

**MATUA MAHASANGHA IN WEST BENGAL: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY  
OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION**

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**By**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled **MATUA MAHASANGHA IN WEST BENGAL: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION** has been prepared by me under the Supervision of Prof. Saswati Biswas, Department of Sociology, University of North Bengal. No part of this thesis has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellowship previously.

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## **MATUA MAHASANGHA IN WEST BENGAL: SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION**

Abstract:

The present study aims to examine the socio-political dimensions of a religious organisation namely Matua Mahasangha which is a greater religious assembly of Matua community in the state of West Bengal. Here researcher has attempted to know how the Matua religious organisation in West Bengal acquired importance in the socio-political arena in the recent past. This study attempts to offer a sociological understanding of Matua from a functional perspective.

The study of the religious organisation, including its organisational structure, ideology, and membership are important dimensions of the intellectual exercise of the sociology of religion. The field of religious organisations is magnified with organisational designs, particular inter-organisational relationships, and a great presence across the society. 'Religious organisations have served as the bedrock of organisational forms and issues' (Demerath and Schmitt, 1998, p. 396).

The religious organisation to be studied in the present occasion belongs to the Hindu Vaishnavite tradition viz Matua, which tends to be defined by observance to Guru Harichand Thakur and his biographic revered book (Sri Harlilamrita). The adoration of deities and adherence to their philosophical

point of view among the followers of Matua sect are considered to be significant markers of this sect-like other small sects belonging to the Vaishnavite tradition in Bengal. It was under his son Guruchand (1846) that the sect got its doctrinal uniformity and organisational propel. The Matua sect arranged for its devotees an uncomplicated religion of individual devotion that did not involve the negotiation of a guru. They have claimed something to be unique as followers happen to be from lower castes in Bengal. It was different from the other small Vaishnavite sects as it developed from and remained integrally connected to the organised social movement among the Namasudras.

Harichand Thakur and his followers were 'Matta' (absorbedly engaged) with 'Haribol' to do practices of virtue discarding the Vedic conduct and behaviour. Seeing these practices, the opponent of Harichand, particularly the Brahmins and the Kayasthas scorned them as 'Matto', 'Mautta', then 'Matuya'. Harichand Thakur had accepted this term. He said, "Bhinna sampradaya mora Matua akhyan" means "We are separate community namely 'Matua'.

The Matuas have gained enormous attractiveness in recent times, both in the media also as in public debates in West Bengal. The ground is, the community has evolved as a persuasive force under the sign of Matua Mahasangha which no political party could markdown to persuade electoral

gain in two districts of West Bengal e.g. Nadia and North 24 Pargana. The fate of as many as 74 constituencies axis on this community, in determining which political party pull the control of the State. Though the body of voters has long ceased to vote on the appearance of caste and community, the Matuas as vote depository are too significant and possibly will not be disregarded by political parties. A decade ago, the Matua Mahasangh was still a little-known Hindu sect. They had a large following among the socially underprivileged sections living in border districts of West Bengal close to Bangladesh. Being a self-directed community organisation, the Mahasangha gradually came up with its constitution. Mahasangha furthermore issued identity cards to its followers; held an intervallic congregation; published books, journals, and leaflets; and organised other mass-mobilising activities to uphold the Matua distinctiveness at the forefront of West Bengal politics.

Taking all these points into consideration, this study may help to look at some new dimensions of a religious (sectarian) organisation from a sociological point of view. This study in particular aims to investigate the case of Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal.

Thus the study aims to look into the following:

Factors behind the emergence of Matua identity from a historical perspective.

Formation of Matua Mahasangha and its diverse activities

The structural and organisational framework of the Sangha (modes of leadership pattern, a system of belief, value, the process of routinisation and institutionalisation)

Processes of social mobilisation and collective action followed by Sangha

Clash of interest and accretion of groups within the Sangha

In the question of theoretical underpinning, the researcher would like to focus on the theoretical framing of the religious organisation, the ways it ensured the provisions of its survival and reproduction. The functional adaptability perspective has competently explored the complex relations between a group's ideologies, organisational structure, and processes to ascertain the factor affecting its use of available resources. Again, it is worth noting that this is very rarely articulated with the church–sect conceptual tradition.

The study is ethnographic and qualitative and mainly followed the interview method. The 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 religious heads, local dalapatis (group leader), local devotees from Thakurnagar, and some Matua intellectuals in Bengal. They thus basically constituted the universe of the study. The persons directly associated with Matua Mahasangha were ideal respondents for my study.

In-depth interviews were undertaken with selected individuals. These informants are referred to as 'key informants'. The selection was done based on their holding key position in the unit of interest, their understanding, and knowledge concerning Matua Mahasangha. The researcher has interviewed about 50 Matuas, taking from Matua Mahasangha committee; local dalapatis in North Bengal and South Bengal; and another from a group of intelligentsias (Matua) in West Bengal. That constituted the people associated with professions like teaching, medical practice, law, engineering, and any other white-collar activists. The reason behind selecting these three different groups as my respondents is that it is from these groups from which we may apprehend to what extent sectarian ideology and individual aspiration towards power politics influence them to participate in the extra-religious domain.

Unlike the other religious groups in India, Matua Mahasangha carries its unique historicity, and its immediate social circumstances are considered to be important bearings which directly connect with people's inclination to group formation. The first chapter (Formation of Matua Mahasangha: The Historical Background) focuses on two important aspects—the emergence of Matua identity and the formation of Matua Mahasangha. The people belonging to the Matua sect have claimed to be distinctive as a believer as they happen to be from lower castes in Bengal. This group has never claimed the allegiance of the majority of those who are considered 'Hindu'.

They have, however, been essential in the forging and proliferation of much of what is called 'Hinduism'. The emergence of Matua dharma in Bengal was unswervingly associated with dissent metaphor against the upper caste dominance of Vaishnav dharma in Bengal. Development of neo-Vaishnavism through the hands of lower caste Guru Harichand could be seen as an alternative discourse of dignity for the lower caste Namasudra people. Most of the minor Vaishnav sects other than Gaudiya Sampraday were initiated by the non-Brahmin guru. Among them, Baul, Kartabhaja, kishoribhajan, and Matua in particular attracted much attention for this easy syncretism.

Except for Matua, most of these sects are broadly classified as semi Vaishnava and they had some influence on Tantric practices and Sufi doctrines of Bengal. The other crucial characteristic is that their following was predominantly though not always exclusively, among the lower castes.

An important reason behind why the depressed Namasudra community felt attracted to this sect was its open challenge to the hegemony of the Brahmans, who were the pivot of the local power structure. One of the methods of perpetuating this hegemony was gurubad, by acting as the intermediary between God and his disciples, enjoyed total control over the latter spiritual life. Both Harichand and his son Guruchand of the Matua sect repudiated this essentialism of intermediacy. Harichand insisted that there was no need for initiation (Diksha), nor even for pilgrimage and the

only means to achieve salvation was through simple devotion and love for God, for which no mediation of any businessman-like guru was necessary. But at present what we notice that a section of Gonsain within Matua sect practicing the Diksha method, which becomes a common form among the community people itself.

Guruchand's preaching towards the Matua dharma was more pragmatic; his stand is just opposite of renunciation. His major concern was how to elevate this community at the stage of socio-economic development and how to install a power of self-endowment. 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.

The third chapter deals with the Structural and Organisational aspects of Mahasangha. Mahasangha is characterised by a hierarchical pyramid 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 organisational framework is extended beyond the central office. The fact that branches have been established in almost all places, where Matuas resided and introduced the

hierarchical order of office bearer indicates the bureaucratic setup and collective efforts for making sectarian awareness, which has been an essential part and necessity of organisational machinery to sustain sectarian zeal. Mahasangha stands for three important pillars; these are centralised organisation structure, iron discipline, and unity within the organisation.

In the fourth chapter, the researcher focused on the process of social mobilisation, consolidation, and assertion of Matua Mahasangha in Bengal. It has been discussed with two specific references (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.

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 a 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. Apart from their organised efforts of collective mobilisation in the political scenario, Matua Mahasangha now became a center for the 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 safeguard the interest of Matua refugees in Bengal.

Clash of interest and accretion of dissent groups within the Matua Mahasangha has been considered as a faction which is an informally constituted segment of members within an institution on the issue of dissent group behavior within the institution. It has been observed that the nature and dynamics of factional conflict within an institution is a phenomenon that often crosses the formal organisational lines. The 'central' or 'originating principle' of the faction within the Mahasangha can be defined as the perception of common interest by individuals in the context of opprobrious relations that exist within the Mahasangha. These groups of individuals hold meetings to mobilise people around the issues that concern them. Such activities help to develop a shared understanding and also prepare for a feeling of agreement or consensus about how to pursue the collective interest beyond the prescription made by the apex body of

Mahasangha. These groups of individuals claim to be Matua intelligentsia and set to chart out campaigns that include lobbying with the political parties, media, and other important makers of public opinion. These people always calculate costs and benefits before undertaking any action.

Articulation of the Matua identity by the lower caste Namasudra population was constructed on the basis of the ideology of protest against the 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.

Over the decade, this community has witnessed an increasing constraint within Matua Mahasangha over the issue of sectarian domination. As time has progressed, these constraints became a permanent marker over the fate of Mahasangha. The primary issue of rift involves the question of who possesses the right to represent or ought to represent Matua dharma and Matua Mahasangha. 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. 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.

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

Firstly, it seems plausible to assume that the degree to which 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 the non-functioning of negotiations at the center 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 the relevancy 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.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BDO- BLOCK DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

BJP- BHARTIYA JANATA PARTY

CAA- CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) ACT

CAB- CITIZENSHIP (AMENDMENT) BILL

CBI-CENTRAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

CPI- COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA

CPI (M) - COMMUNIST PARTY OF INDIA (MARXIST)

FIR-FIRST INFORMATION REPORT

JACBR-JOINT ACTION COMMITTEE FOR BENGALI REFUGEES

MLA-MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

MP- MEMBER OF THE PARLIAMENT

NRC-NATIONAL REGISTER OF CITIZENS

TMC- TRINAMOOL CONGRESS

BS -BANGLA SAL

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## **CHAPTER- I**

### **MATUA MAHASANGHA IN WEST BENGAL: SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGIOUS ORGANISATION**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

In India, religious organisations and sectarian discourses left a considerable imprint in the field of sociology. The present study aims to examine the socio-political dimensions of a religious organisation namely Matua Mahasangha (a greater religious assembly of Matua community) in the state of West Bengal. In this study an attempt will be made to know how the Matua religious sect in West Bengal acquired importance in the socio-political arena in the recent past. Scholars from different disciplines have studied this religious organisation from their own perspectives and in a particular frame of reference. This study attempts to offer a sociological understanding of Matua sect from a functional perspective.

Religion exists in all human societies which are commonly understood as cultural element in every day social life. 'Religious beliefs are shared by a community, and they express the shared values and collective culture through worship and collective myths. Worship is possibly the most indispensable element of religion, but ethical conduct, mythical belief, and participation in religious

institutions also constitute essentials of the religious conduct' (Durkhiem 1961: 61).

It is a powerful institution and has an all-pervasive influence on the political, economic, social and educational life of the people. In their attempt to define religion, sociologists have drawn a common distinction between 'substantive' and 'functional' definitions. 'Substantive definitions attempt to recognise and illustrate the real meaning or substance of religion<sup>1</sup>, what religion has in its center. This has been very difficult to understand without considering religion from the functional perspective indicating what religion does for people. It is quite obvious that functional definition may also play a very important role and it may also be a useful tool to understand religious life along with the substantive definition of religious life' (Berger 1975: 125).

'Religion is a group phenomenon, and sociologists are quite categorical in pinpointing the features of a group. The first and most basic characteristic is that a group is composed of two or more people, who have established certain patterns of interaction including communication with one another. Such interaction is not always necessarily of face-to-face kind' (Johnstone 2007: 7).

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<sup>1</sup> 'A substantive definition entails defining religion in terms of its believed contents. This includes meanings that refer to transcendent entities in the conventional sense such as God and supernatural beings and things. Substantive definitions can also be referred to as essential definitions.' Berger, Peter L. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13.2 (1974): 125.

‘Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, things set apart and forbidden which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim1961: 60). So, religion is an important construct for ever day societal life. It is a considerable element of varied institutional processes including gender relations, socio-economic difference politics; and as a result it plays an essential task in public culture and societal change. If we define sociology as the study of social organisation, then religious organisation certainly could be a core area of interest of sociologist.

