

## CHAPTER IV

### **MATUA MAHASANGHA: PROCESS OF SOCIAL MOBILISATION, CONSOLIDATION AND ASSERTION**

#### **4.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, focus shall be on the process of social mobilisation, consolidation and assertion of Matua Mahasangha in Bengal. It can be discussed with specific reference to two different stages: (1) phase of mobilisation for survival after partition, and (2) phase of consolidation and assertion after P.R. Thakur, particularly since the organisation got a formal sectarian shape and devoted itself to the task of preaching the doctrines of Harichand–Guruchand across India. Organisationally, the Matua Mahasangha has taken a form of voluntary association along with the adoption of its formal written constitution *e.g. Matua Mahasangher Sanghbidhan ba Gathantantra* (detail in previous chapter III) followed by establishment of offices, introduction of formal membership card, incipient bureaucratisation, publications and holding of conferences, meeting of delegates and taking up resolutions.

All the above are, as Nigam (2000) has pointed out, similar to any other caste association which plays a mediatory role between the

ignorant masses and the political system. Why should people join collective efforts when they do not know whether their existence will do any good or they can ride free on the efforts of others? Sociologists have devoted a great deal of consideration to this question, posed first by Olson, he argued that 'collective wellbeing is simply not enough to motivate individual effort in the absence of selective rewards that go only to participants' (Olson 1965).

But as Fireman and Gamson (1979) acknowledged 'individuals share prior bonds with others that make solidaristic behaviour a reasonable expectation'. It has also been observed that a person whose life is entwined with the group (through friendship, kinship, organisational membership, informal support networks or shared relations with outsiders) features a big stake within the group's fate. When shared action becomes imperative, the person is probably going to contribute his or her share albeit the impact of that share is not noticeable (Fireman and Gamson 1979:40).

The range of religious/sectarian ideas, values and dogmas have important bearings for organisational activities. The Matua, theological narrations are mainly drawn from *Sri Sri Harileelamirta* and *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* that encompasses formal source of organisational structure. Matua Mahasangha also embraces more

informal, localised or popular theological expression developed by the community through different polemical writings. The significance of the latter could not be underestimated as vast literature on the Matua come from those sort of polemical writings. To maintain the uniqueness of the sectarian organisation, the community has developed and adopted an alternative theological framework that has rendered their worlds more meaningful and facilitated greater social mobilisation.

The dynamic approach could be seen in the *Guruchand Charit*, which is particularly helpful for understanding the role of religion in social mobilisation because it enables us to explore the reasons why Matua devotee may turn to social mobilisation around particular cause and issue. That could be seen in three interrelated levels, first, one securing the Indian citizenship right for large scale displaced Namasudra Matua people from Bangladesh and the second one is a consolidation of Matua devotees under the umbrella of Matua Mahasangha, and lastly giving a new dimension to Mahasangha in changing socio-political conditions.

#### **4.2. Phase of Mobilisation for Survival after Partition**

Social mobilisation movement, initiated by Hari-Guruchand and their followers was located in identifiable geographical spaces i.e.,

Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna districts mainly populated by Namasudra Matua population (Bandopadhyay 2011). Their movement was aimed towards establishing Namasudra identity launching protest movements against higher caste varna Hindu domination in bhakti Tradition. 'Matua bhakti movement gave new form of alternative platform for the lower section of society based on equality, simplicity and protest' (Halder 1394 BS).

'The schedule caste political movement started in Bengal under the guidance of Sri Guruchand Thakur in the early 20th century and ran successfully but was mainly confined to East Bengal. The close geographical location in contiguous regions was a serious factor in bringing behind successful social mobilisation.

However, in the last days of the Raj, their movement lost homogeneity and was heading in a variety of directions because of the fallout of the pressures generated by diverse politics of partition' (Bandopadhyay, Chaudhury 2017:62). Partition brought new complications and compulsions for the Bengali lower section. But most of them did not – or could not migrate immediately.

Every individual and every family of the Hindus in East Bengal (and indeed of Muslims in West Bengal) had to make this choice. The Hindus were not a homogeneous community in East Bengal,

nor were they evenly distributed in the population. Most of them lived in the southern parts of East Bengal including Khulna and Jessore, north Barishal, south Faridpur and Dacca. Being classified as a Hindu covered a mass of social groupings. Some belonged to the high castes, whether Brahmins or Kayasthas, who lived mainly around Barishal, Dacca and Bikrampur. But most Hindus, perhaps a million from this region and over 4 million altogether from eastern Bengal, belonged to social groups of a lower rank, the 'depressed' or 'scheduled' castes.

'In Bengal, people who migrated in 1947-48 were more wealthy classes, mostly the upper caste Hindu gentry and therefore the educated middle classes with jobs, including many of the Namasudra middle classes also, who could sell or arrange exchange of properties' (Chaterjee1990, Bandopadhyay 1997, Chatterji 2007).

The refugees, pouring into West Bengal from East Bengal/East Pakistan can be classified into two categories:

- a) Old Migrants – I) those who migrated between October 1946 and March 1958; II) those who migrated between April 1958 and December 1963.
- b) New Migrants –Those who came between January 1964 and March 1971.

In contrast to upper caste Hindu emigrants, majority of Namasudra in East Bengal were peasants, sharecroppers or agricultural labourers who found migration a much more difficult prospect. The sole possessions that the majority of them had were their tiny landholdings, and most of these people had never left their localities before. The second wave of refugee influx triggered fresh riots which was spreading from Khulna to Rajshahi and Dacca, and then, to Mymensingh and Barishal districts. Most of the victims of these riots were the lower caste Namasudra and therefore the majority belonged to Matua sect who were now forced to migrate to India ( Bandopadhyay 2011, Biswas and Sato 1993).

