

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

This thesis is arranged in six chapters; the first chapter is an introduction that includes the scope, objectives, literature review and methodology. It starts with introductory note on the religious organisation of Matua Mahasangha, which belongs to Hindu Vaishnavite minor sect tradition; tend to be defined by adherence to Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. The present study has examined the socio-political dimensions of a religious organisation of Matua Mahasangha.

The study of the religious organisation, including its organisational structure, practices, ideology and membership are important dimensions of the intellectual exercise of and sociology of religion. Religious organisations have served as the bedrock of organisational forms and issues. Thus, there is immense potential for research in diverse fields of religious institution. Religion is a field of complex organisation which is often considered as a medium of expression and means of collective mobilisation, it may also be an expression of individual and collective identity that may orient towards collective accretion, and protest against socio-religious injustice.

Unlike the other Vaishnavite sects in Bengal Matua Mahasangha is functionally and structurally different and it developed from and remained integrally connected to the organised social movement among the Namasudras.

The structural and functional understanding of Matua Mahasangha and their involvement in social mobilisation and participation in political sphere have provided a context for in-depth social exploration.

2004 onward Matuas have gained enormous attention both in the media and in public debates in West Bengal. The community has evolved as a persuasive force under the sign of Matua Mahasangha which no political party could mark down in order to garner electoral gain. The fate of as many as 74 constituencies is intricately entwined with this community, in determining which political party will have full control over the State. Being a self-directed community organisation, the Mahasangha gradually emerged with its own constitution. Mahasangha furthermore issued identity cards to its followers; held intervallic congregation; published books, journals, and leaflet; and organised other mass-mobilising activities to uphold the Matua distinctiveness at the forefront of West Bengal politics.

The statement of problem leads to the following objectives which has been studied (a) Factors behind the emergence of Matua identity from historical perspective. (b) Formation of Matua Mahasangha and its diverse activities. (c) The structural and organisational framework of the Sangha (modes of leadership pattern, a system of belief, value, the process of routinisation and institutionalisation). (d) Processes of social mobilisation and collective action followed by Sangha. (e) Clash of interest and accretion of groups within the Sangha.

In this study of the religious organisation of Matua Mahasangha, functional approach was followed and an attempt was made to locate sectarian-based religious organisation in the context of changing public sphere. In the theoretical framing of the religious organisation, functional adaptability perspective was adopted to study Matua Mahasangha. Functional adaptability perspective may competently explore the complex relations between a group's ideology, organisational structure, and processes in order to determine the factors affecting its use of available resources. Again, it is worth noting that this is very rarely articulated with the church–sect conceptual tradition.

In the section on literature review, available literature has been classified into two sections. Firstly, focus has been given on how different scholars from Sociology have analysed sect based religious organisation and what type of models they have adopted to study religious organisations. Secondly, attention has been paid to know how Matua as a separate religious sect has evolved in Bengal. In reviewing the literature on religion, sect, and Matua, brief and precise discussion has been made to highlight some areas where research might be merited. In this section, the focus has been given on those areas which are considered to be holding the greatest potential for sectarian understanding. Here emphasis is laid chiefly on theoretical domains that form core elements of organisational scholarship, because the exploration of these domains in the context of religion—which has such richness and diversity of organisational forms—can offer further opportunities to be extended thereby opening up fundamentally new insights and ways of theorising, thereby making a specially important contribution to the scholarship in this area.

On the issue of methodological persuasion, the study is based on ethnographic and qualitative research, and mainly followed the interview method. Bulk of the data are the empirical findings gathered by both participatory and non-participatory observation,

extensive interviews and chosen in-depth interviews. They were carried out among 50 individuals consisting of Matua Mahasangha leaders, local Matua *dalapatis* (group leader), and local devotees from Thakurnagar and Matua intellectuals in Bengal. The approach to data collection was ‘unstructured’ in the sense that it did not involve any use of pre-structured interview schedule. The choice of the ethnographic method is justified on the grounds that, it is suitable for research investigating the interaction between sectarian practices and the culture shared by the members of the group of people or an organisation.