Indeed, ‘the study of the religious organisation, including its organisational structure, practices, ideology and membership are important dimensions of the intellectual exercise of sociology of religion’ (Turner 2006: 284). ‘The field of religious organisations is magnified with typical organisational designs, particular inter-organisational relationships and a great presence across the society. Religious organisations have served as the bedrock of organisational forms and issues’ (Demerath and Schmitt 1998: 396).

The studies on sociology of religion and religious organisations are noteworthy in their range and possibility, and their ancestry can be traced to the classical thinkers of sociology, who were writing at a

time when religion played an important function in societal life. The classical thinkers—Weber and Durkheim—maintain an influence on the sociology of religion and religious organisations. However, numerous sociologists of religion still rely on classic text in order to elucidate existing religious organisations and practices.

Religion and its ideas have often been considered as a medium of expression and way of life. On the other hand, when religion becomes a means of collective mobilisation its activities often gets transformed into a language of protest, it may also be an expression of individual and collective identity that may sometimes get oriented towards collective accretion, and religious protest against socio-religious injustice and the deprivation. It has been found that nearly all important theories in the sociology of religious organisations, and for many years the source of the sociology of religion in the intellectual world is oriented to church-sect model which has its origin in the works of Troeltsch (1931). It is by and large granted that Troeltsch (1911) represents the preparatory contribution with respect to the church-sect model.

Hence, church and sect model have a long legacy in the writings of social scientists, but it was first Max Weber who popularised the concept. Max Weber (1925) gave the first theoretical understanding to the distinction between church and sect. In the perspective of

charismatic leadership and its routinisation in bureaucratic structures' (Weber 1925), Weber argued on reverse modes of religious organisation: the church and the sect. The church is a hierarchic, comprehensive organisation whose constituents attain membership by ascription. The sect is more or less autonomous, exclusive, and the membership is organised through the stipulated mode of selection. Ernst Troeltsch (1931) in his classic work *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* extended Weber's understanding of 'inclusivity' by providing the additional criterion of the degree of religious accommodation. 'Sects are at conflict with dominant societal values; the church achieves a formal structure with society by compromising essential moral or religious ideals' (Troeltsch 1931).

At its core, church-sect model supposes a self-repeating development in which psychologically effervescent sect breaks away from a conventional hierarchical church. 'In the study of religion, the sect is observed as a dissident movement that has split off from a church' (Troeltsch, 1931).

While late modern sociologists of religion have modified this model, to them a sect is a small offshoot of mother religion often involving a conversion sometimes voluntary. Social scientists on sectarianism have agreed on the fact that in their origin, sects are to be

understood as protest movements. 'The English term sect derives its meanings from a specifically European context, and therefore many authorities reject the use of the term altogether in reference to Indian religions' (McLeod 1978: 293). Nonetheless, the term can be usefully applied to Indian situations, with some qualifications. Following Ernst Troeltsch (1931: 331) and Wilson. B (1958), 'the church–sect dichotomy remains basic to the concept of sects in the writings of many social scientists'.

The problem with applying this definition to Indian situations is that India has never had anything remotely resembling a church. However, Indian scholars have long used the term 'sect' to describe certain religious groups in India, and the present study will stick to that usage.

## **1.2. The Problem under Investigation**

Hinduism, unlike the other religions of India, is a confederation of beliefs that has a horizontal as well as vertical distribution. 'It is not a single homogeneous religion. Not only do the religious beliefs and practices of Hindus vary from one cultural region of the country to another (say, Bengal, Maharashtra and South India). Hindu castes in each area are also characterized by similar differences' (Babb 2005: 203).

Sect, denominations, and cults stand very common in Hinduism, each group of followers claiming to be the original interpreter and true follower of Hinduism. There has been a common resemblance that could be found among the groups, that is all revere and maintain the supremacy of the Veda, unlike some moderate groups (say, '*Kabir Panth*') which pays much importance to *Bhakti* tradition<sup>2</sup> (Babb: 2004).

The religious organisation to be studied in the present occasion belongs to Hindu Vaishnavite tradition *viz* Matua, which tends to be defined by observance to Guru Harichand Thakur and his biographic revered book (*Sri Harlilamrita*). The adoration of deities and allegiance to their own philosophical point of view among the followers of Matua sect are considered to be significant markers of this sect like other small sects belonging to the Vaishnavite tradition in Bengal (e.g. Balahadi Sampraday, Kartavaja, Kishori Bhajan). 'Matua as a sect appeared in East Bengal in the late nineteenth century. It was quite different from the other small sects as it developed from and remained integrally connected to the

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<sup>2</sup>Bhakti tradition is simply based on individual fidelity to preferred deity with unquestionable devotion and faithfulness. This devotionism can be found in psychologically stimulated poetry principally highlighting on individual connection with divine without any mediation.

organised social movement among the Namasudras. The group was initiated by Harichand Thakur (1811/12-1878) who was born in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur to a Vaishnavite peasant family of Namasudra caste' (Bandopadhyaya 2011). Harichand Thakur and his followers were 'Matta' (absorbedly engaged) with 'Haribol'<sup>3</sup> to do practices of virtue discarding the Vedic conduct and behaviour. Seeing these practices, the opponent of Harichand, particularly the Brahmins and the Kayasthas scorned them as 'Matto', 'Mautta', then 'Matuya'. Harichand Thakur had accepted this term. He said, "*Bhinna sampradaya mora Matua akhyan*" means "We are separate community namely 'Matua'. Now, whoever obeys or honours his non-Vedic directions, visions, and philosophy, they are called the Matuas. It was under his son Guruchand (1846) that the sect got its doctrinal uniformity and organisational propel.

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<sup>3</sup> *Hari Bol*, which is one of the most famous chants among the Vaishnava in Bengal, is originally derived from this particular religious movement. In the late 14th century, Bengal came into limelight and became more significant through the rise of the Vaishnava community and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) with his active participation in the Bhakti Movement which has been able to create a gigantic mass movement in the socio-religious life of pre-colonial Bengal. The concept of *Hari Bol* has been taken from the core of Vaishnava rituals during that time.' Dasgupta, Prasenjit. (2003) *Hari Bol: The Evolution and Genesis of the Funeral Music in Post Colonial Bengal*, Lap-Lambert Academic Publishing Saarbrucken, Germany. Online Accessed on September 12, 2018

[file:///C:/Users/hp/Downloads/Hari\\_Bol\\_Evolution\\_and\\_Genesis\\_of\\_Funera.pdf](file:///C:/Users/hp/Downloads/Hari_Bol_Evolution_and_Genesis_of_Funera.pdf)

The Matua sect arranged for its devotees an uncomplicated religion of individual devotion that did not involve the negotiation of a guru. They have claimed something to be unique as followers happen to be from lower castes in Bengal. This group has by no means claimed the adherence of the majority of those who are considered 'Hindu'. They have, however, been essential in forging and propagation of much of what is called 'Hinduism'. In the study of such a group, the present study will focus on two related issues: the relationship between the sect and caste identity, and sect in Indian society. The views of the Matua sect and their involvement in social protest and political sphere from the very beginning have provided a context for in-depth social exploration.

'Matua religious organisation is essentially bhakti based expression of lower caste Vaishnavite sect in Bengal, begun by Harichand Thakur, who was born in a Chandal (an untouchable caste) family. His family was Vaishnavite for a generation. He developed his sect on the basis of an undemanding 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. Through the formation of the Matua sect in bhakti tradition, they have been unswervingly denouncing caste Hindus religious expression and Brahmanic preeminence in rituals. Matua sect has offered new

breathing space for a particular lower caste in Bengal and a new distinctiveness for Namasudra (erstwhile Chandal) people in Bengal' (Bandopadhyay 2011).

Matua sect is structured in a manner relatively analogous to the structure of clan and lineages. The nucleus of the power structure is derived from filiations and descent. Family and clan play a vital role in sectarian activities.

The progression of *Guru-sisya paramparay*<sup>4</sup> (teacher-disciple tradition) is passed on by a distinct model, in which someone joins a sect by getting a distinctive sacrosanct oral technique (*Mantra*<sup>5</sup>). The person from whom it is received becomes recipient's immediate *guru* but he just transmutes the mantra of renouncers to recipients. The deity is homologised with the renouncer's image. Disciplic

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<sup>4</sup> The *guru-shishya* tradition, or *parampara* (lineage), indicates a succession of instructor (*guru*) and disciples (*shishya*) in religious practices (Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism). Each *parampara* belongs to a particular sampradaya (group), and each sampradaya has its gurukulas (religious school). It is the institution of spiritual bonding and mentoring where teachings are transmitted from a *guru* "teacher" to a *śiṣya* "disciple".

<sup>5</sup> Mantra(s) is a specific form of verses, formulas or series of words in the text which contain praise, are supposed to have magical or spiritual efficiency, which is reflected upon, recited, mumbled or sung in a ritual, and which are composed in the systematically arranged ancient texts of religion. There is no commonly applicable identical definition of mantra as mantras are used in different religions and different religious practices.

descent and filiations are important features of the Matua sect. The powers of succession of the descent metaphor and kinship affiliation are essential phrase of Matua Mahasangha.

The substance of lineage in the organisational structure of the Sangha<sup>6</sup> is a significant point for sociological contemplation. There was an embracing system of political association, and that may perhaps be seen in Matua Mahasangha since its initiation.

The explicit and clandestine denigration of Brahmanic pronouncement and unprecedented political development before and after the partition in Bengal and mellowness of local politics with accumulation of demographic predominance of their substantial existence has given a fresh shape to assumed structure of Matua Mahasangha. Like any other religious organisation, Matua Mahasangha has its own code of belief and organisational goals.

The enormous attractiveness has gained by Matuas Mahasangha in recent times, in West Bengal. The ground is, the community has evolved as persuasive force under the sign of Matua Mahasangha which no political party could fail to consider in order to persuade

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<sup>6</sup>*Sangha* is a Sanskrit term, meaning "association", "assembly", "company" or "community". It has been commonly used by different religious organisation like, Hindus, Buddhist, Sikhs and, Jains.

electoral gain in two districts of West Bengal e.g. Nadia and North 24 Pargana. The fate of as many as 74 constituencies axis on this community, in determining which political party pull the control of the State. Though the body of voters has long ceased to vote on the appearance of caste and community, the Matuas as vote depository are too significant and possibly will not be disregarded by political parties. Decades ago, the Matua Mahasangh was still a little-known Hindu sect. They had large following among the socially underprivileged sections living in border districts of West Bengal close to Bangladesh.

The Sangha was initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, to indoctrinate love, acceptance, gender parity and non-difference regardless of caste, class, and faith. After partition of India in 1947, thousands of Matuas came to West Bengal, and Pramatha Ranjan Thakur found a place where he had established small quarters for displaced Matua people at Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas district which become the head quaters of Matua Bhaktas. It would be fascinating to find out with what sort of support apparatus the Matua sect crafts its organisation and adjusts with the present state of affairs when they are operating in a family-political locale that has undergone noteworthy changes.

Presently Matua Mahasangha is on the verge of dissent and accretion in the name of authority structure. So it would be important to understand what sort of relations and system would develop in such a situation both from the side of the filial and succession relations and from the side of sixty-five lakhs followers in North Bengal and overall four cores in West Bengal. The answer would be invoked in the development and endorsement of the familial structure in changing the socio-political situation.

The appearance of Matua Mahasangha as an input in electoral politics, more predominantly after the assembly election in West Bengal (2004) is remarkable. It asked for new dialogue which would be important for political scientists and sociologists. Matua Mahasangha put Namasudra caste conversation at the forefront which was totally diverse from one that has subsisted among the political parties. 'Being a self-directed community organisation, the Mahasangha gradually came up 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' (Bandopadhyay 2011: 267).

Taking all these points into consideration, this study may help to look at some new dimensions of a religious (sectarian) organisation from a sociological point of view. This study in particular aims to investigate the case of Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal.

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

This section, shall mainly discuss about the key stages, steps and basic plan of this research. At the outset, the research objective is a vital point for consideration prior to initiating a research that could be the purpose that can be accomplished within an expected time on available resources. The formulation of research objectives helps the researcher to gather the actual data and that would help the researcher to carry out the research work in adequate manner.

There has been hardly any in-depth research on Matua Mahasangha as a religious organisation. Thus the aim of the study is to look into the following:

- (1) Factors behind the emergence of Matua identity from historical perspective.
- (2) Formation of Matua Mahasangha and its diverse activities
- (3) The structural and organisational framework of the Sangha (modes of leadership pattern, a system of belief, value, the process of routinisation and institutionalisation)

- (4) Processes of social mobilisation and collective action followed by Sangha
- (5) Clash of interest and accretion of groups within the Sangha

It is hoped that this study will help in understanding the Matua Mahasangha from a different perspective and the findings of the study will contribute in expanding the knowledge concerning the religious organisation not only in West Bengal but in India as well.