Joya Chatterji (2010) in her famous book *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* mentioned that, ‘the beginning of 1951, the subsequent disturbance in Khulna riot, about 1.5 million refugees arrived in West Bengal—majority of them were Namasudra peasants’ (Chatterji 2010:111). Bandopadhyay and Chaudhury opined that (2017), ‘the figures given in official records are not often reliable, as they account for less than people who registered themselves and were eventually sent to varied refugee camps. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there

have been probably more, who just crossed the border and settled down in various places in the other districts of Murshidabad, Nadia and 24-Parganas. Nobody knew their exact numbers' (Bandopadhyay and Chaudhury 2017:65).

'Unlike Punjab, in Bangladesh, the Namasudra peasants were deliberately targeted in post-partition violence. At Bongaon railway station the first batch of Namasudra refugees of about 500 families arrived in the first week of January 1950, from where they were sent to varied refugee camps either in Bengal or outside Bengal' (*The Statesman*, 21 January 1950), Their influx continued in subsequent years, among them majority were from Matua community. This physical displacement disrupted their community identity, which then inter-mingled with wider refugee identity.

The Namasudra refugees who arrived in the 1950s failed to get a good deal in West Bengal. Unlike the first wave of high caste bhadralok refugees, they were sent to varied refugee camps in districts like 24-Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan, and Midnapur and a few were sent to the neighbouring provinces of Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya<sup>22</sup> region, consisting

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<sup>22</sup> 'Dandakaranya covered an area of 77.63 square kilometers spread across the districts of Koraput and Kalandi in Orissa and the district of Bastar in then Madhya Pradesh and present day Chattishgarh. The Dandakaranya area was divided into four

of 77.63 square kilometer of inhospitable unirrigated land in central India. While the Namasudra refugees in post-partition West Bengal thus lost their physical space, and with that, lost their spatial capacity to organise and articulate protests, they were also imagining a new spiritual space where they might reinvent their identity more in social instead of political sense.

This had been happening through the initiatives of Pramath Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Guruchand Thakur, the first *Mahasanghadhipati* of Matua Mahasangha. Pramath Ranjan Thakur remained loyal to the Congress during the trying days of partition and migrated soon after, and for some time, remained outside organised politics, as he lost-like other political leaders from east Bengal, his electoral constituency. At this stage of his political career, he also devoted himself to the cause of the

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zones: Paralkote(Chattisgarh), Pharasgaon (Chattisgarh), Umerkote (Orissa), Malkangiri (Orissa). The first phase of rehabilitation ended in 1961. Within that period, 4,369 families in total were dispersed from various camps in West Bengal, and they had rehabilitated in Dandakaranya. The flows of refugees were picked up from 1962, with communal riots in East Pakistan that pushed the Hindus to cross the border. A majority of the families belonged to Namasudra castes. By June 1964 with the new government strategy, around 7,500 families moved into Dandakaranya, out of which 7,261 were Namasudras. The flows of refugees were picked up from 1962, with communal riots in East Pakistan that pushed the Hindus to cross the border. A majority of the families belonged to Namasudra castes. By June 1964 with the new government strategy, around 7,500 families moved into Dandakaranya, out of which 7,261 were Namasudra Matuas. Each such family was allotted around 6.5 acres of agricultural land and half an acre for homestead and kitchen garden, a total of seven acres. When in 1971, flows of refugees cascaded down on West Bengal, the rehabilitation measures were revised to accommodate the unending stream. They had given 5 acres in non irrigated areas and 3 acres for irrigated areas'. (Gupta ,Saibal. Kumar. 1999. *Dandakaranya: a survey of rehabilitation*. Calcutta: Bibhasa)

refugees. In December 1947, P.R. Thakur bought a land in North 24-Pargana between Chandpara and Gobordanga and began the Thakur Land Industries Ltd. This was the start of Thakurnagar, a refugee colony. It had been established to accommodate more refugees from Namasudra Matua community.

Thakurnagar grew into a significant cultural centre of Matua Mahasangha. The main reason for this was not, however, P.R. Thakur's politics, but his role as the Guru of the Matua Mahasangha. In this period, when large-scale Namasudra migration took place, P.R. Thakur began to visit the camps. As a Congress leader, he started encouraging Namasudra refugees to settle down in other parts of India where they might get land to resettle, he argued that hard working Matuas could build a new Bengal in vacant lands of Dandakaranya or Andaman Island if they are allotted such land' (Bandopadhyay, Chaudhury 2017: 76).

The partition of India perhaps did not bring any help to the Matuas, unlike the other Bengali middle Class Bhadraklok<sup>23</sup>,

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<sup>23</sup> Bhadraklok apparently seemed very elusive. With a projection of intelligentsia or knowledge as a cultural commodity (one that apparently does not seem to be the wealth of any class but rather at the vicinity of every ideal Bengali's reach) formed in the psyche of every Bengali the elusive image of the ideal. The domain of "knowledge consumption" either traditional (cultures) or material' (Chatterjee, Partha, 1993. Nation and its Fragments. Princeton University Press p.128). The term Bhadra, a Sanskrit word, denoted Nobel. The term bhadraklok began to be used later for the behaviourally refined people. From the early nineteenth century in Bengal, a

Namasudras were worst sufferers of the partition' (Chatterjee 2007). Matuas not only lost their sectarian autonomy but also were displaced from the territorial anchorage. The post-partition violence compelled them to migrate as Hindu refugees in a broad category to India, where they had to begin afresh and start a new struggle for existence. Thus, social mobility, which they had achieved in the course of the last seventy-five years, was undone and the strength of their social movement was sapped as they as a community remained separated on the two sides of the new internal national borders.

#### **4.2.1. P.R. Thakur: Mediator Between Sect and Politics**

P.R. Thakur in this phase of transition not only projected himself as guardian of the distressed community but also tried to keep himself as a mediator between sect and politics. Unlike Jogendranath Mandal<sup>24</sup>, P.R. Thakur carefully avoided any rhetoric in the path of

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bhadralok emerged as a social category and became practically an institution in the mid-nineteenth century'.