Chapter II deals with two important aspects—the emergence of Matua identity and the formation of Matua Mahasangha. The birth of the Matua as a religion was associated with Harichand Thakur who belonged to Orakandi in the Gopalganj district of present-day Bangladesh. Born in 1812 Harichand Thakur and his followers were ‘*Matta*’ (absorbedly engaged) with ‘*Haribol*’ to do practices of virtue discarding the Vedic and *Goudiya Vaishnavism* conduct and behaviour. Seeing these practices, the Brahmins and the Kayasthas ridiculed them as ‘*Matto*’, ‘*Mautta*’, then ‘*Matuya*’. Harichand Thakur had accepted this sarcastic nomenclature. He said, “*Bhinna sampradaya mora Matua akhyan*” means “We are separate community namely ‘Matua’. Now, whoever obeys or honours his

non-Vedic instructions, visions, and thinking, s/he is called the Matua". Harichand Thakur initiated his sect on the basis of simple non-ritualistic set of guidelines of bhakti tradition as simple bhakti expression had been of observable appeal to lower caste (Namasudra) people of the society. Matua as a sect has offered new breathing space to the lower caste people in Bengal. After Harichand Thakur, his son Guruchand Thakur expanded the sect and formalised the doctrines of the Matua dharma to better suit the needs of the lower-caste peasant community. The principles taught by Harichand and Guruchand were as follows: (1) it is not essential for Matuas to enter the temples of higher castes for the purpose of worship, (2) the service of Brahmin priest for any form of ceremonial activities is denied (3) it is mandatory for all Matuas to worship only *Shri Hari*, (4) no need to worship any form of idols other than *Sri Hari* and to visit any pilgrimage centre of the Hindus, and (5) maintaining good moral character and leading an ideal family life have been emphasised.

Guruchand Thakur had taken pragmatic approach; his stand was just opposite to renunciation. To earn money, be educated and become respectable were his principal points of advice to the disciples. The dictum of '*Hate kam mukhe nam*' (doing worldly duties while chanting His holy name), as Harichand defined it,

became the guiding principle of the Matua philosophy of life. One of the most powerful dispensations of Guruchand Thakur, *jar dal nei, tar bal nei*, (those who do not from a group do not have power) conveyed the message of organisation of collective action. It was around this sect that the socio-political mobilisation of the Namasudras took place. To bring the sect under a centralised organisational framework, the Matua Mahasangha was established sometime before 1915. The present Matua Mahasangha was known as the *Sree Sree Harichand Mission*. It took formal and institutional shape for the first time when it was registered in 1943 with a registered office at Sree Hari-Guruchand Ashram, Labanchora Khulna. Soon after the partition in 1947, the previous structure of Mahasangha got shattered. In 1986, the Mahasangha again took its formal shape with centralised structure and got registered in the name of Matua Mahasangha in 1998 with its headquarters at Thakurnagar, North 24-Parganas, West Bengal.

Spatial displacement of Namasudra Matua created an imagined unity and homogeneity of communities around Thakurnagar. The sectarian identity and community (in relation to spatial displacement) have become increasingly coterminous. So social representations of Matua Mahasangha in public domain has created an impact on the social psychology of Matua followers in

shaping their world view in which they live and in shaping their self-identities. Social representations of Mahasangha, therefore, play a powerful role in the construction of reality that they are a separate entity and deserve special treatment from the State.

Chapter III deals with structural and organizational aspects 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. No one from outside is allowed to hold those positions. Mahasangha functions and operates in a way which seems to be centralised bureaucratic structure. Power follows from the centre, which is the representative of a symbolic embodiment of divine spirit. At present, there is no *Sanghadhipati* and *Mukho Upodesta/Pradhan Upodesta*, because after the death of Baroma Binapani Devi and her elder son Kapilkrishna Thakur the said posts have remained vacant. Earlier *Sanghadhipati* had performed

certain functions and he acted on the advice of a *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor). *Sanghadhipati* exercised the real constitutional power to operate the Mahasangha. According to the law enacted in Matua Mahasangha, the *Sanghadhipati* carried out *Mukhoupadesta's* advice and order in enforcing his power and authority in action. As per the Constitutional direction of Matua Mahasangha, the *Sanghadhipati* is the official representative of the *Mukhoupodesta* (Chief Advisor) and he had carried out the latter's instructions. *Sanghadhipati* was in close contact with common Matua devotees and the general public; he often guided and supervised the devotees. Matua Mahasangha is considered as a social service oriented religious organisation. To discharge necessary socio-religious duties, different sub-committees work together. They are: Branch Committee, Hari Mandir Committee, Householder Sangha, Education and Cultural Committee, Social Welfare and Service Committee, Student and Youth Welfare Committee, Department for Women.