#### **1.4. Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Orientation**

Religion is a theme of fundamental importance to sociology. To write sociologically is inescapably to work within a particular convention that has in advance acknowledged certain issues and themes that are relevant in the definition of social phenomena. 'The fact that a time-honoured sociological practice has already defined the field in advance appears to be particularly important in the case of religion' (Robertson 1970). Durkheim pointed out that the duty of sociology was to ascertain 'the ever-present causes upon which the most indispensable forms of religious thought and practice depend' (Durkheim 1961: 20). 'Durkheim's sociology of classification was the source of his sociology of religion; in that religion is a method of understanding certainty in terms of the force of the classificatory principle that is sacred-profane duality. But his realist and

functionalist version of the social consequences of religious practice ignored the socio-political proportions of a religious organisation' (Davie, Grace 2006: 56).

'In Weber's vision religion is tilting to the practical needs of everyday life. In respect to sectarian groups in modern days, it was commonplace to presume that religious ideas were often significant in social dissent and others' (Jurgens Meyer 2000). Weber engaged a theory of charismatic breakthrough to comprehend the secular dynamic of authority and leadership in social institutions. 'Charisma is institutionally important in the definition of different religious roles and patterns of organisation' (Weber 1952).

Wilson regards 'sects as ideological movements whose explicit and declared aim is the maintenance, and perhaps even the propagation, of certain ideological positions' (Wilson 1959: 363).

While studying the religious organisation Matua Mahasangha, the functional approach will be followed, and engagement of the sectarian-based religious organisation with the modern context in the changing public sphere will be located. The term religious organisation refers to the fact that, in addition to the doctrinal, experiential, metaphysical, philosophical, therapeutic, cultural and devotional aspects, the religious life is practiced through the medium of structured, normative social relationships. The form of

these relationships also varies usually in time and space. But their general importance to the assembly and reproduction of spiritual thoughts, feelings and actions cannot be seriously doubted. What is being contended here is merely that the social organisation of groups is a crucial key to a sociological understanding of their structures and processes.

Following Troeltsch (1931), a social scientist tends to understand a 'sect' as a dissident movement that has split off from a 'church'. A sect is a small offshoot of the church. Ernst Troeltsch's use of the church-sect-mysticism model was different. He was concerned less with capturing the distinctive qualities and tensions of modernity than with isolating the ineradicable and recurrent within the Christian Gospel and its socio-cultural embodiments. There is a strong current of optimism in his account of the dialectical relations between church, sect, and mysticism. The problem with applying this definition to Indian materials is that India has never had anything remotely resembling a church. McLeod (1978) pointed out that the term 'sect' derives its meanings from a specifically European context, and therefore many authorities reject the use of the term altogether in reference to Indian religions. Nonetheless, the term can be usefully applied to Indian materials, with some qualifications, and, students of Indian religion have long used the

term sect to describe certain very important religious organisations and communities in India' (Mc Leod 1978: 189), and we shall continue this usage here.

Matua Mahasangha is a bhakti based religious organisation constituted by the lower caste Namasudra Matuas. This is the highest organisation of the Matuas in India. Its proponent being Harichand Thakur, an epoch incarnate and his rightful heir and son Guruchand Thakur. They promulgated Matua's religious discourse; work ethics and ideology to popularise and expand its scope among the masses. These groups have never claimed allegiance to the majority of those who are considered 'Hindu'.

Sects, for Dumont (1970), 'are a distinctive product of the renouncer's project. Indian sects are founded by renouncers and tend to retain cores of renouncers' (Dumont1970: 39). Dumont's view of the Indian sect as an expression of the renouncer's values based on ideology of protest, and, is a useful point of departure to my enquiry.

It is important to note that there is declining interest in church-sect theorisation and changes taking place in religion. Thus, Robertson (1972) argues that 'sociologists abandoned the church-sect model because of their incapability in explaining the organisational

complexities of religious groups' (Robertson 1972: 298). He further observes that the 'character of religious groups and its socio-cultural milieu has changed in such a way that it could not be easily accommodated within the existing conceptual vocabulary' (Robertson 1972: 299). Certainly, 'church and sect are imprecise and ambiguous concepts that could not shed much explanatory light on the organisational aspects of religious groups. Moreover, some of their cognate sub-types have been found to be inappropriate to changed circumstances' (Nock 1981:521). Troeltsch (1931) also expressed his doubts about the applicability of his typology of the church, sect, and mysticism to post-eighteenth century phenomena.

The present study would like to focus attention on theoretical framing of the religious organisation, the ways it ensured the provisions of its own survival and reproduction. The functional adaptability perspective has competently explored the complex relations between a group's ideologies, organisational structure, and processes in order to ascertain the factor affecting its use of available resources. Again, it is worth noting that this is very rarely articulated with the church–sect conceptual tradition.

Functional adaptability perspective offers the advantages of making assumptions about the role of deprivation, grievances, frustration, or dissatisfactions in either the origins of a religious movement or the motives of its participants. The increasing use of this perspective is thus not independent from changes that have taken place in the framing of theoretical problems about religious movements.

Matua Mahasangha as a religious organisation is based on the idiom of social reproduction that reflects its own structure and also represents a fundamental substitute for the followers. In general, the Matua sect provided a platform for the economically, and socially underprivileged section of the society. Matua religious organisation has come up as the important medium of social and cultural contestation, and state politics have become the principal agent of religious organisations. Paradoxically, to control religion in the public domain, the state makes religion as an important base for its political gain.

In this context one may take a note that the bonding between particular sectarian group and politics gets crystallised and keeps adjusting with changing historical circumstances. In this regard, Robert Fowler's (1985) postulation on sectarian religion is worth

mentioning. According to him, 'the theology of the sectarian group and its social conditions define its stand on socio-political development, beyond pure theology. The second one is the level of leadership position and file support for the involvement of leaders in social action activities, along with the degree of unity among the group' (Fowler 1985: 24).

The possible connection between Matua Mahasangha and politics is varied in nature, as the Matua people are passing through the pain of physical displacement and identity predicament. 'In post-partition West Bengal refugee identity had led to a rephrasing of idioms of victimhood and struggle' (Sen 2012). Refugee status and deprivation from gaining Indian citizenship status place them to stay close to functional adaptability for their own survival. Therefore, sectarian identity and discourse give more scope to promulgate Matua identity based on sect rather than placing less emphasis on caste identity. The present study thus would offer an opportunity to closely observe the collective assertion and mobilisation of Matua Mahasangha in the light of functional adaptability and relation between the sacred domains of sect organisation.

### **1.5. Review of Literature**

In the sociology of religion especially in reference to religious organisation in the society, most of the studies consist mainly of Christian organisations in Western countries. That mostly revolves around Max Weber's formulation of religion and Troeltsch's understanding of sect and religion. The present review tries to draw upon the resources from European studies on sect-based religious organisation and Indian orientation on religious organisation. Most importantly, the review is intended only to highlight those works which illustrate what researcher perceived to be major trends in the sociological publications that could have been listed. Researcher's review is therefore restricted to a small number of themes indicating new literature in theoretical and conceptual thinking about the religious organisation of Matua Mahasangha. However, the study offers an opportunity to review a good amount of literature, both theoretical and empirical, on the study of religious institutions, sects, and lower caste movements.

The available literature has been classified into two important sections. On the one hand, attempt has been made to discuss how different scholars from sociology have analysed sect based religious organisation and what type of models they have adopted to study

religious organisations. On the other hand, literature have been reviewed which specifically point out how Matua as a separate religious institution has evolved during the colonial period.

### **1.5.1. Studies on Sect and Religious Organisation**

*The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1931) by Troeltsch has identified the fact that social reality is significantly influenced by religion. He has taken the ethical content of Christianity to modern social problems, faced with disintegrative consequences of capitalistic modernisation. The social role of religion was rendered effective in shaping of human society. He has identified two major functions of religion in modern societies, firstly generating religious consciousness and secondly social function of religion which in turn furnishes a potential for social integration.

*Sects and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society* (1967) by B Wilson has attempted to study a range of problems associated with sectarian study which was unfolded first time in his study of sects. His aim was not to formulate a theory of religious sects but on the contrary, he tried to show that there is abundance of exceptions and qualifications to rules and, typologies that may include some of his own earlier proposal. New religious movements in society are expressed through dissent and protest within the

religion, which helps to give alternative view of religious sects within the conventional form of religion. Wilson has identified certain points that may be considered as important marker for the study of sect, these are: how to study sects, how and why people join sects, how sects evolve, and triangulation of sects, state and society.

In his other study, *Sects and Society: A Sociological Study of the Elim Tabernacle, Christian Science, and Christadelphians* (1961), Wilson emphasises on religious classifications of each sectarian group, in terms of religious teachings, history, organisations, social involvement and compositions. Here he tries to link the Weberian model with his sociological understanding of religion. He has also clarified some essential questions regarding topics such as schism, ecumenism, recruitment, leadership and charismatic power. The author comes to the conclusion that he was dealing with established sects, in contrast to the usual emphasis on the dynamic trend of sectarian groups towards denominational status. Here he tries to blend religious teachings with the economy.

Wilson followed a specific model which could follow grand narratives of classical sociological understanding. His focus on sect ran parallel with major religious traditions. The important thing we could find in his study is that he treated sects as deviant traditions

of major religions. Wilson saw rationalisation as the most common direction of development for religious movements. He speculated that a resurgence of deviant religious sects and its demands is likely as a result of the imposition of increasingly rational and impersonal procedures upon man. However, far more characteristic of religious deviance in modern societies is the conversionist and manipulationist types. The former reflecting the far-reaching individuation of contemporary life, and the latter more homologous to societies in which people were highly competitive.

Arun P. Bali (1979), in his paper *Organisation of Virasaiva Movement: An Analysis in the Sect-Church Framework* analysed various aspects of the movement in terms of its belief system, value system, the ideology of protest, leadership, modes of recruitment and organisational framework. In order to assess the dynamics and structure of the Virasaiva movement, one needs to look at not only the organisational framework and the cementing or integrating forces that have sustained the movement, but also the changing nature of the organisational framework.

Bali has shown how the movement protested against Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system. He particularly attacked the corrupt practices of the Brahmins. This movement in early phase

was small, spontaneous and anti-establishment in its orientation. At a later stage, the leader of the movement created an elaborate organisational framework parallel to that of the Brahmins, with its own source of legitimacy, sanctions and codes of conduct, and punishments for the deviants. Thus the Vira Saiva movement became highly routinised. Through the following of Weberian model of the church–sect continuum, Bali has successfully incorporated various dimensions of organisational structures. However, it is not clear from his paper how these routinised organisations have maintained relation with the society or the other agencies of the society.

Nalinaksha Dutt (1998) in his book *Buddhist Sects in India*, observes that increasing competition among the different sect organisations in Buddhism gives rise to ideological rifts and competitive leadership in Buddhism. The development of Buddhist sects in India has been one of the most important and persistent problems in the area of Buddhological scholarship. He has made a useful contribution, how each group is operating and at the same time they are disassociating from others. Without putting any theoretical speculation, Dutt vividly describes how sect organisation has developed, how it has been run and it is operating its followers etc.

R. K. Jain's (2006) *Religious Response to Social Unrest: The Rise of Kanji Swami Panth in Contemporary Jainism*, observes how sect runs on entirely different directions. His study was entirely based on exploratory field investigation among the Kanji Swami Panth sect in Jainism in Uttar Pradesh. His narration is quite descriptive in nature, less guided by any such theoretical model of understanding. R.K Jain has discussed the subject in two segments—firstly he gives a historical background of the movement and its leaders. And, he contextualises such movement and its division from Digambar Jains, which has been based on contestations of doctrine, cosmological rationalisation and actual confrontations between the followers of Kanji Swami Panth and their opponents. Kanji Swami Panth is an incipient rebellion by the lower-caste Jains against the practice of a powerful combination of the rich, the pandits and monks. All these dynamics of schisms established beyond doubt the explosive and fissive combination of power and redemption in religious movements where reform is dramatised as a search for the millennium.