<sup>24</sup>Jogendranath Mandal was born on 29th January, 1904, in a peasants' family at Maistarkaandi village under Gaurnaadi Thana (Police Stations) of District Barisal Bengal Province (Now Bangladesh). Jogendranath Mandal completed his LL.B in the 1934 and started practicing law at Kolkata from 1935. In the year of 1936, Jogendranath Mandal contested the election for Bengal Legislative Council and defeated the very strong Congress candidate Mr. Saral Kumar Dutta and became an independent MLA from Barishal (Bakharganj) constituency. In 1942 he initiated the Scheduled Castes Federation in Bengal which became the third largest political party of Bengal after Congress and Muslim League. Jogendranath Mandal became the first law and labour Minister of Independent Pakistan out of seven ministers. Mahapran

Dalit politics, because his main target was not to establish or maintain separate Dalit identity for Namasudra Matua but his intention was to re-consolidate old sectarian values of Matua Mahasangha and work towards proper rehabilitation of displaced Namasudra masses in different parts of India. He went to the Congress and sought for political support for the distressed Matua masses and gave his full support to all the Congress candidates in the first election in independent India, held in January 1952.

The effort made by P.R. Thakur to re-consolidate the distressed Matuas in West Bengal was started from a level of uncertainty because separate Matua identity now co-existed with three competing levels of distresses, which are as follows: distressed internal refugee identities, distressed lower caste identities, and distressing memories of religious persecution in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This may be called a triangulation of distressed identities; at times one might overshadow others but that does not

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was honoured with the post of President of the first session of Parliament till the permanent President was elected. He came back to India in the month of September, 1950, and settled in Kolkata. He formed Bengal refugee conference and arranged a large conference on 11th and 12th January 1951. He started severe movement for the refugees and took very active part in the 'satyagrah' for the permanent settlement of displaced persons in West Bengal only. On 9th July 1958 an organisation named 'East Bengal refugee parliament', a non-political organisation, was set up to unite the refugees of East Bengal and realise all the rights for peaceful living.' (see Mandal, Jagadishchandra(2002). *Mahapran Jogendranath O Babasaheb*, Sujana Publication, Kolkata)

mean that the other competing identities have completely disappeared. Under the new environmental situation, previous organisational setup in Orakandi did not make any positive impact as alienated leadership was no longer a source of power, which Matua could rely upon to confront a hostile world.

Hence, it was a different task for the Matua leadership to regain the strength and confidence of the distressed community. So P.R. Thakur decided to take a new form of leadership that could reconnect sectarian values with politics. Under the new innovative and strategic manoeuvre, they had begun to recollect old values in new changing situations. Community responses to the organisational drive as made by P.R. Thakur and the participation of the Matua community in a rehabilitation programme organised by the Government in different parts of Bengal as well as in Dandakaranya, indicated one particular dimension of their integration mentality, which motivated them to cooperate on political issues as given by the Congress government at that time in West Bengal and in Delhi. Voting behavior and electoral support to the Congress candidate in the election of 1952 reflected their intense desire to integrate with the new changing conditions in India.

#### **4.2.2. Middle Path taken by P.R. Thakur to Re-Organise Matua Mahasangha**

P.R. Thakur had taken a middle path that had separated from the path of Guruchand Thakur (as Guruchand Thakur desired for complete autonomy from the conventional religion and appeasement politics practised by national leadership). P.R. Thakur's notion of community was thus not wholly autonomous in terms of sectarian ideology neither he desired for complete separation from appeasement politics. Even he did not prefer to hold and continue the autonomous entity of Matua Mahasangha in terms of sectarian modalities rather he strove for redrawing its boundaries in response to various socio-political realities.

'The policy of Rehabilitating Bengali refugees outside West Bengal was announced in 1956, Jogendra Mandal at this situation began to mobilise the Bengali refugees in order to protest against the governmental policy of rehabilitating Bengali refugees in Dandakaranya' (Mandal 2002). 'P.R. Thakur supported the Dandakaranya policy of rehabilitation of Namasudra Matua. He criticised Jogendra Mandal and communist leaders for misguiding the Namasudra refugees for their vested political interest. As a Congress leader, he had maintained a connection with government

officials and Namasudra masses to be settled in Dandakaranya. He even visited the Dandakaranya region, in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh' (Biswas 2003: 517).

'As a Congress candidate, he won an Assembly seat from Haringhata and Hansnakhali in 1957 and 1962, respectively. He also became a Minister of State for Tribal Development of West Bengal Assembly. But his association with the congress did not sustain for a long time, in 1964, he stepped down from the Assembly as a protest against the attacks on refugees in Bongaon by the police and allegedly congress goons. In 1967 he contested in the election as a candidate of newly formed Bangla Congress in Lok Sabha Constituency in Nabadwip, and he won against the Congress candidate Sachindra Mohan Nandy' (Biswas 2003:520).

In 1988, P.R. Thakur with some of his close associates re-organised Matua Mahasangha and registered it as a socio-religious organisation. Perhaps the decision was taken to organise the scattered Matua population and bring them to a single platform, because, in spite of his political and sectarian mission, a large section of Matua population remained untouched by the influence of Thakurnagar. Numerous splinter groups were dispersed across the country and they had their congregations and organisational

setup without any connection with P.R. Thakur and his family members. The plan was to re-confirm familial legacy in Matua Mahasangha and unconditional dominance over the Matua *bhaktas*. Therefore, it meant a symbolic return of family supremacy to the reinvented sectarian and identity politics of Matuas in Bengal.

To know about the intensity of sectarianism and its collective mobilisation, it is important to know the theological justification for self-help movement in alien space and base for its authorisation. The standard of theological underpinning is probably the more important consideration instead of the situational politics and social precedence. Being a guru of sectarian organisation, P.R. Thakur followed Guruchand's teaching to make the community self-assertive. His most powerful dictum "*jar dal nei, tar bal nei*" (those who do not from a group they do not have power) and "*mukhe nam hate kaj*" (be engaged in work with name of Hari) conveyed the message of the organisation.

