if a member commits any social crimes or criminal offence such as theft, robbery, hooliganism, snatching, hypocrisy, and defalcation, for which the public image of Mahasangha gets tarnished, the member should be suspended.

4. Expulsion: Any action that is against Matua ideology like adultery, polygamy, religious conversion or anything that is against Matua religion shall be considered in the same light according to law, and one punished under penal laws for criminal offences shall be expelled in order to safeguard Mahasangha's interest. Any one involved in misappropriation of Sangha's fund shall also be expelled. Any person disobeying *Sree Dham Thakurnagar's* decision

and instruction or slandering it is considered a crime which is fit for expulsion.

3.5.2. General Rules (Rule no 11) of Matua Mahasangha for the Members and Devotees

1. The members of the Matua Mahasangha have to renew their membership every year at the earliest. The membership has to be renewed within the month of January or February. The renewal fee shall be rupees one for one year. The collection amounts are deposited in the Central Office.

2. The main person of the family shall be accepted as the member of the branch. The main person shall include names of his family members through an application and bring them under the membership. The monthly subscription of the family shall be fixed at a specified rate. Half of the subscription stipulated for every family shall go to the head office while the rest amount shall be kept with the branch for developmental purposes. Secondly just as every Matua family emplaces the *Mangal Ghat*¹³ in the house, they shall put a handful of rice grain in the container, before they proceed to cook their food.

¹³ Vessel filled with water or grains for an auspicious occasion

After the month ends, the amount of rice grains collected has to be sold and the amount received shall be divided in to two halves one half shall go to the head office and the other half has to be deposited with the branch office. The scattered and detached Matua family who are unable to establish a branch organisation due to some impediments can directly collect an application form and after depositing the filled up form can get the opportunity to be a member of the Householder branch of Matua Mahasangha. But in this case, the family has to pay monthly subscription at a stipulated rate.

3.5.3. Instructions on ideals and customs to be followed by Matua devotees

1. Sree Harichand and Sree Guruchand should be seen as indistinguishable and inseparable in relation to power and grace, all devotees must see as identic that is as Hari-Guruchand.
2. Persons those are in apex body are eldest descendants of Sree Harichand, they are blessed, spiritual embedded graced directors of Matua Mahasangha. All rights are strictly reserved for the family members for steering the Mahasangha. All devotees of Matua Mahasangha shall be administered according to their order and instruction.

3. *Sree Harileelamrita, Sree Guruchand Charita, Sree Hari Guruchand Charita Sudha, Sree Sree Maha Sangkirtan, Sree Sree Hari sangkirtan* are some texts which have to be accepted as conclusive records. These texts cannot be changed, modified, added or rectified. However, if information is made available, based on research on religion that can be added to the main texts .

4. One who considers Sree Hari-Guruchand as his great teacher and who shall consider and accept the *Harinam Mahamantra* (Great Sacred spell for deliverance) as his life's meditation, consciousness, prayer and main means of leading a spiritual life and has immersed himself in the *Harinam Sangkirtan* or has decided to lead his life on the ideals of Sree Hari-Guruchand Thakur shall be considered as a Matua.

5. The Matua have no other teacher than Harichand. Hence, no Matua can be Acharya Gonsain, Pagol or Guru. Because they are guides to *Sree Thakur* hence they are respected but not of the same status as that of Guru.

Matuar ek guru vinnyo guru nai
Orakandi prabhu yini khiroder sai (Guruchand Charita, p.573).

Matuas have one and only one guru.
He is Orakandi Prabhu one that is perpetual master of Khirod
(Guruchand Charita, p.573).

6. A person suffering from hyper disorder or disease can submit his/her vow, *hajjat* or donation directly to Sridham Thakurbari.

*Samal ! samal! tai Matua gan
Hajat kakhono keho karona haran (Guruchand Charita, 573).*

Caution! caution! O Matua devotee
Donation made to god cannot be given to robbery
(Guruchand Charita, 573).

7. *Acharya, Gonsain* or *Pagol* can personally take obeisance from devotees. But that obeisance has to come from willing devotees. All devotees have to be associated with one another in order to actively give shape to the ideals of Matua Mahasangha. In case there is no branch or unit in the locality, one can be a Householder member of the Mahasangha.

8. The *Sarbojanin*¹⁴ *Sree Hari Mandir* or personal *mandir* can be erected according to modern architectural design and process. There shall be a memorial erected in the *Sree Thakur Mandir* as indicative of the ideals. There shall be a victory trumpet in between two ensigns.

9. No idols except that of Harichand, Shanti Mata, Guruchand, Satyabhama can be kept on the altar of Sree Hari Thakur. If

¹⁴ The word *Sarbojanin* comprises of two words 'Sarbo' in Bengali meaning or all, and 'janin' meaning people so the word *Sarbojanin* means for all people. *Sarbojanin Hari Mandir* understands no restriction in respect of colour, creed, caste and class.

someone wants to keep the portrait of father, mother inside the temple it can be kept in a separate place. However, it has to be observed that the altar of Sree Thakur always remains on a higher platform. The rules of the mandir shall be applicable everywhere. The Matua *Hari Sangeet* should be given the highest priority while singing.