The secretary of each department/committee was 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. From the very

beginning, Mahasangha functioned through centralised authority and several subcommittees. The institutional structure of Matua Mahasangha claims its control over the preachers as well as the devotees.

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 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 Mahassangha.

Chapter IV deals with process of social mobilisation, consolidation and assertion of Matua Mahasangha in Bengal. It has been discussed in two different segments: (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.

To maintain the uniqueness of the sectarian organisation, the community has developed and adopted an alternative theological framework that renders their worlds more meaningful and facilitates greater social mobilisation. The dynamic approach could be seen in the *Guruchand Charit*, which is particularly helpful in understanding the role of religion in social mobilisation because it enables us to explore the reasons why Matua devotees may turn to social mobilisation around particular cause and issue. That could be seen in three interrelated levels, first, 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. Matua Mahasangha, therefore represents a new identity that transcends their older narrower caste identity to accept a more modern sectarian identity. With this new identity, they began to act like a sort of a 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. All

political parties adopted a 'politics of recompense' to Matua Mahasangha.

Chapter V deals with clash of interest and accretion of dissent groups within the Matua Mahasangha. The study shows, how the members from the Mahasangha apparently take advantage of the existing structural principles of their organisation in the formation of political alliances for their vested interests. The presence of different interest groups within Mahasangha is considered to be a common marker of disharmony that existed since the time of Sri Guruchand. At present these interest segments are divided into certain groups, but may not always function as a stable body, as each segment can assume to be merged with others in a different situational context. These interest groups are dynamic in nature as they do not conform to any hard and fast rule and are not confined to any definite ideological or political plank. In the case of Matua Mahasangha, ideology was a very crucial aspect for lower caste sectarian movement. But the verdict of ideological supremacy was kept aside when the question of earnestness and seriousness came into the path of actual practice.

It has been observed that although faction membership was not identical with lineage ties, most of the people belonged to the same faction as did other members of their lineage, especially their

brothers and first cousins. Factions and schism among the Thakur family began between two brothers. Later they turned into the largest faction in Matua Mahasangha. Faction within the Mahasangha is the fallout of ideological, philosophical and personality conflicts, among the constituent members which may or may not be necessarily economically or socially determined. They are identifiable in a variety of socio-political contexts. Factional structure denotes the role played by persons within a group and the psychological predispositions guided by self interest that support this pattern.

CONCLUSION

Articulation of the Matua identity by the lower caste Namasudra population was constructed on the basis of the ideology of protest against low ritual position and social degradation. The congregational nature of the Matua Mahasangha helped the Namasudra devotees to construct and reinforce a sense of collectivity that resulted in the construction of a new self-image of a community that was marked by a commonly shared sense of honour and the attitude of defiance to the social authority of higher castes. That led to emergence of a new form of Vaishnava religious sect which is quite different from other defiant Vaishnava sects in Bengal.

The rise of both Namasudra Matua consciousness and Matua organisation is related to the growth of local middle class leadership in Matua concentrated areas. Assertive Matua identity that may be associated with local leadership is reinforced by the political interventions, capacity to commodify Matua identity and their demographic preponderance, rendering it ripe for vested political gains. Some of the evidences presented in this thesis have supported this view; however, there is also counter-evidence, which casts both the positioning of Matua organisation and the trajectory of involvement in politics beyond the constraints of an assertive Matua autonomous identity.

Construction of Matua identity could be described as amalgamation of lower caste consciousness through reinvented neo Vaishnavite ethos. Present study reveals that their consciousness for mass mobilisation is chiefly based on factional affiliation and that has characterised the often self interested world of Matua politics.

The principal argument is that local leader, the very groups that have been collaborators for main stream political parties, have turned consolidated Matua politics to factional politics, because they have realised that more political gain could be obtained through factional politics and that is limited to panchyat and

block level only. The philosophical notions of the Matua Mahasangha based on compassionate faith deny all forms of distinction in terms of caste and colours. Unlike the other Vaishnava sect, women were accepted as social equals and were given equal rights in the congregational life of Matua Mahasangha. Yet, in reality, this philosophy does not appear to have been pushed very far and the principle of collective egalitarianism is more or less restricted in the Mahasangha. The Matua Mahasangha does not recognise any form of idolatry and essential ritualism of Hinduism and condemn them as instruments of upper caste domination. The followers of Mahasangha therefore do not prefer to worship any God and goddess.