His religious role and teachings helped to unite a community that had lost its physical space and were now dispersed across the subcontinent. Thakur, however, preferred negotiation and self-help in the matter of rehabilitation. But ultimately, frustrated

from the insensitivities of the Congress government, he devoted his energies to create a spiritual space in the form of Matua Mahasangha, where dispersed Namasudra community could eventually unite and reinvent their collective self. From the case of the Matua Mahasangha's agitation and protest mobilisation especially in Bengal, it is clear that religious bindings and religious concerns were capitalised by the activists who were ready to see the potential to mobilise others following the citizenship right of displaced Namasudra people from Bangladesh.

#### **4.3. Phase of Consolidation and Assertion after P.R. Thakur**

Since the times of P.R. Thakur, the Mahasangha made repeated attempts to posit itself as the frontal organisation of the Namasudra community. Success evaded because the ideas of protest theology and mobilisation as well as the performance with symbolism took a back seat as political interest and local faction became more important than sectarian discourse.

In most cases, political negotiations were happening at the local level. P.R. Thakur died in 1990. His elder son Kapilkrishna Thakur established a centre at the village Asthi in the district of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. This centre was working under one of the branches of Matua Mahasangha and as Sanghadhipati of

Mahasangha, he himself was taking care of the Ashram. This centre was intended to mobilise the Namasudra refugees who settled in Central and South India in the 1950s. Since then, Matua Mahasangha engaged in rendering different types of community services at a local level like an initiative to supply relief to flood victims, to establish primary schools, etc.

In 1994, in a large meeting organised near Shahid Minar in Kolkata, the main focus of the speakers was twofold which was basically religious in nature. Firstly to unite the Matua including people who belong to the splinter group under one umbrella of Matua Mahasangha. The other was putting emphasis on spreading Matua dharma among the Namasudra community.

In 2001, the Mahasangha held a mass agitation before Bangladesh High Commission in Kolkata to express protest against the atrocities committed on the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. However, such activities on the part of the Mahasangha indicate its zeal to come up as a crucial political actor. In the meantime a law was passed in Parliament in the form of Citizenship Amendment Act 2003, this 'Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003 made citizenship by birth conditional, restricting it to a person born in India, where both of his/her parents are citizens of India; or one of his/her parents is a citizen of

India and the other is not an illegal migrant at the time of his birth' (Venkatesan 2011). The law was passed with an intention to prevent illegal Muslim migration but on the contrary, the law went against the interest of Namasudra Matua people in India.

#### **4.3.1. Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2003 and Reactions of Mahasangha**

The issue of the constant influx of refugees from the neighbouring countries due to the civil commotion and religious persecution was raised in the standing committee in Rajya Sabha on 12, December 2003. The Committee received a large number of representations from different organisations particularly from West Bengal and certain parts of North-Eastern region expressing apprehensions that people who have migrated to India from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan because of atrocities committed on the minorities by the theocratic rulers, would now be detected and deported under the proposed law. It had been pleaded by the petitioners for granting of citizenship and other facilities to such migrants by the government of India.

The religious persecution of minorities in those countries which resulted in a mass exodus of individuals from their ancestral

lands, particularly from Bangladesh, was emphasised in the Committee. While expressing sympathies for such refugees, members were of the view that rather than granting citizenship to these refugees, it might be better if the government could protect them.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2003, was laid on the table of Rajya Sabha on 12, December 2003. 'In 2003, the amendment to the Citizenship Act brought about two significant changes— the recognition in law of the category of overseas citizens of India, and the constraining of citizenship by birth by confining it to only those whose parents were Indian citizens or one of the parents was an Indian citizen and the other was not an illegal migrant. In addition, the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003 provided the procedure for the establishment and maintenance of the NRC. Section 14A made the registration of all citizens of India, issue of national identity cards, the maintenance of a national population register, and the establishment of the NRC by the central government, compulsory. Thus, the 2003 amendment emphasised the wall of separation between citizens and non-citizens by inserting in the section on citizenship by birth, the distinction between those who were born to

Indian parents and were Indian citizens through descent and blood ties, and those who could not make such claims to citizenship by birth. The Citizenship Rules (2003) took the distinguishability principle further by putting in place bureaucratic procedures for creating the NRC and issuing national identity cards to citizens. Under the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003, the Registrar General of Citizen Registration was to establish and maintain the NRC. Under these rules, the central government was to carry out house-to-house enumeration and collect particulars of individuals and families, including their citizenship status' (Roy 2019:29).

The Matua Mahasangha vociferously protested against this law. Out of collective action Matua Mahasangha demanded scrapping of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2003, in this context Sinhary (2017) acknowledged that, 'for the first time Mahasangha received recognition as the political mouthpiece of the Dalit refugees when 21 Matua devotees pledged to a fast unto death in 2004 to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2003. To pacify that agitation delegates came from Delhi to listen to their demands' (Sinhary 2017).

On the citizenship issue, unlike the previous mobilisation against high caste supremacy, the Matuas transcended from ideological protest to more crucial issue like citizenship right. That again compelled the Matua Mahasangha to launch protest movement and collective mobilisation in the political line. Their official mouthpiece *Matua Mahasangher Patrika* (dated 4th April 2004), mentioned that for all practical purposes, Indian Government denies citizenship to those that crossed over from East Bengal after 25 March 1971, the day when major violence by the Pakistan army started in Dhaka. The 2003 Citizenship (Amendment) Act took away the prospect of citizenship from the children of many of those who fled discrimination in East Bengal.

#### **4.3.2. Shifting of Strategy to Utilise Political Agency**

The amendment to the act made the, lower caste Namasudra Matua to be identified as ‘infiltrators’. In 2009, the General Secretary in his report *Mahasanger 23 Tama Barshik Sanmelan* (2019:19) clearly acknowledged that ‘Matua Mahasangha would not participate in any politics except as is needed for the progress of dharma’. This open and formal declaration was very indicative and significant as Bandopadhyay (2011) said that, ‘if this alteration of strategy is motivated by the citizenship issue, it

probably comes with the realisation that having socially consolidated their demographic power almost sort of a silent revolution achieved behind the glare of everyday politics' (Bandopadhyay 2011:269).