There are many Indological works on Indian religions worked by prominent figures such as J. Gonda (1997) *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, M. Monier Williams (1870/2016) *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, A. K. Coomaraswamy (1943/2006) *Hinduism And*

*Budhism*, R. G. Bhandarkar(1913/2014) *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious System*, S. B. Dasgupta (1995) *Hari Bol: The Evolution and Genesis of the Funeral Music in Post Colonial Bengal*, and others. These works investigated the ancient Indian texts and produced their philosophical, philological and religious underpinnings. The Indian sectarian literature is vast in number, and the studies in this field are mostly vivid description of *guru-shishya* (master-disciple) relationships.

M. N. Srinivas's(1952) work *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs in South Asia* discusses in terms of normative framework of functional analysis. This book leads Srinivas to construct the concept of Brahminisation because he primarily ignores Kahtriya, Vaishya and Sudra but later he realised that the princely status of the Kahatriya is nothing but the complement to the Brahminisation. He opines that theoretically the Hindu religion can use the four labels of sanskritisation like Brahmanya, Rajanya, Vaishya and Sudra but per area or zone the content of every label gets changed as well as according to locality, time and group the dignity of the different castes is hierarchically placed differed to a great extent. Yet according to him, the notion of Brahminisation possesses an implicit probability of further abstraction into a higher level concept-‘sanskritisation’.

K. Ishwaran's (1983) work, *Religion and Society among the Lingayats of South India*, is a socio-historical study of a community that has preserved substantial autonomy from orthodoxy through the institutionalisation of customs for the establishment of equal opportunity. Ishwaran shows that the twin institutions of dasoha (feeding and sheltering the needy) and kayaka (social labour) are aimed at the reduction of inequalities. While it is true that inequalities still prevail among Lingayats, there are typical ideological sanctions for treating all members as equals. He said that, 'this type of ideological approval of egalitarianism is much less possible in the hierarchic Hindu society.'

Venugopal's (1988) work, *Ideology and Society in India: Sociological Essays*, depicts how the *Lingayats* are a reformist group that emerged in the twelfth century in Karnataka as an anti-caste movement. It incorporated several groups into a monotheistic religion centred around the wearing of the *Linga* (a phallic symbol) on the body of all men, women and children. It eliminated the various "pollutions" connected with birth, death, spittle, menstruation and dealings with low castes. It held that all those who adored Shiva in the form of *Linga* were equals and achieved equal right to get salvation. Among the *Lingayats* the caste divisions

are not absent, but such hierarchical division has only local or territorial import.

V. Subramaniam's (1979) work, *'Cultural Integration in India'*, avers that Bhakti based sectarian group some time made a useful impact to political steadiness in the society. Bhakti tradition not only brings the masses together but also motivates social cooperation. The people of villages and towns are linked together by specific bhakti tradition and that helps to create sectarian belongingness. This sense of belongingness is usually promoted by Bhakti literary output and its integrative symbolism. In this process, the weaknesses of formal political line of action were significantly modified. Hence, Bhaktism gave rise to an informal political culture that had influence over the population. Subramaniam's understanding have been very helpful to the present thesis, which shows how particular bhakti tradition moulds person's understanding of politics.

Anupama Rao's (2012), *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, is an original work of historical anthropology that investigates how India's Dalits, transformed themselves from stigmatised subjects into respectable citizens. Anupama Rao's description of a century of 'caste radicalism' among Mahar dalits in

western India gives an analytical argument about the salience of dalit politics for many of the foundational categories of modern Indian democracy. The caste question goes beyond the usual antithesis of localism and globalism and illustrates a decisive notion of intensive universality. Her book offers us a sustained and probing analysis of modern history of caste in western India, connecting issues of gender, personhood, property, and politics to facts of oppression and inequality.

As dalits have been symbolically reincorporated into formal political arena via Hindutva politics and its anti-Muslim enactments, an emergent dalit politics has also challenged Hinduisation.

Narang (1956) in his book *Transformation of Sikhism*, has taken into account the religious and political life of Sikhism. He believes that all religious movements are politically motivated and driven by certain goal to be achieved. Narang asserts that the relationship between religion and politics is more intensive than anywhere in the world. He has shown how a religious body got transformed into political-military organisation due to persecution to which Sikh community was subjected by the Muslim government.

### **1.5.2. Selected Literature relating to Matua**

Bandopadhyay's (2011) study of caste in Bengal is framed within Marxist tradition which is influenced by the materialistic interpretation of history. He gives a detailed description on how religious structures and caste mentality are shaped by material conditions. A material condition of social history occupies the central position in his vision of the social order of Bengal. His study *Caste, Protest and identity in colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* shows us how public and private, politics and religion, caste and class are intersected with each other. Namasudra Matua, as a distinct lower caste sect that emerged in Bengal in the early twentieth century, gave a new direction in social politics. Namasudra Matua—the second largest Hindu lower caste—more or less remained isolated from national politics till independence, but it failed particularly to maintain their separate political existence and eventually integrated into the political mainstream after independence. The consciousness of Namasudra identity in recent decades is not just opposed to high caste gentry's politics but covertly and overtly maintains a subversion transcript of an autonomous political entity. The history of Matua and its movements which date back to the late nineteenth century have been studied by several scholars. But people have very little

knowledge of this Namasudra sect led by Namasudra community in the then eastern Bengal. Bandopadhyay says that scientific probing in social history of Matua can reveal the true transient nature of caste identity as a factor in Indian society and politics and shows that no single standardized public policy, be it the reservationist panacea inherited from the colonial past or the class approach of orthodox Marxism can address the problems of all the backward castes at a time, fulfill their social aspiration or uplift them from their present conditions, let alone empower them all.

Though there is some sort of disagreement on the issue of whether caste in itself can become an ideology and whether caste and class are coterminous in the Indian context as caste points to a definite economic indicator of the poverty line of people. Though the classical theory of caste negates such a formulation and puts caste more as an analytical category of the sociological understanding of people but not an economic category to determine the economic status of people. Such a traditional understanding of caste is undergoing change and the language of discourse is also undergoing change.

As Dumont (1970) argued that, 'caste has never been just a cultural category, as each caste was connected with a hereditary traditional

occupation that was indicative of a social division of labour.’ Nicholas Dirks (2008) has shown that, ‘caste was never just a religious concept based on notions of purity of pollution. On the contrary, caste ranking was measured by distance from the crown, legitimated by royal authority and associated notions of honour’ (Dirks 2008). Namasudra Matua in movement dynamism is playing an important role which cuts across all conventional models of caste dynamism. Dirks has said in his book ‘Castes of Mind’ that, ‘caste has always been political—it has shaped in fundamental ways political struggles and processes.’ Bandopadhyay chronologically delineates the critical moments in the history of the Namasudras. He tries to show how the caste solidarities run through class lines and the creation of competing and contesting religious and national identities.

Dennis Walker (1999) argues that writings from Matua intelligentsias had made more impact on developing Matua separate identity within Hinduism. Serious effort has been given by the Matua writers to draw a clear line from Hinduism to Matuaism. A series of articles in *Harisevak Patrika* (a monthly magazine of Matua Sangha) points out the uniqueness of Matua dharma in Bengal. The authors have also maintained distance from Islamic influence in their writings. Walkers showed that these sort of ideological sparks

have not been continued, adjustment with the Hindu philosophical tenets can be seen in their writing when thousands of followers in Bangladesh have been discriminated in the name of Hindus. Several writings have pointed out that all Bangladeshi Matuas consider themselves as Hindu.

We can now place all the studies together to take resort to the fact that notwithstanding the evidence of rationalisation, socio-economic factors, sectarian development and role of intelligentsias; consensus is that we are not able to reach any specification about the dyadic role and relations between sectarian groups and politics.

In reviewing the literature on religious group, sect and Matua, some topics have been highlighted where research might be merited. The limited nature of the organisation-based literature with respect to the Matua Mahasangha gave new thrust to outline real form of Matua Mahasangha within the sociological discourse. In this section, focus is placed on those areas that are considered to hold the utmost scope for sectarian understanding. Here focus is mainly on speculative understanding that form core elements of organisational scholarship, because examining these areas in the context of religion—which has such richness and diversity of organisational forms—arguably has noteworthy potential to be

extended by opening up new insights and ways of theorising, thereby making a significant contribution.

### **1.6. Methodology Adopted**

The study is for all intents and purposes ethnographic and qualitative in nature, and mainly followed the interview method. 'Learning to do ethnography involves illuminating account to see social environments in a way that problematises certain phenomena' (Forsythe 1999:129).

Therefore, the 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 religious heads, local *dalapatis* (group leader), local devotees from Thakurnagar and some Matua intellectuals in Bengal. They thus basically constituted the universe of the study. The persons directly associated with Matua Mahasangha were ideal respondents for the study.

In terms of method, the study followed the following procedures:

- (a) Data were collected from different sources, where observation and informal conversations were the main sources.
- (b) The data collection was 'unstructured' in the sense that it did not involve any use of pre-structured interview schedule.

(c) The focused interview was usually a single setting or group, of a relatively small scale.

Ethnographic research methods were applied while conducting fieldwork.

1. Descriptive notes have been taken while in the field.
2. Variety of information were gathered from three different perspectives—perspective of members who are directly connected with Matua Mahasangha, Local dalapatis (local level of leaders) either from urban or village setting and a group of key informants.
3. Cross-validation and triangulation was done by gathering different kinds of data, through observations, interviews, program documentation, and recordings.
4. Representation of programme participants in their religious congregations, views of their own experiences in their own words.
5. In-depth interviews of selected key informants.
6. Building trust and rapport at the entry stage. Remembering that being a researcher, one may also be observed and evaluated.

In-depth interviews were undertaken with selected individuals. These informants are referred to as 'key informants'. The selection was done on the basis of their holding key position in the unit of interest, and their understanding and knowledge with respect to Matua Mahasangha. Since the purpose of this study is to search for

an explanation of how this sectarian organisation operate and what is its role in the present day context. In this regard the ethnographic method was preferable. 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.

The purpose of ethnographic research is to understand a culture, group or institution from the insider's view and to describe culture as an integrated whole. However, this does not necessarily mean that the 'interpretation' of culture, the pattern of structure and its role in society and politics are based solely on the judgment of the researcher. To avoid that observation, interviews, newspaper clippings, social media clippings, official journals and other writings were collected.

However, the fieldwork was carried out in South Bengal<sup>7</sup> as well as in North Bengal<sup>8</sup> for the sake of specific information; both the

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<sup>7</sup> Farraka barrage in West Bengal is taken as diving point between two parts. Transition starts after crossing Malda Town and to be specific It is Ganga River which divides the state in a different cultural zone. Similarly South Bengal and North Bengal also have been divided by the respective Railway zones. Eastern Rail (ER) and North-Eastern Frontier Rail (NFR). Strangely it maps the divide totally. The districts on the south of the Ganges— Murshidabad, Nadia, Birbhum, Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman, Bankura, Purulia, , West Midnapore, Jhargram,

groups as well as individuals were approached for gathering data. The reason behind choosing only local Matua leaders is that this particular group of people can have more and better understanding of the socio-political engagement of the Sangha and its political agenda. Aspirations of the Matuas and overall development of Matua Samaj, the involvement of leaders of Matua Mahasangha in politics, the process of mass mobilisation could be well perceived from the leaders and educated members of Matua Mahasangha. Their opinion and views were helpful in comprehending the dynamics of Matua sect.

Since in-depth explorative research depends on the quality of data and its specification, the interview has not been restricted to any given number, because in such study facts were more important than quantifications. In spite of that for delimiting the effort and time, the researcher has interviewed about 50 Matuas, taking from Matua Mahasangha committee; local *dalapatis* in North Bengal and South Bengal; and another from a group of intelligentsias (Matua)

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East Midnapore, Hooghly, Howrah, Kolkata, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas.

<sup>8</sup> North Bengal consists of the districts of Cooch Behar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Malda, Murshidabad and Uttar Dinajpur.

in West Bengal. That constituted the people associated with the professions like teaching, medical practice, law, engineering and any other white collar activists. The reason behind selecting these three different groups as my respondents is that it is from these groups from which we may comprehend to what extent sectarian ideology and individual aspiration towards power politics influence them to participate in the extra-religious domain. During the in-depth interviews the respondents were allowed to express their opinion in detail. Following the phenomenological approach, their narration was documented in a descriptive form.

The first-hand field data constituted a major data base of study. Besides, use was made of various polemical writings in different periodicals published by Matua devotees.