The philosophical practices of Mahasangha based on Bhakti tradition is very common with other Vaishnava tradition in Bengal, but it is against the philosophy of Vedantism. Unlike the Vedanta, Matua believes in spiritual salvation through participating in worldly affairs. It opposes the concept of an illusive world and the desirability of spiritual salvation in the other world. Harichand Thakur advised his disciples to worship the goddess of wealth because renunciation of worldly desires may deliberately demotivate the working population, and condition them mentally to accept their subordinate position in society while contemplating salvation

in the other world. Guruchand Thakur insisted to earn in an honest manner and not to indulge in any form of unscrupulous means. In his view, ideal karma (action) needs to be combined with *bhakti* (devotion). Harichand's proclaimed dictum is '*Hate Kam Mukhe Nam*' (doing worldly action while chanting His holy name). This dictum ultimately became the guiding principle of the Matua devotees and Mahasangha.

Matua dharma gives utmost importance to the value of family life and advises its disciples to maintain the duties of a householder. Women in Matua philosophy are regarded as equal partners in religion and family life. Sri Guruchand instructed his Matua devotees to refrain from any form of adultery, as this may bring dishonour to their community. In this regard, Sekhar Bandopadhyay (2011:44) observed that 'the Matua sect, therefore, attempted to reform the manner of the Namasudra at a mass level, and thus also tried to avoid the stigma attached to the other deviant orders.'

Since the registration of Matua Mahasangha in 1988, the Sangha was called a socio-religious organisation, whose prime principle was to disseminate the message of Harichand and Guruchand, two iconic figures of Matua community. The structure of Matua

Mahasangha has been designed with hierarchal gradation in tune with the modern voluntary organisation. It has its own written and printed constitution. But it is not a democratic organisation in the true sense of the term, and it essentially remains and behaves like a religious sect. The structural principle of Mahasangha is based on absolute norm of centralisation. As a family-based religious sect, Matua Mahasangha keeps the leadership of the organisation in the hands of the descendants of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. Even in the constitution, it is written that sectarian head of the Matua Mahasangha must always belong to the Thakur family.

At the head of this organisation there are the *Mukho Upodesta / Pradhan Upadeshta* (principal advisor) and the *Sanghadhipati* (organisational head). Under them there is a central executive committee. Presently both the posts of Pradhan Upadeshta and Sanghadhipati are vacant, since the death of Matua community's matriarch, Pradhan Upadeshta, Binapani Devi ('Boroma') (died on March 5, 2019) and Sanghadhipati Kapilkrishna Thakur, the elder son of Binapani Devi, (died on October 13, 2014). Manjulkrishna Thakur, the youngest son of Baroma, presently runs the Sangha as a Saha Sanghadipati.

As per its constitution, Matua Mahasangha strictly prohibits its members and office bearers from participating in politics, but surprisingly nothing has been mentioned about the family members of Thakurbari regarding not participating in direct politics. The main moto of the Mahasangha is to spread the messages of Harichand–Guruchand among the distressed people in order to mobilise them into a religious movement to establish their rights in society. The constitution of Matua Mahasangha proclaims that it is not an organisation of the Namasudra alone, and anyone who adopts the teaching of Harichand–Guruchand is welcome to join the organisation. The Matua, therefore, represents a new identity that transcends the old caste-based identity and became more universalised in its symbolic representation.

Thus, although the Matua Mahasangha after Binapani Devi had secured for itself a position of power within the present political setup, its socio-religious movement certainly had become seriously fractured. Now the organisational focus is more on authority, debates and pledge for political concession. The masses and leaders of the Mahasangha have been gradually moving apart. Leaders no longer represent the voices of common people. Their movement towards maintaining separate sectarian identity continued to pull in

different directions with more powerful political streams gradually appropriating separate Matua identity into a mere political category.