Matua Mahasangha, therefore represents a new identity that transcends their older narrower caste identity to a more modern sectarian identity. With this new identity, they began to act as some sort of pressure group. In the 2009 election, the Matua Mahasangha showed its organisational potency as a guarantor of votes within the Matua populated areas. The influence of Mahasangha within the Matua populated areas brought political parties to their knees.

On 21 Sept. 2010, former Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee gave the Sri Sri Thakur Harichand-Guruchand honour to Baroma's elder son Kapilkrishna for his continual work for the Matuas. 'We are thinking of instituting an award like this one for long. I'm happy that our plans have come true. People who fought for the upliftment of the downtrodden are Sri Chaitanya Deb, Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore and also Thakur Harichand and Thakur Guruchand. But history did not recognise the role of

the last two just like the others' (*Times of India*, 21 September 2010.).

The left front government also sanctioned the plan of a government college at Chandpara and provided land for the Sree Sree Harichand-Guruchand Research Foundation in Rajarhat. The Trinamool Congress, in turn, upgraded the Thakurnagar railway station, promised government jobs, a railway station stadium and hospital. The battle for Matua vote bank has also caused a split within the All India Matua Mahasangha. Two factions have emerged, led by the two brothers — Kapilkrishna and Manjulkrishna. One stood in the election with the Left Front ticket while the other backed the Trinamool Congress. All political parties now agreed to offer support for the development of the Matua Mahasangha. The amount of donations received by the organisation also entered their official report. It had been reported in Bengali daily *Anandabazar Patrika*, (5 November, 2009) that a politician spokesperson from Matua Mahasangha said that 'as ten out of fifty million devotees of Matua Mahasangha live in this province, and that they are expected to function in keeping with the wishes of Baroma, the spiritual leader of the sect, if ever she expresses such a wish'. This

statement expresses their confidence over Matua devotee across Bengal and their absolute submission to Thakurnagar. This explains why all the political parties suddenly started taking notice of Matua Mahasangha, while having neglected the Matua population for the last sixty years?

On Feb 2, 2011, the Matua Mahasangha was handed over a land of 20 cottah at Rajarhat, New Town, Kolkata, by the Left Front Government to set up the Harichand–Guruchand Research Foundation. Around 3500 to 4000 members of Matua Mahasangha were present on the occasion. The Mukhoupadesta Baroma Benapani Devi and Saha Sanghadhipati Manjulkrishna Thakur were not present. During the occasion, former Housing minister and HIDCO Chairman Goutam Deb clarified that ‘he was much aware of the Matua community and activities of Matua Mahasangha’. Kapilkrishna Thakur, Sanghadhipati of Matua Mahasangha, acknowledged that ‘there has been a conspiracy to stop this research foundation from arising. There are conspiracies from within and out of doors the Sangha in making this research foundation happen but we've overcome the troubles’, he said (*Times of India*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2011).

Harichand–Guruchand Research Foundation came up with a twofold demand: “*Chai nagorikotyo, chai jatipatro*” (we demand citizenship, we demand caste certificate). Although in this regard CPI (M) did some work to please Namasudra sentiment. Within the Parliament, they demanded SC status for the Namasudra people living in Northern and Central provinces as erstwhile Bengali refugees.

In August 2007, a convention was organised by CPI (M) at Ambedkar Bhavan in Delhi. Convention of persons belonging to the Namasudra and related castes from Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi with an aim to conduct relentless struggle demanding granting of scheduled castes status to Namasudra, Pod (Pondra) Maji, and other similar castes among Bengali refugees now rehabilitated in states other than West Bengal. The Chief convener of the Convention Mr K. Varadarajan acknowledged that even after 60 years of independence the rights of dalit and therefore adivasis have not even been recognised. Moving the resolution, CPI (M) leader Ms Brinda Karat described the plight of those who had suffered due to partition. While many of those that came from Bangladesh settled in West Bengal and other bordering states, many of them were rehabilitated by the Govt. of India in

other states. Condition of majority of them continues to be dismal. They are deprived of education in their mother tongue and enormous numbers of them remain landless. Even those that should get Schedule Caste status have not been granted in other states.

However, these twofold demands of Matua Mahasangha, gave new impetus among the Matua devotees. They organised an all India *Ratha Yatra* (chariot procession) to mark the 200th birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur. The leaders of the organisation led the procession within the Namasudra Matua populated areas across India. The thought behind the initiative was to unite and mobilise the community under the banner of Matua Mahasangha. The prime focus and modus operandi of Matua Mahasangha thus has been changed from caste estrangement to citizen politics. Therefore from the very essence of Matua Mahasangha and for which this particular sect was developed in post independent period got dissipated and their role became more prominent within the domain of local politics. Recent political conditions never allowed the caste and religious questions to disappear from public discourse. If some groups are trying not to use religion for political purposes, but ultimately other political

agencies may bring up caste and non-secular issues and try to arouse them on these primordial lines.

The English daily *The Telegraph*, dated 29 December 2010, reported that, on 28 December 2010, ‘thousands of followers of deviant sect- the Matua Dharma- hit the streets of Kolkata holding their red flags high, and dancing to beats of their traditional musical instruments *donkas* and *kasha*, they gathered to attend a huge public meeting convened by their frontal organisation Matua Mahasangha, at Esplanade located in the heart of Kolkata’ (*The Telegraph*, 29 December 2010). It was organised before the assembly elections of West Bengal in 2011. The meeting was attended by top-ranked representatives from all the major political parties. All of them shared the dais with Baroma Binapani Devi. The aim of the meeting was to demand the repeal of the Citizenship Amendment Act 2003. This was because it denied citizenship to those refugees who have immigrated to India and branding them as ‘illegal migrants’. The message of the Mahasangha in this meeting was clear enough.