Data already in the public sphere, like newspapers Libraries, local /state archive, social media (Facebook, Youtube videos) were analysed. Help was also taken from available literature and reports published on the Namasudra and Matua community in West Bengal. While analysing the data focus had been given on meanings rather than quantifiable phenomena and measurements of specific variables. The analysis of the data includes interpretation of the meanings and functions of individual and group actions and mainly

takes the form of oral descriptions and explanations, with functional analysis. Theoretical understanding of particular social situation plays a role in ethnographic research that is inductive in nature. At this point, academic insight informs the elucidation of data revealed in the perspective of discovery. In the process of research, new empirical findings were corroborated with theoretical understandings not in the sense of testing prior theoretically driven hypotheses but in using theoretical understanding to make sense of the new data revealed in the field research.

Fieldwork was carried out in three different phases.

The pilot study was done in the month of December 2014 and then library work was done for a long spell of time. After preliminary survey was made, detailed fieldwork was initiated in the month of October 2016 which lasted till February 2017. A pilot study helped a lot as the researcher met some key informants and one key informant led to another key informant. Field work was continued again in May 2018 and ended in May 2019. Besides, short visits were made to the field till sufficient data was collected to write the thesis.

During the course of field work, participant and non participant observation, interview, case study and life history methods were relied on. The informal interactions with people were helpful to the

study. Since the organisation of Matua Mahasangha is carrying a variety of tendencies and respondents comments on single issues were different from each other, therefore, painstaking observation and own understanding for any particular issue has been given utmost importance.

In the process of collecting data, researcher also came across a variety of materials, some making sense while other mundane.

Many a times there was confusion with gathered information from different literature and newspapers as it sometime did not stand with whatever was observed in the field. It became a hard task to gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding of some data.

So, in order to verify its accuracy and validity, Verstehen<sup>9</sup> method was utilised. Weber argued that an individual's understanding

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<sup>9</sup> Literally translated as “understanding” or “insight” in German, Verstehen concerned with identifying the meaning as well as cause of social phenomena. ‘It is defined as an approach of scientific research by taking the meanings people attached to their actions into account’ (Schaefer, 2013). ‘The theory of Verstehen stands for the general methodological approach that the subject matter of the social sciences is typically different from natural sciences, and as such the techniques of the physical sciences cannot be applied to the study of social sciences. The subject matter of the former is frequently identified as ‘purposive behavior directed towards ends’, conscious and unconscious.’(Elwell, 2005). ‘Verstehen embodies a complete understanding of something. It is a way of approaching hermeneutics (interpretation) that takes its view from the personal and complete understanding of the subject’ (Weinert,1996).

cannot be quantified rather it can be interpreted. In the interpretive sociology of Weber, “understanding” lies in the connection between the subjectively lived meaning experienced by individuals and the big sociological and historical evolutions’(Moriceau 2010: 964). In the field work an effort was made to know how principles and values of Matua Mahasangha help to connect to the development of Matua psyche. In this approach, the effort was given to see and feel like a Matua and then stepping back to think over the entire process from the outside as a researcher in sociology.

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## CHAPTER II

### **FORMATION OF MATUA MAHASANGHA: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND TEACHINGS**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Religious organisations in India have been playing a very influencing role in state politics as well as in the group mind. The formation of religious organisations in India cannot be understood in a straight jacket, as numerous socio-economic and political factors are associated with each set of religious organisation.

Unlike the other religious groups in India, Matua Mahasangha carries its own unique historicity, and its immediate social circumstances are considered to have important bearings which directly connect with people's inclination to group formation. This chapter focuses on two important aspects—the emergence of Matua identity and the formation of Matua Mahasangha.

'The terms sect, denomination, and cult stand very common in Hinduism, and each group of followers of this religion claim to be an original interpreter and true follower of Hinduism. There has been a common resemblance that could be found among the groups that have been revered and maintain the supremacy of Veda' (Babb

2004). The sect to be studied is Matua that belongs to Hindu *Vaishnavite* tradition; ‘it tends to be defined by adherence to Guru Harichand Thakur and his much revered biography titled *Sri Harlilamrita*. Admiration for the divine being and commitment to an idealistic position are considered to be important markers of the Matua sect. The people belonging to the Matua sect have claimed to be distinctive as believers as they happen to be from lower castes in Bengal. This group has never claimed the allegiance of the majority of those who are considered Hindu’ (Bandopadhyay 2011: 10). They have, however, been essential in the forging and proliferation of much of what is called ‘Hinduism’. The emergence of Matua dharma in Bengal was unswervingly associated with dissent metaphor against the upper caste dominance of Vaishnav dharma in Bengal.

## **2.2. Harichand Thakur: The Initiator of Matua Sect**

The emergence of the Matua religion goes back to the time of Harichand Thakur who belonged to Orakandi in the Gopalganj district of present-day Bangladesh. The year of birth is not certain and is mentioned both as 1811/1812. ‘He became active at a time when the untouchables of then East Bengal were converting to Islam and Christianity due to their ill-treatment by upper caste Hindus. Harichand attempted to prevent the conversion of the

untouchables by introducing the Matua religion that maintained continuities with the Vaishnavite interpretations of Hinduism, adhering to the new form of Vaishnavism. He, however, wrenched, bent, atomized and reconstructed it to honour the ex-outcastes and advance their interests' (Dennis 1999). Development of neo-Vaishnavism through the hands of lower caste Guru Harichand could be seen as an alternative discourse of dignity for the lower caste Namasudra people.

### **2.2.1. Namasudra and its relation to Matua Religion**

The origin of the word 'Namasudra' is extremely uncertain. Colonial ethnologist like James Wise (1883) and H. H. Risley (1891) believed that 'the word 'Namasudra' was derived either from the Sanskrit word "*namas*" or "adoration" or from the Bengali word "*namate*" that means below or underneath'. 'In the first case it would mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the Sudras. In the second case, the word would perhaps mean a lower grade or Sudras, a status the Chandalas of Manu had gained promotion to but these two explanations appear to be highly improbable in view of the new sense of self-respect associated with the Namasudra identity' (Bandopadhyay 2011: 11).

The different synonyms of the Namasudras are 'Chandal', 'Charal', 'Namasud' and 'Namah' (Singh 1995: 978). 'The word Chandala, as surmised by Raja Ballal Sen, ruler of Sena dynasty of Bengal, is used as a generic term, to refer to all the lower caste people' (Biswas 1991: 561). Since it is absolutely impossible to establish that they had descended from the particular mixed caste called Chandala described in the post-Vedic *Dharmasutra* literature, it is perhaps logical to say that they were just being referred to as such because of their low social position compared to other Hindus. Their low social status was possibly the result of their late incorporation into Hindu society.

According to Manu, 'the sexual intercourse between a Sudra man and a Brahman woman resulted in a Chandal offspring. In the code of conduct laid down by Manu, we find that it was prescribed that the Chandals should live outside the villages, should not possess water pots. They should wear clothes discarded by the dead and adorn themselves with ornaments made of iron and could not enter any socio-religious functions organised by the high caste. Marriage and financial transaction should be limited within themselves or within their own castes. Bengal Chandals or Namasudras were treated as untouchables and exploitation, hatred, discrimination

and neglect were all that they deserved from the Brahmanic social structure' (Biswas 2015).

Tarak Chandra Sarkar the author of *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, mentioned that 'The Namasudras are the Brahman Buddhists who did not want to change their religion at the time of Raja Ballal Sen'. Namasudras are not Sudra as it has been mentioned by the prominent Matua writers such as Gourpriya Sarkar (1995) in his book *Jatitawa Sangraha*, Jitedranath Majumdar in his book *Jatitawa o Namasudra Jatir Utpatti* (1998), Jogredra Chandra Majumdar in his book *Namasudra Jati Tatwa Katha* (1991), Shri Sukumar Sarkar in *Namasudra Parsav Bipra (BS 1382)*, Raicharan Biswas in his book *Jatiya Jagaran* written in 1921 mentioned that, 'Namasudra are Brahmin by caste descended from ancient Rishis i.e Namash Rishi. Secondly, their occupation is agriculture and this has always been considered a noble profession' ( Biswas 2015). This group of authors has unanimously mentioned that Namasudras are neither Sudra nor Chandal rather they are Brahmin by birth, but due to some historical circumstances at the time of Raja Ballal Sen, they had lost glorious identity as Brahmin and as a result they had to live like a Sudra for their survival.

### **2.2.2. Neo Vaishnavism and Matua Sect**

‘The Vaishnavism in Bengal can be traced back to the eleventh or twelfth century C.E., although the neo-Vaishnavism as a separate entity could be found in the sixteenth century’ (Sanyal 1981). Chaitanya (1486–1533) was the most important figure in the growth of the Vaishnavas. The history of Vaishnavism in Bengal can be analysed in terms of “great man” model. ‘This is facilitated by the sociological categories defined by Max Weber to whom the great man is the charismatic prophet, who breaks from tradition to proclaim a radical new message. He was exceptionally instrumental in declaring the doctrine that Lord Krishna is a supreme idol and not simply an incarnation of Vishnu’ (Dimock 1961: 23)

‘Sri Chaitanya’s teachings include not only the religious dogmas but also some social preaching i.e. the same right of worship of God with devotion (bhakti), by individual participation in mass-worship irrespective of caste through kirtana, etc. His introduction of kirtana i.e. the mass chanting of the name of Hari as the means of mass worship had a tremendous impact on the society. As the participants of kirtana came from different castes, so caste distinctions were, to a great extent, relaxed. As a result, the submerged classes of Hindu social order came to have a new sense of human dignity with the perception that though disdained by the

people of the upper strata of society, they would be loved by God if they could worship him with devotion' (Chakraborty 1985).

The ultimate goal of Sri Chaitanya was the social and spiritual salvation of the downtrodden. But the early liberal trend of Vaishnavism turned into an institution and the orthodox element became prominent where Brahmanic rules became an essential part of *Gaudiya* Vaishnavism. Slowly but surely, this conventional trend became dominant, as the Brahman gurus began to introduce caste rules and codes of differentiation. 'The Brahman devotees were allowed to enjoy all sorts of ritualistic privileges, where untouchables were despised as *jat Vaishnava*' (Chakraborty 1985). He also observed that Vaishnavism in Bengal was stimulated by *bhakti* tradition and became a social practice that nevertheless was restricted to a specific form of *bhakti* tradition, and *hari nam* can be epitomised as a vibrant force that engulfed entire population of Bengal.

'It is quite explicit that neo Vaishnavite (deviant sect) principles and customs of subordinate caste group are quite often based on certain belief systems that are contradictory to those of *Gaudiya* Vaishnavism. Neo Vaishnavite consciousness as developed by other than Brahman guru may not always contain caste as a central

element in its construction' (Kolenda 1964; Jwergensmeyer 1998; Chatterjee 1989)

The emergence of neo Vaishnavite sect and new system of philosophy was not unrelated to the process of struggle between conventional religious practices and protest religion of subordinate groups. The autonomous element in neo Vaishnavite religion emerged precisely at the moment when dominant religious practices were tightening grip over its followers and imposed Brahmanical strictures for spiritual salvation. Ramakanta Chakraborty (1985) has compiled a list of fifty-six heterodox sects. Of these are, *Adwaybadi, Asimtraja, Aul, Ashram-biradhi, Kartabhaja, Kalikumari, Kanupriya, Kishoribhajan, Khushibiswashi, Khepabama, Guruprasadi, Gourbadi, Gourshyam, Grihibaul, Gairikbirodhi, Goureshwar, Gobrai, Gharpagla, Churadhari, Charanpakhi, Jaganmohini, Darpanaryani, Darbesh, Darsayasi, Nareshpanthi, Nathbhaya, Netairadha, Nera, Paramhansa, Pratapchandi, Varnabiragi, Balarami, Bangshidhar, Bwala, Bamkaupin, Ratbhikhari, Radheshyam, Ramdas, Ramballavi, Yadurai, Yugalmilan, Sambhuchandi, Shishyabilashi, Sahaj, Sakhibhabak, Pastadayak, Sai, Sahebhdhani, Staram, Smaranpanthi, Swadhipsanthi, Haribola, Hajrati, Hardashi and Matua.*

Most of the minor Vaishnav sects other than Gaudiya Sampraday were initiated by non Brahmin guru. Among them Baul, Kartabhaja, kishoribhajan, and Matua in particular attracted much attention for this easy syncreticism.

Except Matua, 'most of these sects are broadly classified as semi Vaishnava and they had some influence of Tantric practices and Sufi doctrines of Bengal. The other crucial characteristic is that their following was predominantly though not always exclusively, among the lower castes' (Chatterjee 1989).

Ramakanta Chakraborty said that 'Brahmanic rules began to be strictly applied after the historic festival held in *Kheturi* (Rajshahi) sometime between 1576-1582, which was attended by representatives of nearly a hundred Vaishnava groups from all over Bengal' (Chakraborty 1985). *Kheturi* council laid down the doctrinal and ritual framework of what was to become the dominant orthodoxy of *Gaudiya* Vashnavism.