Over the decade, this community has witnessed increasing constraint within Matua Mahasangha over the issue of sectarian domination. As time has progressed, these constraints have become a permanent marker over the fate of Mahasangha. The primary issue of the rift involves the question of possessing the right to represent Matua dharma and Matua Mahasangha. A plethora of factions through their publication in print media as well as social media are trying to express their purpose of representing Matua dharma's cause of pain urging their devotees to present own stories and give voice to own text and histories. Such factional groups have focused on two main goals, first, that of disseminating or propagating what they have in terms of most superior form of religion for all downtrodden people who have long misunderstood the complexity, richness and truth of its teachings and second, defending Matua dharma from Hindu culture that swallowed unique protest religion.

Somehow it has become a common practice among many who are studying Matua people and organisation from the same perspective to represent all Matua devotees into a singular term, and it seems

that all Matuas are loyal to the Thakurbari. In reality, it is only a nuanced look at this organisation. It is crucial to note that politics and Matua Mahasangha are quite varied in nature.

The organisational dilemmas faced by Mahasangha were produced by a variety of internal strains and rifts. The first one is the 'dilemma of fixed orientation with multiple motivations'. This refers to the change that has occurred in Mahasangha. Following a single line of thought led to the creation of a particular focus group. At the time of its formation, the group focused on a particular issue by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. However, over time, the group developed different roles and status, therefore, other concern and interest began to attract people's attention.

Privileges associated with leadership positions began to supplement and dilute the real motivation of the founder who focused on the mission of the group that they gathered around them. It is likely that the present apex members, who are descendants of Hari-Guruchand, do not share the common cause as their predecessors had experienced, and may not have the enthusiasm, insight and focus of the original members who had mobilised around their founders. Importance is given to sectarian ideology in the current decade as it compensates for neglect of

sectarian teaching in the understanding and strategies of the Matua Mahasangha.

The group of people within the Sangha who came under the influence of reductionist interpretation of self-interest, denied the importance of sectarian ideology and demographic supremacy. There is no evidence, however, that the interest of Matua Mahasangha to build a strong organisation is effectively translated into practice.

Indeed the Mahasangha seems to have been in a state of continual disarray with dissension and internecine squabbling threatening its unity. The distance between Matua Mahasangha and other peripheral groups had widened during the years since 2011, especially since the announcement of a Trinamool Congress candidate from the member of the Thakur family. As sections of executive members in Mahasangha did not stand with such a decision, they felt that political involvement in Mahasangha would dilute the spirit of Matua Mahasangha. Soon after this, the internal cleavage in Matua Mahasangha emerged. It was based on the clash of personalities between two brothers, Kapilkrishna Thakur and Manjulkrishna Thakur, and their groups. The rift to a great extent

was not an expression of conflicting ideologies, but it was the clash of individual loyalties.

If we analyse the recent situation about the organisational ideology and Matua as a community, it is possible to discern a set of assumptions about the political role of a religious organisation which forms the framework that cut across all conventional political spectrum in Bengal.

One of the interesting lines of the statement which frequently came out of their writings suggest that organisational ethos and political statement of Guruchand are still expressed through daily practices of an organically linked community. Religious practices and ideological discourses have been closely linked, so that sectarian ethos-based community can also be described as semi-ethnic cultural community organised under sectarian discourses and common modes of living. Hence, it is not that individual members of the community accept membership of the community as their primary identity but they are dispersed with multiple identities. In lieu of this, certain calling in the name of Sri Harichand and Guruchand can work as an organic mechanism, and from that particular angle certain predictions can be made regarding their behavioural patterns and attitudes in tune with community values

and sectarian commitment which is largely carried out in an unwitting way in which community perceived the world.

The ideational approach of sectarian values is embodied in social practice and congregational mode of living. Congregational aspects of social functions are the main epitome from which the common sense of Matua identity disseminates which includes *kirtan*, socio-political dialogue, text reading, expressing Matua myth as separate identity and experience which can often be contradictory to the actual living. Social functions in local congregations work as agents to reproduce the structure of dominance by encouraging an uncritical acceptance of an existing mode of present dharma and their renouncers. Community and sectarian values express the ideology of separate identity which is linked to its history of socio-religious protest.