#### **4.3.3. Involvement of Mahasangha in Vote Bank Politics**

The Matuas under the leadership of Mahasangha had already, by then, made their presence felt as a solid vote-bank in the Panchyat polls in 2008 and the Lok Sabha elections held in 2009. The

community, which now emerged as a determining factor in influencing the results of about 35 state assembly constituencies in 2011, now came up in bargaining position to extend their support only to those candidates who would pledge to meet their demands in future. This is for the first time when Matua Mahasangha successfully made their public presence in such a way that all the politicians present on dias expressed their sympathy and endorsed their demand to repeal Citizenship Amendment Act 2003.

The Matuas had now emerged as a force that no political party in West Bengal could ignore. After witnessing the emergence of organised protest and mobilisation on the part of Matua Mahasangha, Mamata Banerjee of TMC party who belonged to the opposition (2009) commented that, 'I shall work for the Matuas as long as I am alive' (*Times of India*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2009,).

In social mobilisation Matua Mahasangha is capitalising certain emotional ties based on unique historicity of Matua dharma. That perhaps offers a very effective way of generating social boundaries and bonding that need not be all-encompassing. Organisations define themselves by making a distinction between those who belong and those who do not, between social actions that is part of the organisation and that which is not. Moreover, organisations

may not always articulate a clear purpose to which their activity is oriented.

In a complex and pluralistic social environment, they vary in their strategies from including some members for certain purposes and at certain times or in certain cases. This shows that organisation was not stuck to any pre model structure rather was willing to change its modalities consistent with their organisational requirements. In this context, one of the central themes that occupied Weber's attention was the matter of the "routinisation of charisma" (1978:246). Weber observed that several religious movements are founded by persons with strong personal charisma but lose strength after the first leader dies. The death of a leader creates an authority crisis during which followers face the matter of transferring legitimate authority from one charismatic leader who has the emotional loyalty of followers, to a permanent structure which will facilitate the movement's continued survival.

After the demise of Kapilkrishna Thakur (2014), Matua Mahasangha was caught in a dilemma with regard to authority, as executive body which was formally constituted by the Matua devotees could not find an appropriate and suitable face to guide the organisation in political domain. The organisation

encountered with challenges and opportunities thanks to the constant change in organisational preferences and problem arising in family domain. The changes in authority structure included refutation of family supremacy in organisation and shifting of organisational goals or preferences from social concerns to political gain. In such a changing situation the organisational members are expected to compete and survive within the dynamic socio-political process. These changes affect two important aspects of the organisation's functioning; they are organisational culture and organisational commitment.

It was claimed by Pariksheet Bala, local dalapati of Thakur Nagar that 'Matua Mahasangha was embedded with extensive networks which extend downwards to common devotees across India and outwards to global community within the Matua community. These networks facilitated in following of monetary and material resources through religious network where subscriptions are collected from individual donors, and congregations'.

In the organisation all the members are required to formally apply for membership and obtain a card with photo identity. Its members are often either individual members or they will become

members as a family. Each family has got to pay a yearly subscription starting from Rs 12 to Rs 50. Till 2018, the Sangha had quite 7000 branches all over India. If the membership numbers are even almost what is claimed, one could imagine the annual income of the organisation from subscription alone. In addition to the present, their annual reports proudly announce the names of more wealthy donors who contribute regularly hundreds of thousands of rupees in running its various welfare projects.

Matua Mahasangha also has an access to extensive human resources. Volunteers are mobilised, willing to work without payment or material reward. Even very poor people, who face daily pressures to secure basic needs, still tend to find time to be involved in their local religious congregations. The recruitment and retention of paid staff are often difficult because they cannot offer fixed salaries like that by the state or private sector. It has been observed that the organisation depends primarily or entirely on support from religious congregations, we further noticed that the religious commitment of staff and volunteers within the Matua organisation results in a better work ethic (promoting

behaviour like honesty, transparency and hard work) and better services, although the evidence for this is often only anecdotal and not proven. A key point that has emerged from the study is that 'religious' mobilisation is more linked to rather earthly problems with class, socio-economic inequality, displacement, and marginalisation. However, ideally there is no immediate link between believing in one particular faith in the one hand and social mobilisation on the other. But in the case of Matua Mahasangha it appears to be intertwined.

In the field certain things came to be noted that beyond the name Matua Mahasangha there was little religious content to the collective consolidation. It lacked religious leadership and, most importantly, it did not draw on theological resources as said by Sujoy Biswas (School Teacher at Local primary School at Chand Para). He also unhesitantly claimed that, the capacity for mass mobilisation does not come automatically from their respective organisational traditions and it is deviating from the religious directives as put forward by Sree Guruchand Thakur. Therefore, at present Matua Mahasangha is facing certain dilemmas and crisis in organisation, leadership, centralisation and institutionalised co-operation. Though Matua Mahasangha has its own constitution that supports the religious principles of Matua

dharma, as propagated by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur at certain level there is acute organisational crisis regarding execution of power.

#### **4.3.4. Literary Activism by the Matua Intelligentsia**

In raising their voice against the social atrocities what they encountered was literary activism by the Matua intelligentsia which became an integral part of Matua Mahasangha. The Mahasangha incessantly promotes literary activities among its followers. Aside from the first religious texts, like *Sree Sree Harililamrito* and *Guruchandcharit*, there are a number of periodicals published state wide by the varied branch organisations of the Mahasangha. These include the *Matua Mahasangha Patrika*, *Matua Bandha* and *Matua Darpan*, *Harisevak*.

Although one can find a continuing critique of the Hindu caste-dominated Bengal politics in Matua literature, it aims to supply authentic knowledge about the experience of caste oppression and perpetual victimhood. It has other salient features also. Unlike other Dalit literature, Matua literature attempts to posit Harichand–Guruchand as counter-elites in bhadralok dominated West Bengal and as native icons of Dalit identity by moving away from Ambedkarite political assertion.