‘*Jai Jai Hari Chand, Jai Krishnadasa*’ this anthem has to be sung together in accompaniment of musical instruments during the religious congregations.

During the ceremony, *Harileelamrita, Hari-Guruchand Charita Sudha* or portion of *Guruchand Charita* has to be recited followed by devotional songs.

10. During the time of *Kirtan* only ‘*Haribol*’ is permissible. All other Vasishnavite sects chant ‘*Harekrishna*’ as their main word of devotional utterance except Matua (Adhikari, 1995, p. 188). No person should enter into unnecessary utterance in the Devotional Song Specially at the time of *Kirtan*. During the religious congregation inside the meeting place smoking is strictly prohibited.

*Mahatsawbe baje kotha kohite dibe na
Khabe ar harinam gabe sarbajana
Hari nam vinno ar nahi kar gandogal
Sudhu matro balaibe sudha haribol (Harileelamrita.217)*

Unnecessary conversation shall not be entertained in Mahotsav,

Harinam should be song and staple of masses.
 Only name of Hari forgetting any form of rumpus.
 The only ambrosia shall be the name of Hari in campus.
 (*Harileelamrita.217*)

During the *Kirtan* and *Mahotsav* (religious congregation), the left side should be hosting the seats of men while the right should host the seats for women. A place should compulsorily be kept vacant in between. Care must be taken that there is no difficulty while paying obeisance to Sree Thakur and after that all devotees must take their respective seats.

During the weekly religious congregation devotional song like *Kirtan* and discussion should be held between 9 am and 12.00 noon and be concluded latest by midnight.

During the *Nam Sangkirtan* and annual religious celebration, many parties shall stay awake at night and take rest according to their respective turns while taking rest in between so as to complete the ceremony according to the pre-planned work schedule. Barring these four months of *Joistho, Bhadro, Poush and Chaitra*¹⁵ the holy statue can be placed on any Wednesday of a month in the morning. The entire night of Tuesday shall pass in continuous *Namsangkirtan*.

¹⁵ Second, fifth, ninth, and twelfth of the months respectively in Bengali calendar

While replacing two holy statues, on the altar, in name of *Sree Harichand* and *Shanti Mata*, every statue or receptacle must be adorned with five mango leaves, coconut with ear, flower garlands and new *Gamucha*.¹⁶ *Sree Thakur's* receptacle should be smeared with sandal wood powder and *Shant Mata's* receptacle should be smeared with vermilion. If required rice, meadow grass and *Tulsi*¹⁷ can be used. The holy water in receptacle can be changed only once in a year. Every Wednesday, the receptacle should be filled with holy water. After emplacement of the receptacle, *Sree Sree Harileelamrita* should be chanted thrice in name of *Sree Thakur*.

10. *Sree Thakur's* ideology should be preached according to religious ideals and scientific methods as ascribed in *Sree Sree Harileelamrita*, *Sree Sree Guruchand Charita* etc. no criticism of other religious incarnations, religious teachers or great personalities should be allowed. The main aim shall be to preach the greatness of *Sree Thakur*. Special *Gonsain*, *Pagol* and *Bhakta* or devotees shall observe the ideals of *Sree Thakur* with great care and dedication.

¹⁶ *Gamucha* (also *gamocha*, *gamchcha*, *gamcha*) is a thin, coarse, traditional cotton towel found in India and Bangladesh that is used to dry the body after bathing or wiping sweat. *Gamucha* is the local term for a sweat towel.

¹⁷ A kind of basil which is cultivated by Hindus as a sacred plant. Scientific name is *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, also known as *Ocimum sanctum*, holy basil

3.5.4. The Twelve Commandants of Harichand Thakur

All Matua devotees have to follow these twelve commandants with utmost diligence and great reverence. These commandants are as follows-

- i. Always speak the truth.
- ii. Consider others wives as mothers.
- iii. Show respect to parents.
- iv. Distribute love in the world.
- v. Do not discriminate against holy person of character on basis of class and caste.
- vi. Beware of the six instincts.
- vii. Do not malign other religions.
- viii. Do not fall for fatal attractions.
- ix. Emplace *Sree Harimandir*.
- x. Work with your hand and name of God on lips.
- xi. Pray regularly.
- xii. Devote whole heartedly to God.

3.5.5. Eleven Strictures framed by P.R. Thakur for followers of the Matua Mahasangha

1. Members must feel that “Matua Mahasangha is my life. If necessary, I can sacrifice my life for Matua Mahasangha. The chief attributes of Sree Hari-Guruchand’s devotee is in keeping Matua Mahasangha alive. How can I consider someone a Matua, if the person is unable to love Matua Mahasangha?”.
2. A branch must be established in regions where at least ten Matua devotees live. These devotees must congregate every week or at least once in order to sing spiritual hymns and discuss spiritual matters related to Thakur and Sangha.
3. Every Matua devotee must strive to support the Sangha.
4. Every Matua devotee has to participate in Matua religious *Mela*¹⁸, on the occasion of advent of all embracing *Sree Harichand*, at *Sree Dham* Thakurnagar.
5. Every devotee has to participate in the devotee congregation at *Sridham* Thakurnagar for the *Raas Mela*.¹⁹

¹⁸ ‘Mela is a Sanskrit word meaning 'gathering' or 'to meet' or a 'fair'. It is used in the Indian subcontinent for all sizes of gatherings and can be religious, commercial, cultural or sport-related. In rural traditions melas or village fairs were (and in some cases still are) of great importance’.