Certain questions that have been asked to local leaders (*dalapatis*) still remain unaddressed or inadequately answered, and no concrete conclusions could be drawn from it. Is there any commonality that helps consolidate Matua identity in Bengal in singular form? Why does Matua identity get fragmented in terms of region, location, political affiliation and mode of leadership pattern? Is there any possibility to form a separate political platform? (If yes)

How would it be possible? Are the members from the Thakur family able to make a platform for the downtrodden? Do they have any capacity to make this platform effective? Is there any other agency that makes an effort to start the process of effective politicisation of the Matua people? Are the ideology and narrations of Sri Guruchand Thakur still significant today (in the context of education and social protest)? Why does it not reflect in the political domain? Do the Matua people feel more comfortable to arrange and engage in local congregation for pursuing Harikirtan than to construct any strong political will for translating Guruchnd's ideology into political empowerment?

Three important points coming out from the study are as follows:

Firstly, it seems plausible to assume that Matua Mahasangha's protest against upper caste sacred order has a strong bearing for identity construction but in the post-partition phase their assertions have been caught in two important phases—"*chai Jatipatra-chai nagorikatya*".

Secondly, members of the group and peripheral followers are different in their understanding from others, and there are perceived dissonance between reality and what is considered ideal. Thus the cognitive experience of dissonance is becoming a very

strong agent acting for non functioning of negotiations at the centre and peripheral level. Thus narrations of each group act as a symbolic performance of how and why they are different from other groups.

The apex authority in Mahasangha often keeps changing its strategy and political alliances to maintain relevance in sect organisation as well as in mass politics. Perceived alternations in strategy for political alliances create rifts at different levels within the Matua Mahasangha. How does the Matua Mahasangha reach the masses? Matua sect may have distinguished themselves from others with innovative strategies for bringing religion to the common Matua people. Thus, the number of Matua followers from the time of Sri Guruchand Thakur increased to approximately nine to ten lakhs, and the Matua Mahasangha grew to become the largest lower caste sectarian group in the country. But why, what exactly did they do? The answer would be twofold: as a sect, they rejected many traditional cumbersome ritual practices and seemed capable of adapting to and growing up with changing circumstances. Matua sect developed an innovative organisational structure for reaching widely scattered masses, unlike other sectarian groups.

Sect proclaiming family bonding is an essential part of the adorned gospel of Matua dharma. First, regarding strategy, Matua employed the technique of free riding and congregational preaching which could be explained as ways of functional adaptability of Matua Dharma as such. In the case of disseminating of Matua dharma *gosain* and local *dalapati* are responsible. They are the two main vehicles in propagating Matua dharma in the respective area. *Gosains* are men with a theological scholarship who are considered messengers to the Matua *bhakta*. They have a simple strategy of going from house to house preaching the gospel and giving *mantra* of Matua sect in the family setting or in a specific congregation as convened by local dalapatis. Even they solemnize marriage following specified rules set by the Matua Mahasangha.

Despite the compassionate effort made by the local Matua Gosain they failed to develop sect-like denomination because they have changed constantly over the years and moved progressively further away from their religious vision as propagated by Sri Harichand Thakur. Mahasangha has not evolved as well structured organisation and it has never been fully assimilated either culturally or structurally into a sect-like organisation. Though they have the full length of literature on how the organisation would perform with hierarchical gradation along with work specification,

yet the organisation runs more like a traditional lineage of devotion to a particular person and denying any organisational setup.

Common Matua devotees, in particular, could easily hide their identity if they wanted to and merge unobtrusively into the host society. However, they did not want to deny their identity not only because it gives social-political weight, but also because of the collectivities of the members who share a common past and which they have achieved through sustained protest and assertion.

Members today consider themselves as much a part of their original movement that had taken place during the time of Sri Harichand and Sri Guruchand Thakur. They may not be overtly concerned with theological bases which led to protests and schisms many years ago. In fact, many of them have only a vague, often inaccurate understanding of their religious heritage. However, this conception does not accommodate the plural version of sectarian understanding. Undoubtedly much of the problem has been caused by the limited view of the Matua Mahasangha, presently Mahasangha and its people appear more as a category that may not occur within the specific predetermined model like the sect-church continuum.

The popular notion that Matua Mahasangha was closely identified with the lower section of the society has been given strong support. But the existence of such a causal relation is not unique any more, as recently State Government declared two separate development boards—one is restricted for Namasudra and another one for Matua that is categorically divided into two different identical existences of social groups. The ideological aspects of this division played at the level of the ideational state are neither aesthetic nor cultural, but political.