Therefore, in order to commemorate the birth centenary of their guru, thousands of Matuas came together and celebrated the occasion with enthusiasm in 2007. The thought behind such initiatives was to uphold an alternate history that was never allowed to germinate in the past due to the preponderance of the upper-caste Bhadrakalok avenue of public life in Bengal. ‘The rise of Matua Mahasangha as a political lobby also influenced other Dalit literary mouthpieces to acknowledge the former’s current activism as an important step towards a future organised Dalit politics’ (Sinhary 2017:158).

A small Matua organisation like Harichand Mission regularly contributes to Matua literature despite its political differences with Mahasangha. Debendralal Biswas Thakur, after he had developed a rift with the Sree Sree Harichand Seva Sangha, established his own mission in 1977 and launched a magazine called Harisevak. Deben Thakur’s major works include “*Matua-ra Hindu noy: Dalit Oikyer Sandhane*” (Matuas are Not-Hindus: In Search of Dalit Unity), “*Swadhinata 50: Iye Asaadi Jhuta Hai*” (50 Years of Independence: The Liberty is Farce), “*Kolir Kahini*” (The Story of Kaliyuga). ‘He sought to unite Dalits and refers to Guruchand Thakur as the local icon of Dalit politics in Bengal, elevating him above Ambedkar’ (Sinhary 2017:159).

A *Harisevak* editorial (1990:1) mentions, 'more than the Indian Central Government's promotion of "Hindu" as a category — rather rebuked the eagerness of most followers of Harichand Thakur to return themselves as Hindus in the forms. If, when the census is held, we entered our religion as Matua, comparison with the preceding census would enable us to know what is the number of Matua adherents in India and Bangladesh, and whether our religion is advancing or going backwards.'(Walker1999:563).

One may raise a fundamental question that why did the Matua Mahasangha take part in politics? The solution could be due to caste-based discrimination and physical dislocation from time to time, the members of Matua became instruments of state play, which denied their citizenship to the Indian society, especially in Bengal. It is not only partition which put them in distress. It is a fall out of systematic oppression led by state mechanism which denied their basic rights, as being lower caste in Bengal. The identity of Namasudra Matuas at present as citizen is uncertain and status assigned to them by upper caste Hindus in caste divided and structured society adds to their plight. Identity construction of Namasudra Matua is not just a symbolic sort of social capital, and it will be erroneous, if we equate Matua

agitation within the sort of singularity. The various sort of fissure and native factors also are related to it. The submersion with different political parties and groups several times was not just derived from theoretical underpinning of Matua Mahasangha rather it had been channelised by practical orientation of distressed masses. The category of Sectarian text has often been considered identical with the phenomenon of sectarianism.

In several articles in *Harisevak*, Section of dissident Matua writers claimed that Matua religion became Brahminised. In addition to it the offspring of Sri Harichand and Guruchand Thakur indulged themselves in diplomatic negotiations to personal mileage. Matua headquarter did not communicate these anti-Brahmanical tradition to the masses in Bengal also in India. Rather it is helping the Brahminical hegemony to sustain *manusmriti*. They tried to prove Harichand Thakur by birth a Namasudra, to be a Maithili Brahmin elevated him as reincarnation of Bishnu.

It was most fascinating fact that large sections of publications were related to Matua dharma and emphasis was given to the peripheral narratives of Matua Mahasangha that represented mostly through personal understanding fissure centred narratives

of the peripheral quasi group, which hints towards the existence of a second opinion of unique spatial understanding or consciousness against the Matua Mahasangha, which has been coined because of the peripheral consciousness.

On the question of lack of participation of new generation in protest movement, the probability of the extent of correlation between the caste identity and sectarian identity appears to be very significant. Caste disguised identity and caste neutral surname became more popular among new generation of people. Since social status of the individual is no more associated with caste identity and socio-economic advancement made them set apart from traditional identity. That obvious effect of sectarian participation in this social gathering which is identified as gathering of lower caste is that it breeds psychological inhibition against active participations by young members.

#### **4.3.5. NRC and Matua Mahasangha**

On the issue of National Register of Citizens (NRC)<sup>25</sup> in Assam, Matua Mahasangha again drew the people's attention. A news article

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<sup>25</sup> The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is the list of Indian citizens in Assam. Assam, which faced influx from Bangladesh since the early 20th century, is the only state having an NRC. It was prepared in 1951, following the census of 1951. It is being updated to weed out illegal immigration from Bangladesh and neighbouring regions. Recently Assam released the final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which included 1.9 crore names out of a total applicant pool of 3.29 crore. The process of NRC update was taken up in Assam as per a Supreme Court order in

with a headline ‘Matua rail, rasta roko’ was published in ‘*Times of India*’ (1 August, 2018,). A day after the second and final draft of the Assam NRC when it excluded 40 lakh out of 3.29 crore applicants, *Sara Bharat Matua Mahasangha* on Tuesday 30 July, 2018, launched a movement to protest the exclusion of nearly five lakh people of Matua community from Assam NRC. Thousands of Matuas came to the streets and blocked the rail tracks across North 24 Parganas district. Boroma Binapani Devi signalled a movement from the Matua headquarters at Gaighata’s Thakurnagar. “A bigger movement will be launched all over West Bengal,” she expressed grave concern over the draft of NRC in Assam, which leaves out over 40 lakh people and of whom five lakh are Matuas.

The important factors behind sustaining their activities in West Bengal are mentioned here. It seems plausible to assume that the sect’s protests were launched as sections of Matuas were not happy with the issue of formation of Matua Development Board. On August 7, 2018, barely six months ahead of the next Lok Sabha elections.