'Seen from the standpoint of the history of Vaishnavism, in Bengal, this imposition of more or less orthodox caste practices on the Vaishnava movement was part of the same process which gave rise to the deviant sects' (Chatterjee 1989). 'The assertion of Brahmanical dominance,' says Ramakanta Chakrabarty (1985), in a religious movement which was rooted in mysticism and which was

anti caste and anti Brahmanic in nature, certainly led to the development of neo Vaishnavite order like Matua religion by Harichand Thakur.

‘Shri Hari Chand Thakur was born in a Namasudra family in Bengal on 11<sup>th</sup> March 1811/1812 in a village called Safaldanga in Gopalganj subdivision (Greater Faridpur). He and his family members followed Vaishnavism for a generation. His grand grandfather Mohanram was devout Vaishnava and was known in his locality as Thakur Mochairam. His eldest son Jashomanta was also a Vaishnava devotee and he too inherited the title of *Thakur*. It was from his time that the family abandoned its original surname Biswas’ (Halder 1393 BS).

Harichand Thakur took primary education from village *Pathshala*, and then he attended upper primary school for only a few months only. He did not like stringent formal education. He spent his time with friends and roamed with them from one place to another. Due to his simplicity and high devotion to *Hari*, he was loved and cherished by all especially for his compassionate outlook. He could also sing *Hari Kirtana*.

From very childhood he was endowed with a spiritual inclination with magical healing power, he soon began to attract disciples from his own village, as well as from neighbouring villages. ‘One day he

experienced self-revelation, through which he realised that he was an incarnation of God himself, born on earth to bring salvation to the downtrodden. As his simple doctrine had an appeal for lower orders of society, more and more of them flocked around Harichand' (Haldar 1393 BS; Haldar 1394 BS). 'Devotees made him a saint and imposed on him the attributes of charisma' (Bandyopadhyay 2011).

### **2.2.3. Harichand Thakur and 'Naba Yuga Dharma'**

Followers of Guru Harichand began to believe (mostly from Namasudra community) that Harichand was gifted with supernatural power, not only to cure diseases but also to punish social offenders. This had obvious implications for the existing relations of power in local society. Nityananda Halder (1394 BS [1987]), in his book '*Matua Dharma Ki O Keno*', has mentioned that 'Harichand Thakur invented a new religion *Naba Yuga Dharma* separate from Vedic Hindu tradition based on Brahmanic supremacy'. The development of sect thus tends to subvert the hegemonic order and therefore its upholders also tried to deter them, at first by means of physical coercion and then by restoring to social boycott. Yet another tactic of the opponents was to ridicule them as *moto* or people drunk with their own spiritual outpourings (*matoyara*). But as in this way the upper-caste Hindus and also the

respectable Vaishnava distanced themselves from the followers of the sect, they later developed a greater sense of solidarity. In order to vindicate the irreverent image of his sect, Harichand turned the ridiculous epithet (*moto*) into the symbol of protest; and he called his sect *Matua*.

### **2.3. Guruchand Thakur and Formalisation of the Doctrines of the Sect**

The sect gradually grew in size as it became the rallying point for all the untouchable and lower caste people in the region-Namasudras, of course, constituting an overwhelming majority of them. 'Harichand died in 1878, but the sect expanded further under his son Guruchand Thakur, born in 13 March, 1846. The latter formalised the doctrines of the sect to better suit the needs of an emerging lower-caste peasant community' (Bandopadhyay 2011: 35).

An important reason behind why the depressed Namasudra community felt attracted to this sect was its open challenge to the hegemony of the Brahmans, who were the pivot of the local power structure. One of the methods of perpetuating this hegemony was *gurubad*, by acting as the intermediary between God and his disciples, Brahmin enjoyed total control over the latter's spiritual

life. Both Harichand and his son Guruchand of the Matua sect repudiated this essentialism of intermediacy. Harichand insisted that there was no need for initiation (*Diksha*), nor even for pilgrimage and the only means to achieve salvation was through simple devotion and love for God, for which no mediation of any businessman-like *guru* was necessary. But at present what we notice is that a section of *Gonsai* within Matua sect is practising *Diksha* method, which has become a common form in the community itself.

The Matua believes in equality of sex, and considers that both male and female can equally participate in physical as well as in spiritual work. They do not encourage early marriage, like upper caste social reformers Guruchand Thakur allowed Widow remarriage. Matua addresses their spiritual instructor as '*gonsai*'; both men and women can be *gonsai*. Matua religion sees the world and beings as the creation of an image supreme God *Hari*, here they are repeating some mythological images of upper caste Hinduism.

'Once compared to some sects and schools of Sanskritic Brahmanical faith, the Matua religion may be less socially deterministic; however, it often seeks more headway or opportunity for individuals from modest backgrounds by adjusting, rather than

denying, the tenets that the Hindus castes also have' (Walker 1999: 563). The sect did not, however, recognise idolatry and ritualistic Hindu religion and condemned them as an instrument of Brahmanic domination. The deities of the Hindu idol, Guruchand believed, were the creation of the scriptures written by Brahmans and the sole purpose of these scriptures was to establish the supremacy of the Brahmans in the society.

Guruchand denounced all rituals, he therefore, wanted, as we learn from his biographer, a simple religion that would provide guidance to the common people for living a meaningful life. Both Harichand and Guruchand themselves gradually assumed among the devotees of the Matua sect, the status of *sravanaguru*. This development that amounted almost to their deification becomes evident from a number of devotional songs of the sect.

*'Kaj ki amar mantrabije  
Harichand-chhabi rabir kirane uthalilo madhu hritsagore'  
(Tarak Chandra Sarkar: Sri Sri Mahasamkritan,59)*

What for do I need the mantra when the portrait of Harichand has been  
glittering in sunlight in the lotus of my heart?  
*(Tarak Chandra Sarkar: Sri Sri Mahasamkritan,59)*

*'gururupe Hari tumi, ese samsare,  
Tumi Hari hoye Hari bole, nam dila sakalare' (Matua Sangeet,65)*

Lord *Hari*, you may have come on earth as the Guru, you being *Hari* yourself, chant the exalted name of *Hari* and given mantra to everybody. (*Matua Sangeet*,65)

‘jaya jagatbandhu Guruchandrahe  
Namasudra kuloddharan kripasindhe’ (*Matua Sangeet*, 11)

Hail Guruchand, the comrade of all on earth, the sea of mercy, the deliverer of the Namasudras. (*Matua Sangeet*, 11)

‘*Matua ek guru vinno guru nai  
Orakandi prabhu jinni khiroder sai*’(Guruchand Charit,573)

Matua has one and only one guru. He is Orakandi prabhu one that is the perpetual master of Khirod.

### **2.3.1. Kirtan in Matua Sect**

Kirtan was, however, an essential part of the Matua religious life. It conveyed a message of solidarity to the members of the community and thus united them in a common pursuit of self-respect and confidence. As ‘kirtan was sung collectively, it gave the sect a congregational character and helped its predominantly Namasudra devotees to construct and continually reinforce their collective identity through the shared experience of devotion’ (Bandopadhyay 2011: 40).

Unlike the other Vaishnavite sects, Matua has its unique pattern for kirtan which is not found in any other Vaishnavite sect in India. In kirtan events sponsored by either Matua households or local

congregation of Matuas, which usually takes place at *Hari Mandir* idols of Harichand are installed either permanently or temporarily in the premise of *Nama samkirtan*. The first day of a kirtan is known as *adhibās*, and the event culminates with the gathering known as *mil mahotsab*, which usually takes place on Tuesday afternoons. The most important proceedings, after the greeting of the guests and the ceremonial offerings to Harichand Thakur's pictures on the holy place, are *mātām* and *baiḥhak kīrtan*.

The first is a concert of instrumental music led by percussions, along with collective dance. As the name *mātām* suggests, the collective dance with *danka* and *kashi* is overwhelmingly passionate, bringing a different state of psychological stirring.

This is performed through *ḍaṅkā*—a big two-sided drum played with two wooden sticks, and the *kāśi*—a round shaped metal gong played with a stick at rhythmic intervals. These two instruments are strongly associated with Namasudra Matua identity; the *ḍaṅkā* and *kāśi* are played by both men and women.

Musical instruments have a sanctified status among Matua followers, especially during their religious congregations. With the beginning of the event these Matua followers start jumping and performing like they are in an intoxicated state of mind

*'Bhara buke khola chule, jay Harichand  
Danda dekhi Matua santan,*

*Dam dam maro danka, chhinde phelo sab sankha  
 Maha byome uda re nishan  
 Bhabna ar karishki, benche theke maris ki?  
 Bado hoye holi hataman  
 Jag, Jago, Jago bir, soja kore rakho seer  
 Jak jan bechee thak man' ( Matua Sangeet,65)*

The devotees of Matua, with bare chests and unbridled hair, stand and say victory to Harichand.

Beat your drums, get rid of all your fears and hoist your flag up in the sky. What are you thinking of, do you want to behave like dead people while you are still alive? Though you are great, you have been denied honour. So wake up, O brave men. keep your heads high, Do not renounce self-worth, even though you have to forfeit your life. (*Matua Sangeet,65*)

It has been found that, especially in the village areas some traditional Vaishnavite followers also participate in *kirtan* events organised by Matuas, but they consider that their *Mil Mahotasb* is not pure because they offer non-vegetarian food and set up a common kitchen for everyone—the fact that, Matua devotees are principally proud of, in view of their strong emphasis on caste equality. On the other hand, traditional Vaishnavite kirtans would always have two separate kitchens and where they have strictly maintained the vegetarian rule, and always have two separate arrangements, one for initiate Brahmin disciples and one for the common devotees.

For the Namasudra devotees of the Matua sect, kirtan was also a cause of collective vigor and strength. The songs (or *namgan*, as they were popularly called) emphasised, first of all, the superpower of the gurus, both Harichand and Guruchand, who could help their

devotees to overcome all the worldly crises. The guru could take away the fear of king and ward off all hazards, could bring solace to all sorrows and give life to the dead. What all these songs aimed at was the generation of self-confidence in the minds of those who were otherwise powerless and ill-equipped to face the hazards and obstacles of life.

It is *namgan* which also give them courage and self-respect and the strength to stand up to the powerful adversaries who kept them down in society. This congregational singing of *namgan* was, for the devotees of the Matua sect, a political ritual to assert their collective will. It would construct a new self and that would controvert the established cosmology of power in local society. ‘The *namgan*, in other words, are songs of self-assertion for bolstering up the collective ego of a community’ (Bandopadhyay 2011: 41).

*Shri Harililamrita* the sacred scripture of Matua asserts that ‘there are only two genuine castes—male and females. No other caste exists and everyone must eat rice out of one pot together. The sacred book of Matua (*Shri Harililamrita*) gave new version to Hindu mythological theme of the four cyclic *yugas* or ages: the *Satya* of knowledge and wisdom, the *Treta* and *Dwapar yugas* of the gradual decline of Dharma, and our present *Kali-yuga* of trouble, ignorance, and vice’.

They contend that the Sudra caste is the greatest among the four castes.

‘Harichand Thakur appears in this lowest caste (the Shudras): by residing in it, he distributes the holy name/*mantra* of *Hari*, calling all to him. The name of *Hari* is the chief seed-*mantra* of all the books of religion (*shorboshastro bij-mantra Harinam*). To take or receive this spell-*mantra*, one has to be a follower of the Matua religion innovated by Harichand Thakur: otherwise, it is impossible—simultaneous rejection of the Hindu sects and acceptance of their Sanskrit books as having recorded some truths’ (Mondol 1988: 34). ‘This *Haribol* of the Matua is sung during the Kirtan that brings together the supreme cult Vishnu, and the *Hari* of Harichand Thakur. Like other Vaishnavite sects Matuas never utter or chant the holy word ‘*Harekrishna*’ but they utter the word *Haribol* which indicates their separateness from other Vaishnavite Sects’ (Adhikari 1995; Mukherjee 2018)

### **2.3.2 Matua Philosophy which oppose *Advaita Vedantism***

The Matua philosophy was meant to oppose the Sanskrit *Advaita Vedantism*, which was regarded as the quintessence of the classical religion of the elites, devised to keep the sudras in a perpetual state of subordination. *Vedanta* represented the monistic philosophy of

spiritual salvation by means of renunciation, getting out of the illusory worldly bondages and attaining the supreme truth, i.e., *Brahma*, who eluded embodiment.