Cultural content is not just a sacred textual reference, but a historical form of consciousness or subjectivity. An ideological current of Guruchand's narration about the Matua dharma is political, but not in an immediate pragmatic sense. Nevertheless, the inscription of Guruchand Charit is not just a value loaded textual scholarship but a political commitment as well. But over the years, the central focus of the Matua religious organisation has shifted from separate sectarian discourses to moral compromise. Now the attention has been turned more towards the ways through which political privileges and gains can be ensured. This has become the organisational precondition and functional adaptability for their own survival and reproduction. That may certainly go

beyond the formal calculations of sectarian rationality upon which it was founded.

Hence their mode of functional adaptation in changing socio-political milieu explores their range of adaptation process in different socio-historical circumstances. This helps one to understand their psychological and changing ideological disposition that allows the elaboration of practical understanding of the sectarian adaptation of this category of population. Aspiration of the Matua population in different phases of sectarian life went along with the adjustment of their internal organisation to social requirements.

A restriction on political participation has successfully been overcome by the present Mahasangha leader and they do not put any objections towards making any adjustment for participating in current political modalities. If sectarian norms come in the way of their pursuance of political goals the Mahasangha does not hesitate to reject the sectarian ethos for achieving organisational political goals. Their criterion for adjustment is based on rules of effectiveness in achieving the immediate objectives. Variability of strategy and approaches to the achievement of a certain goal incite the Matua leader to act in certain way. It is noteworthy that, it is

not the sectarian norms that encourage the adjustment but it is the familial leadership that encourages participating in the process of functional adaptation and that helps to modify and develop the organisational orientation. Functional adaptation is not just a way of existence to the present form of Mahasangha but also one of the mechanisms of organisational structure as dictated in the constitution. In the process of adaptation, Mahasangha has taken a pragmatic approach in balancing between mutual expectations of individuals in the organisation (political domain) and sectarian ethos of the organisational structure.

Complexity over the authority structure and control pose distinct problems in the organisational context of Matua Mahasangha. In contrast to other religious sects in Bengal, Mahasangha may increase the proportion of administrative fiasco as they grow in size. The spatial dynamics of religious organisations, which grow on a localised basis, reduce the scope to generate administrative efficiencies at the central apex body. Matua Mahasangha is a hierarchy based religious organisation that operates within constraints over which it has very little control, such as its followers. At present it is not even possible to put any effort to bring organisational 'rationality' or 'efficiency' as the organisation is in a truncated position.

The term Matua is itself salient to individual identity, and that followers are motivated to participate in sectarian activities by intrinsic factors, such as a belief that it is 'true', or extrinsic factors, such as the social networking opportunities it brings. The process through which the Matua Mahasangha as such uses its sectarian idioms in politics is nothing but an adjustment, to gain leverage in terms of economic and social betterment. This adaptability may coincide with the transformative process in which traditional set of leadership within the Thakurbari is gradually weakening and affiliation to need based mobility has become much more prominent.

The ceaseless reinvention of Matua people's role along with their readjustment to different historical circumstances has also transformed the way they perceive their social history and present condition. It has made them more aware of their role in politics as vote bank and 'deciding factor' in election results. These sacred images thus became means of promoting their images in socio-political development. As such, the Matua Mahasangha at present tries to use its sectarian identity as an asset in order to regain its old dominance and politically ensured development. To what extent it has succeeded so far in this front is hard to evaluate immediately. However, it has made the masses and political agencies use its

nomenclature i.e. MATUA as a most prolific term in the present climate of Bengal politics. And this nomenclature behaved like an ethnic belonging and an inherited trait that, given its widespread social acceptance, with ease lends itself to become 'most deciding factor' in the field of political mobilisation.

Since the partition of India, political parties in West Bengal have vied for the votes of the refugees settled in the state. There are well over 80 assembly constituencies, particularly in the districts bordering Bangladesh, where Matua has been a factor in deciding the outcome of the elections. But the CAA and the NRC may well be the issues that will decide the future prospect of Matua Mahasangha. The battle lines are drawn between the two contending groups within the Mahasangha based on their specific political affiliations which seem resolved to oppose the fundamental principle of Matua as a dharma as it may lead to the bitter end of Matua Mahasangha. Comprehensive Matua ideology is shown to be hollow and even autonomous existence of Mahasangha is completely dependent on family complicity.