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2013. It was done in order to wean out cases of illegal migration from Bangladesh and other adjoining areas. NRC updation was carried out under The Citizenship Act, 1955, and according to rules framed in the Assam Accord. A total of 3.29 crore people applied. The verification involved house-to-house field verification, determination of authenticity of documents, family tree investigations in order to rule out bogus claims of parenthood and separate hearings for married women’.  
<http://www.insightsonindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/National-Register-of-Citizens-NRC.pdf>

The Trinamool Congress government headed by Mamata Banerjee as chief minister decided to set up two separate boards for the welfare of the Namasudras and Matuas. Mr Mukul Bairagya, working president of the All India Namasudra Bikash Parishad, had already drawn the attention of the Chief Minister in Cooch Behar claiming that there are around 2.87 crore Namasudras in Bengal who desperately needed socio-economic development.

Mukul Bairagya claimed that in Bengal, more than 90 per cent of Namasudras are Matuas who constitute traditional vote banks of the ruling Trinamool Congress party in the state (*Times of India*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2018). This was strongly criticised by Shantanu Thakur the present MP of Bangaon (son of Manjulkrishna Thakur) in social media.<sup>26</sup> He vehemently rejected reports and said that ‘Matuas are not the traditional voters of Trinamool Congress. To him the present government was using the Matua sentiments for their own political gain. They have nothing do with Matua people. Therefore Matua Mahasangha must keep away from the political parties. Matua Mahasangha must maintain its functional autonomy.’ The statement implies that till today voice of a functional autonomy is present there.

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<sup>26</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd\\_TPt6fyW4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd_TPt6fyW4)

In 2016 the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) Government had introduced the Citizenship Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha. The Bill was meant to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955 to redefine the term “illegal immigrant” and provide shelter to persecuted religious minorities in Muslim majority Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Accordingly, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from these three countries were not to be treated as “illegal immigrants”. The argument was that Muslims have other Islamic 26 countries to seek shelter; Hindus have only India.

Though the bill was passed by the Lok Sabha, it subsequently lost within the Rajya Sabha. It therefore lapsed with the outgoing Lok Sabha. The bill was again tabled on Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and passed by both houses on 11 December, 2019. ‘THE CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2019 NO. 47 OF 2019’ that has been published in “The Gazette of India” dated 12th December, 2019. The Act clearly mentioned that, In the Citizenship Act, 1955 (hereinafter referred to as the principal Act), in section 2, in subsection (1), in clause (b), the following proviso shall be inserted, namely:— "Provided that any person belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian community from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan, who entered into India on or before the

31st day of December, 2014 and who has been exempted by the Central Government by or under clause (c) of sub-section (2) of section 3 of the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 or from the application of the provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946 or any rule or order made there under, shall not be treated as illegal migrant for the purposes of this Act;" it also mentioned that 'Nothing in this section shall apply to tribal area of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram or Tripura as included in the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution and the area covered under "The Inner Line" notified under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873.'

Matua Mahasangha Shantanu Thakur's faction welcomed the act in the press release dated 11 December, 2019, where it has been mentioned that 'our long cherished demand for Citizenship demand is going to be fulfilled now and Boroma's dream shall be materialised by this act.' However, there is confusion within matuas as ruling state government now stands against the act. In an interview he also claimed that, Mamata Banerjee was now looking more for Muslim votes than Matua votes in Lok Sabha elections (2019) which revealed a sharp polarisation in the voting pattern in the State, with the BJP consolidating Matua votes to its side. Presently the Muslim population in West Bengal (according to the 2011 Census) may have increased from

27 per cent to over 30 per cent now. In around 130 of the 294 constituencies in the State, Muslim votes have a decisive role. Out of those 130 constituencies, the Muslim population stands between 40 to 90 per cent in 74 constituencies. In the Lok Sabha elections, Mamata Banerjee led in 98 of the 130 constituencies and 60 of the 74 constituencies, clearly pointing to the firm Muslim support for her. On the other hand, the BJP hopes that the CAA will serve to further wean away Trinamool's Matua votes and increase its own vote bank among the refugee Hindus. But there are various categories of Hindu refugees. Those who came in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are already integrated into the social and political system.

However, the fate of those Hindu refugees who have come to India in the 1980s and 1990s and are still coming today remain undecided. The ruling party's opposition to the CAA has led the Matua population to lean towards BJP as a result in the Lok Sabha election 2019, around 30 constituencies which was known for TMC vote bank shifted their electoral mandate from the ruling party TMC to the BJP, therefore, Trinamool Congress (TMC) lost its Lok Sabha seats in Bongaon and Ranaghat where the Matuas are majority in number.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

The dissident group within Mahasangha is not very happy with the present attitude of the ruling TMC party. Sukdev Biswas, a faction leader of All India Matua Mahasangha aligned with the BJP, says, 'As long as there are Hindus in Bangladesh, there will be some coming. The *miyas* don't allow them to live in peace. These people will need to be given refuge here'. He also added that, 'No Hindus are foreigners in India'. He caps this with a slogan: "*Matua hither jonnyo je kaj korbe, tarai deshe raaj karbe.*" Whoever works in the interest of Matuas will rule the country. That keeps open the possibilities of developing new equation in power politics with the organisation. Secondly members of Matua intelligentsias differ in their understanding regarding Constitutional framework of Matua Mahasangha in reference to their integration with wider society.

They have developed different narrations on how they socially differ from others. Thirdly as a sect it always kept changing its strategies in order to take care of their differences with other religious groups as well as to make it relevant to politics. Apart from their organised efforts of collective mobilisation in political scenario, Matua Mahasangha now has become a centre for shelter of refugees for Namasudra population and, especially for

the migrants who took refuge in and around North 24 Pargana and Thakurnagar. Mahasangha extends all support to these refugees by granting membership to them. Matua Mahasangha also runs a legal cell for Namasudra refugees. Mahasangha tried to make sure the interest of Matua bhakta and safe guard the interest of Matua refugees in Bengal. As Sekhar Bandopadhyay rightly observes, ‘political involvement marks a definite deviation from the spirit of Matua Mahasangha constitution, which intended it to be a non-political organisation dedicated to the spiritual and social wellbeing of the downtrodden’ (Bandopadhyay 2011:273).

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