¹⁹ ‘In the Bhagavat Purana and in the Vishnu Purana, the Rash Yatra of Sri Sri Krishna is mentioned. In the later autumn, Sri Krishna’s union with the Gopinis

6. The main aim of devotee congregation of Matua Mahasangha is to:

- i. Create an ideal family life.
- ii. Establish the power of Matua Mahasangha.
- iii. Exchange the views.

The devotees of Matua Mahasangha shall strive to direct themselves in the path laid down by *Sree Harichand* keeping in mind the above three aims.

7. When someone becomes a post bearer in the Sangha or becomes the leader in Mahasangha, all shall follow his orders or instructions; the sangha leader shall elect the next leader of the Mahasangha.

8. The leader of the Mahasangha shall be the only controller and decision maker. The Sangha shall be administered in accordance with the decisions he takes. If he so desires he can put into action, any rule or law, which is in the sake of the general well-being of all Matua devotees within the Sangha.

9. The name of *Sree Harichand*, through religious preaching and welfare shall reach out to the devotees.

with Dance & Songs is expressed in the Rash Lila. Raas mela celebrations commence from the auspicious day of Purnima in the month of Kartik according to Bengali calendar'

10. The regional sangha shall be constituted with number of branches and all the regional sangha shall form the district, state and central committee of the Matua Mahasangha.

11. Members must proclaim that “All Matua devotees of Matua Mahasangha are close to my heart and hence no one should accuse one another. Everyone is brother to one another and bound by heart.

*Marmon a janiya keho karo na nindibe
Hoile atma bidraho charkhare yabe
(Sree Sree Harileelamrita. P.226)*

Do not accuse one another without knowing the essence.
The internal conflict shall destroy every one's existence.
(Sree Sree Harileelamrita. P.226)

3.6. Conclusion

The institutional structure of Matua Mahasangha claims its control over the preachers as well as the devotees. They have asserted that commanding over the Matua devotees naturally follows from the domain of the Thakur family. Thus, the *Mukhoupodesta* is authorised to entitle the Matua *sadhu, gonsain and pagol* with *Chhota*²⁰ and any other title. It shows the power of distributing the

²⁰ Chhota is the commanding baton carried by the leader of group within the sampraday, is a symbol of authority

baton of authority, the eventual authority over the *sampraday* could be consolidated.

Apart from these, followers of *Matua Dharma* in both rural and urban areas form local bodies that are supposed to organise different activities in their localities according to their own desire and design. It is not necessary that in this context they require to have close contact and correspondence with the central body. Often they may communicate and receive the sanction letter or blessings from the *Mukhoupodesta*. Sometimes they may not be officially encouraged to perform any such sort of religious functions.

In reality, *Matua Mahasangha* does not enjoy the allegiance of all *Matuas*. There are few other autonomous organisations that are functioning independently with their own objectives and without maintaining the contact with *Matua Mahasangha* as such. Some times their relation with the Mother Organisation turns strenuous with regard to motto of Sree *Hari-Guru Chand* and overall activities of *Matua Mahasangha*. There may be many members of the *Matua sampraday* who maintain their religious activities without bothering much about the directives and organisational activities of *Matua Mahasangha*. However, they have their own ways of organising them at the village level. Generally the most important activity for

them in a calendar year is to organise a religious gathering for one month following the day of *mela* at Thakurnagar. In a locality where there are followers of Matua in good numbers, sometimes they form a group or *dal* to carry out the religious activities and congregation as per Matua dharma.

In most of the cases a *dal*²¹ in a locality bears the same sort of structure as followed by Matua Mahasangha. Generally a dal in a village or locality is headed by *Sabhapati* or President *Saha Sabhapati* and Accountant. The principal executive office bearer is called *Dalapati*, who is expected to be senior, knowledgeable and faithful among the Matua devotees. *Dal* acts as a consolidated group in a locality and is supposed to meet regularly especially on Wednesday, specified for weekly congregation of the Matuas. The congregation is held either at devotee's home in rotation or at common places.

In reality, despite the strong presence of organisational structure as proclaimed in the constitution, there is no single segment of Mahasangha that is working in a consolidated manner. Due to the

²¹ Dal is group, the concept of dal is important among the matua, Guruchand Thakur once commented '*jar dal nei, tar bal nei*' it means people who do not have their own organisation have no power as such.

complete absence of apex bodies, presently Mahasangha is in a truncated form without having a proper line and goals. Present Saha Sanghadhipati (Manjul Krishna Thakur) makes himself distant from organisational activities. Therefore functional part of the organisation has lost significance and political assimilations have become the usual functions in the Mahasangha.

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