The *Bhakti* tradition, on the other hand, was against this philosophy of monism, it opposed the concept of an illusory world and desirability of spiritual salvation in the other world. Harichand developed this difference in perspectives into a position of opposition. He believed that *Vedanta* inculcated a theory of despair; by advocating renunciation of worldly desires it deliberately demotivated the working people and mentally conditioned them to accept their subordinate position in society, while contemplating salvation in the other world. He, therefore, preached the hollowness of the quest for spiritual salvation and advised his disciples to worship goddess of the wealth (Haldar 1393 BS; Haldar 1394 BS: 39; Haldar 1397 BS; Bandopadhyay 2011: 42).

The principles taught by Harichand and Guruchand were as follows:

- (1) Making it not essential for Matuas to enter temples of higher castes for the purpose of worship.
- (2) Denying the Brahmin priest any form of ceremonial activities.
- (3) Mandatory worshiping of only *Shri Hari*.

(4) Not worshipping of any form of idols other than *Sri Hari* and not visiting any pilgrimage centres of Hindus.

(5) Maintaining good moral character and leading an ideal family life (Haldar 1394 BS: 39-40).

Matua as a sect gives utmost importance to family life in keeping with all moral values and stresses is on settled agricultural activities, and advises its disciples to perform the duties of a householder. 'The proper performance of familial duties requires a combination of two qualities or *guna*—*Raja* and *sattwa*—while the former motivates people to work, the latter elevates them above worldly desires' (Haldar 1394 BS). 'The family life which was so emphasised in Matua philosophy was thus to be regulated in accordance with strict sexual discipline, chastity of women and proper sexual behavior by men—these virtues are repeatedly extolled in the preaching of the *Gurus*' (Haldar 1943 : 567).

### **2.3.3. Pragmatic Approach Taken by Guruchand Thakur**

Guruchand's preaching of the Matua dharma was more pragmatic in nature; his stand is just opposite of renunciation. His major concern was how to elevate this community to a higher stage of socio-economic development and how to install a power of self-endowment. Earning money, being educated and becoming

respectable, were his principal points of advice to the disciples. All should propitiate the Goddess of wealth, for wealth was the source of all power and those who are favoured by *Lakshmi*, received the favour of *Naryana* or *Hari* as well.

Bandopadhyay (2011) said that ‘philosophy of Matua did not accept the notion of karma theory which rationalised and legitimised their present position, on the contrary, Guruchand insisted that one should earn in an honest way and this quest for wealth must not lead to unscrupulous or unbounded greed. So the ideal path would be to combine *bhakti* with *karma*, spiritual devotion with material action. 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’ (Bandopadhyay 2011: 42). The sect, unlike the others of its genre, thus inculcated a work ethic, which was necessary to motivate an upwardly mobile community, still struggling under disparities and obstacles.

*Biswa bhore ei niti dekhi parospore*  
*Je jare uddhar kore se tar ishwar (Sri Sri Guruchand Charita 1943: 65)*  
*Tahar nandan srigurucharan thakur upadhi jar*  
*Pitar awgya sei mahashay loyeche jatir bhar, ( Sri Sri Guruchand Charita 1943: 67)*

‘Thus, Matua sect, attempted the reformation of the manners of the Namasudras at a mass level, and thus also tried to avoid the stigma attached to Vaishnava orders’. ‘Guruchand often used to tell his followers that, it is only education which helps one to earn the

respect from others. Only education can bring them salvation from all type of destitution' (Halder 1943: 67, 74).

*Mor pita harichand bole gechen more  
Vidya shikhha swajitike dite ghore ghore.....  
Khaw ban a khaw tate dukho nai  
Chelepila shikha dao ei ami chai ( Sri Sri Guruchand Charita 1943: 109)*

Guruchand also realised that illiteracy and ignorance were the roots of all degradation the Namasudra masses were suffering from, and, therefore, he instructed his followers to work for the education of the members of his caste. Guruchand said that no matter whether they had food or not, Matua must educate their children.

The sect became popular in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Guruchand led the untouchability movement called the Namasudra movement in India. He took initiative to start a primary school in Orakandhi in 1880 (Bangladesh) for the distressed people. He had united the people for better environment and education. Guruchand Thakur preached this socio-religious ethos among Namasudra, and encouraged their upward mobility by initiating his famous education movement in the year 1881, 10 years before the birth of Ambedkar.

*Bachi ki mori tate khati nai  
Grame game pathshala gore dite chai ( Sri Sri Guruchand Charita 1943: 108)*

Bandopadhyay (2011) empathically asserted that not only did Guruchand's teaching motivate the community to become more self-assertive, but he himself, with his influence as a charismatic religious preceptor, became the leader of their social movement, and Orakandi, his ancestor village, became its headquarters. One of his powerful dictum, *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 initial mobilisation of the Namasudras took place, in the hands of some disciples of Guruchand, known as the sixty-four *mahantas*, who preached the ideas of Hari-Guruchand and gathered around them thousands of devotees from Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakharganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore, and Tippera districts in today's Bangladesh. The most popular religious festival was *Baruni mela*, held to celebrate the birth anniversary of Harichand on the last day of the Bengali month *Chaitra* (in April). The occasion thus offered an excellent opportunity for social mobilisation and communication of the message of social movement in an informal and less organised way. The leaders of the Namasudra community now began to use this religious platform in a more systematic way to organise a social movement against their degraded condition.

‘To bring the sect under a centralised organisational framework, the Matua Mahasangha was established sometime before 1915 under the leadership of Tarak Gonsai. Though the family members of Guruchand do not accept that Tarak Gonsai was the harbinger of Matua Mahasangha it is accepted widely that Tarak Gonsai played a very important role in formalising the initial structure of the Mahasangha. R.P Thakur, Guruchand’s grandson, after his return from England, thought of reactivating this social organisation and he convened a general conference of the Matua devotees in 1931 in thier native village Orakandi. The following year, the endeavour of Gopal Sadhu gave the Sangha the organisational shape of a mission with an *ashram* started at Khulna district town on a plot of hundred bigha of land, where Namsudra students coming from poor peasants families, could stay and continue their studies’ (Das 1952; Haldar 1394 BS).

‘Due to Guruchand Thakur’s education movement, the Namasudra became politically conscious and, therefore, elected Dr. Ambedkar from a Bengal constituency in the Ganaparishad Election in 1946 at a time when he was getting marginalised by caste-Hindu political foes. Guruchand Thakur, who was considered another avatar ("*Shivavatar*") in his own right, unified Bengal’s great Namasudra community eliminating its divisions and skilfully organised the

ongoing mass inclusion of this community to Matua, in protest against Brahmanism' (Das 1952).

Guruchand Thakur struggled uncompromisingly to get rid of social evils like inequalities of caste system untouchability, right to enter temples and overall development of Namasudra People in Bengal. He took initiative to establish fifty six primary schools in order to give proper environment for the downtrodden of society.

His persistent struggle for the proper educational programme of the Namasudra made him popular among thousands of lower caste people in rural Bengal. Taking helps from local Namasudra People and Matua devotees he had formed Namasudra Welfare Association in 1880.

He went on to call an All Bengal Namasudra Conference, which was held at Duttadanga in the district of Khulna (presently in Bangladesh) in the year 1881. Guruchand Thakur was the main key person of the conference. He advised his devotees to open primary and upper primary schools in the areas densely populated by Namasudra. In that conference, he proclaimed that '*Bachi kingba mari tate khati nai, grame grame pathshala gore jete chai*' (it doesn't matter whether I live or die, I shall keep open primary school in different villages).

His next movement was to eliminate the derogatory term, *Chandal* (which was then associated to Namasudra by the upper caste Hindus) from the census report. He was successful in the same. The term *Chandal* was removed from the census report of 1911. In 1907 he appealed to the then Governor of Bengal and Assam for the employment of the Namasudras in government services' (Bandopadhyay 2011).

It was in this way, Matua sectarian assertion had entered a different paradigm that gave birth to Namasudra identity movement, which systematically tried to convert their strength of numbers into a source of political power. So till independence hardly we can find any sectarian reformative activities under the banner of Matua Mahasangha. However in subsequent years till the partition of India, the leaders of the Matua sect in Orakandi were not much involved in political activities, they sometimes supported certain candidates contesting for posts of district unions. Such a process, however, created factions among leaders of the community.

#### **2.4. Partition of India and New Phase of Accommodation of Mahasangha**

Partition of the country in 1947 devastated much of the gains achieved by the Namasudra community during all these years;

however, Matua Mahasangha as a sect entered into the phase of accommodation and consolidation in a new changing alien environment. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and his family came to India, settled down at Thakur Nagar, in spite of his calling large part of Namasudra Matua community remained in East Pakistan and remained loyal to '*Orakandi Thakur*'. But their decision to stay back in East Pakistan did not bring good fortune. Gradually they realised that they were in a disadvantageous position in comparison to the Muslims, their one-time allies; in changed situation many of the Namasudra Matuas preferred to leave the land for India, where they were initially accommodated in transit camps before being rehabilitated in different parts of West Bengal then in the states of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and the Andaman Islands.

The exodus continued through the next decade and the situation became so precarious in the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1970-71, that a large number of refugees, many of whom were from the Matua sect entered India.

This time the Government had no specific scheme to rehabilitate them. Under such circumstances, the social and political gains that the community could garner all these years took a severe jolt. Unlike the pre-partition days when the Namasudra mass rallied

around the identity of the community and perpetrated acts to protect that, the refugee population was struggling hard for mere survival. Still, they tried their best to maintain community solidarity; the Matua Mahasangha helped them by offering an identity marker and a reason for assemblies and congregations.

#### **2.4.1. Thakurnagar Becomes the Epicenter for the Matua Bhaktas**

From the very first day, Thakurnagar (which comes under the district of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal) acted as a parent body for the Namasudra Matua refugee. The place is named after the P.R. Thakur as he was the key person to develop a town for displaced Matua *Bhaktas*.

The transitional character of Matua Mahasangha was not free from the controversy among its members. Pramath Ranjan Thakur and his family members were trying to influence Matua devotees through charisma which was associated with family but that invited objection from a part of the Matua devotees as they wanted to preserve everything in the line of democratic participation. There happened to be two important fissure points that split the Matua devotees into different groups, these are modus operandi of the sect and refugee resettlement.

Mahananda Haldar formed his own group (1965) in Barachandi in Nadia district, called *Harichand Seva Sangha*, following the agenda of *Harichand mission*. Mahananda Haldar aimed for expansion of Matua dharma and social work for Matua devotees. It is Mahananda Halder who composed *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita* and through his *Harichand Seva Sangha* he had freely distributed thousand copies of *Sri Sri Guruchand Charita* among the Matua Bhaktas.

Pramath Ranjan Thakur, grandson of Sri Guruchand Thakur, realised that mere preaching of sectarian ideology to common masses was not sufficient as millions of Matua devotees had become refugee and ideology could be preached only after they reached a sustainable level of existence, *Hari bhakti* would not bring them a peaceful life. The first phase of Matua consciousness and mobilisation can be seen in the 1952 post-election phase.

Pramath Ranjan Thakur (P.R. Thakur) realised that demographically though Namasudra Matua were good in number they were not notified in the electoral list and those who had the citizenship cards were subdivided by different political parties. Unlike Jogen Mandal, Pramath Ranjan Thakur did not want to make separate Dalit identity rather he wanted to change everything

according to the new changing circumstances. In this context, it is worth mentioning that, changing socio-political situation put constrain on Matua Maha Sangha in such a way that forced them to change their basic idioms of separate Matua religious identity.

‘It has been acknowledged that social movement of the Namasudra revolved around the Thakur family of Orakandi, even Gandhi described Guruchand Thakur as a great Guru in a personal letter written to Pramath Ranjan Thakur. However, with the death of Guruchand in March 1937, the prime ideologist, the efforts to keep the movement away from the Congress-led Nationalist movements also came to an end. Within a year his grandson Pramath Ranjan Thakur could see the reason behind coming closer to Congress’ (Bandopadhyay 2011: 267).

He believed that Matua people are hard-working and were capable of making their own living. In public gathering, he kept encouraging the distressed Matua *bhakta* by pronouncing different verses of Sri Guruchand to instill a sense of courage and vitality. He observed that mere denouncing Government rehabilitation programme outside Bengal may invite uncertainty which would make them more vulnerable to live in a new changing scenario as he did not

want to throw them into unknown political crisis only, it is his charisma that Matua dharma spread all over India.

The official declaration of Matua Mahasangha today is that the organisation was founded by Guruchand Thakur in 1931/32 (*Matua Mahasangher 25 tama Barshik Sammelan: sadaran Sampadoker Protibedan, Nov 2011*). But Sekhar Bandopadhyay (2011: 192) mentioned that the 'organisation was formed around 1915 by Tarak Goshai'.

During fieldwork, when the questions were asked to some of the Matua leaders apart from Thakur family about whom they consider the real founder of Matua Mahasangha, the answer was not so astonishing in the present context of Matua Mahasangha. The respondents asserted that the Thakur family never acknowledges the contribution and dedication made by leaders other than siblings of Hari-Guruchand Thakur, so it is quite expected that in official documents they have served wrong information about the founder of Matua Mahasangha. 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.

The partition struggles not only disoriented the Namasudra movement, but also disrupted the political project of Matuas. Although Pramatha Ranjan Thakur—the first *Sanghadhipati* (organisational head) of the organisation nominated by Guruchand—took initiative to revive the organisation repeatedly.

Since 1949, the project met with numerous hurdles and did not evolve into anything substantial. ‘One major reason for this failure was political differences within the leadership of the organisation immediately after partition. Mahananda Haldar the former secretary and editor of the magazine, *Thakur*, resigned from the post and formed his own independent organisation, called the *Harichand Seba Sangha* in 1956. The two organisations functioned separately for over a decade. Finally, in 1980, under the initiative of Susil Kumar Biswas, the two separate outfits merged to form the Harichand Matua Seba Sangha. In 1983, a change in name of the central organisation was proposed by Binapani Devi called *Baroma*, and the wife of late P.R. Thakur. The proposal was finally accepted by the working committee of the organisation. It was thus renamed as the Matua Mahasangha in 1986. Since then, the organisation has regained its old status and devoted itself to the task of preaching the doctrines of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur

among the Namasudra population scattered across India' (Sinhary 2017: 152-153).

The Matua Mahasangha was registered in 1998 with its headquarters at Thakurnagar, North 24-Parganas, about 65 km away from Kolkata. Its cover page, *Matua Maha Sangha Patrika*, the official mouthpiece of the organisation, defines the sect as one established as a 'religion with spiritual outlook based on socio-economic uplift of the downtrodden class including ideal family life and for their mass salvation in the way of eliminating the caste division and untouchability, social and economic discrepancy'.

Like Thakurbari in Orakandi in Bangladesh, there is a special sacred seat for master and a pond called *Kamana Sagar* where devotees take a holy dip and pray to Hari-Guruchand for wish fulfilment.

There is temple complex at Thakurnagar, other than the temples devoted to Harichand, Guruchand and Pramath Ranjan Thakur, there are also temples containing idols of some Hindu deities. Following the motto of *Matua Mahasangher sanbhidhan ba gathantanra, Sree Dham Thakurbari* (Constitution of Matua Maha Sangha), the leaders try to develop a separate sectarian consciousness among the followers that efficiently challenges the

cultural and religious markers of the Hindu caste order. The organisation has introduced booklet on a separate set of rituals and practices, which directly opposed the Brahmanical doctrine.

Bandopadhyay's (2011) observation in this regard stands in different position, to him, 'the claim made by Mahasangh as separate religious entity separated from Hinduism, does not match at the pragmatic level, the sect and its belief system absorbed many elements of established Hinduism or of the more orthodox trends within the *Bhakti* tradition and lost much of its distinctiveness as well as its subversive edge. This element of conformism or selective absorption of symbols or ideas from elite culture was observable, most particularly in ideas governing the family organisation and the status of women' (Bandopadhyay 2011). As the songs of the sect composed at a later period indicate, the structure of the family in Matua philosophy gradually came to be conceptualised in terms of the notions of patriarchy.

*Sate nari bhabe je jan,  
Puja kare patir charan  
Mayer sadhan bhajan nai....thakte swami bartamane. (Matua Sangeet: 110)*

Pious lady must worship husband, if the husband remains alive, there is no need to worship any other. (*Matua Sangeet: 110*)

*Age Jodi jantem ami, eto garal e ramani,  
Phele giye omni kortem gurur dhyan (Matua Sangeet: 79)*

If I had known earlier that women are full of so much poison, I would have discarded her and immersed in thoughts only of guru. (*Matua Sangeet:79*)

Such a notion of patriarchal domination in family relation was derived from the ideology of hierarchy that determined the wider Hindu social structure, which Matua sect once sought to defy. The ideal Hindu chaste woman was one who worshipped the feet of her husband, and for her no other form of worship was necessary to attain salvation. This was quite contrasted to early liberalism of the sect which initially allowed women equal right to participate in its congregational religious life.

Not only that, women also came to be regarded as obstacles in the path of salvation, a stereotype which Guruchand had once denounced so severely as an upper caste Vedantic distortion. 'Apart from the social practices, this process of assimilation was also evident in the realm of ideas. In the case of Matua philosophy, this could be seen in the gradual incorporation of the theory of incarnation. In the devotional songs of sect appears as the incarnation of Hari or Krishna' (Bandopahyay 2011).

*Gururupe hari tumi, ese samsare,  
Tumi hari hoye hari bole, nam dila sakalare ( Matua Sangeet: 65)*

To spread the *hari nam* to the world you came down to us as *guru*, hence you are ultimate lord. ( *Matua Sangeet*: 65)

In a similar way and perhaps for similar reasons, *gurubad*, i.e., the Brahmanical doctrine that inculcated total control of the spiritual life of the disciples by their preceptor, which both Harichand and Guruchand had once so zealously discarded, was also gradually incorporated into the belief system of the Matua sect. Not only were the first two *gurus* deified even in their lifetimes, but also their early disciples, who were instrumental in the wider dissemination of their ideas, were believed to have shared their supernatural powers. Even the latter concept which was more Brahmanical, particularly notion that the intermediary of *guru* was essential spiritual for salvation of the disciple, appears to have gained greater acceptance, as some of the expressions in their devotional songs (*Matua Sangeet* : 212)

*Guru Gosainr daya hobe, karmabandhan jabe guche  
Jadi jabi opar, kar Sreguru kandari, harinamer taree (Aswini kumar Sarkar,  
Sri Sri Hari Sangeet: 17)*

If you want to sail across to the other world, make *Harinam* your boat and accept *guru* as the boatman. (*Aswini kumar Sarkar, Sri Sri Hari Sangeet: 17*)

Bandopadhyay (2011: 212-213) observed that ‘these songs also indicate the concepts of an illusory world and the primacy of the later disciples of Harichand and Guruchand, although both of them

were so averse to the Brahmanical notions that sought to demotivate the lower classes and thus prevent them from achieving social mobility.’ In the collection of Matua songs there are numerous examples which imply that the typical Vedantic theory of *maya* and the desirability of renunciation of worldly pleasures or *Kamini-kanchan* (women and wealth), which Matua belief system was once conceived in opposition to, had been absorbed and internalised by the followers of the sect during the latter period.

*Kamini kuhuke rase, magna hoye achi bose,  
Sadhan bhajan hobe kise, bhulechhi mayay (Matua sangeet: 113)*

I have been possessed by the mysterious influence of women. I do not know how I would undertake my spiritual duties, as I have been bemused by *maya*. (*Matua sangeet: 113*)

*Michhe rajak kanchan, e dhana jauban  
Guru pade samarpan kariba ekhan (Matua sangeet: 117)*

Wealth and youth are false; I shall now surrender everything at the feet of the Guru. (*Matua sangeet: 117*)

This absorption of philosophical notions from the established or orthodox religious order was symptomatic of the Matuas’ inability to escape this dominant cultural influence. This was not unexpected either, as the Namasudra devotees of the sect were not living in social isolation. On the contrary, the major objective of the

community was to seek integration into the constituted social structure and this necessitated absorption of the dominant cultural values of that society.

Matua as a 'Community' does not exist *sui generis*, they are produced, re produced, challenged and re-imagined on a, daily basis. In socio- psychological terms, Matuas are 'lived' through the negotiation of social representations and, as a result, through the construction of community identities.

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 create 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, plays a powerful role in the construction of reality that they are a separate entity and deserve special treatment from the State. Throughout this chapter, it has been stressed that collective mobilisation and emergence of self-identity as initiated by Matua Mahasangha are far more than any predetermined interpretative tools. They come not only to shape our understandings of inter subjectively agreed realities, but also to

constitute this reality from shared memories of histories, which again intersect with the ideological construction as given by Hari-Guruchand, which made them conscious about the importance of collective self against any social atrocities.

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## **CHAPTER- III**

### **THE MATUA MAHASANGHA: THE STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS**

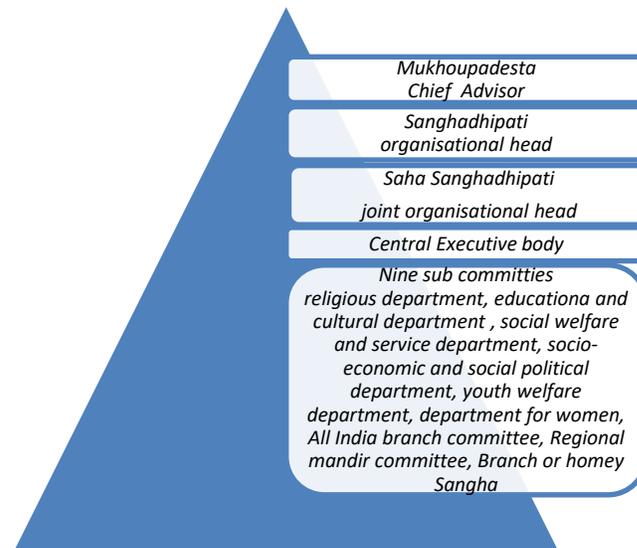
#### **3.1. Introduction**

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

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

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

### 3.2. Hierarchical Pyramidal Structure of Matua Mahasangha



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.2.1. Mukhoupodesta**

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>10</sup> A title given to common devotees or leaders of the Vaishnava tradition

<sup>11</sup> Chain for matua devotees which are made out of the dry coconut shell.

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

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

### **3.2.2. Sanghadhipati (Chief Official)**

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.2.3. Saha Sanghadhipati**

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

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

### **3.3. Central Executive Committee**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.3.1. President of Matua Mahasangha's Central Committee.**

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

### **3.3.2. Vice President of Matua Mahasangha's Central Committee**

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

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

### **3.3.3. General Secretary of Central Committee**

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

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

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

#### **3.3.4. Assistant Secretary**

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

#### **3.3.5. Organisational Secretary**

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

### **3.3.6. Office Authority**

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

### **3.3.7. Secretary of the Departmental Committee**

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

### **3.3.8. Treasurer**

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

### **3.3.9. Accountant**

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

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

### **3.4. Functional Divisions of Matua Mahasangha**

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **3.4.1. Branch Committee**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **3.4.1.1. Functions of the Branch Committee**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.4.2. Hari Mandir Comittee**

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

### **3.4.3. Householder Sangha**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **3.4.4. Education and Cultural Committee**

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.4.5. Social Welfare and service Committee**

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

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

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

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

#### **3.4.6. Student and Youth Welfare Committee**

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

#### **3.4.7. Department for Women**

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

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

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

### **3.5. Duties Performed by the Matua Devotees**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>13</sup> Vessel filled with water or grains for an auspicious occasion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Unnecessary conversation shall not be entertained in Mahotsav,

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

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

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

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

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<sup>15</sup> Second, fifth, ninth, and twelfth of the months respectively in Bengali calendar

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

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

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

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

### 3.5.4. The Twelve Commandants of Harichand Thakur

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **3.6. Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## 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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## CHAPTER V

### CLASH OF INTEREST AND ACCRETION OF DISSENT GROUPS WITHIN THE MAHASANGHA

#### 5.1. Introduction

Clash of interest and accretion of dissent groups within the Matua Mahasangha among its member has been considered as a faction, which has been constituted either informally or formally within the Mahasangha. It has been observed that, the nature and dynamics of factional conflict within Mahasangha is a phenomenon that often crosses the formal organisational lines. Factional origin is the process that precipitates the formation of enduring conflict groups. 'Among the variables linked together by an originating process there can be objective or perceived economic, social, and political interests; outside threats; and internal opportunities' (Rastogi 1970: 14).

The present study tries to find out 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 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.

Even in respect of their claims or demands or objectives, they are seen to be quite flexible. Interest groups in Matua Mahasangha generally adapt themselves to the existing socio-political ambience and also emerging circumstances.

## **5.2. Perception of Common Interest Developed by the Dissent Group**

The 'central' or 'originating principle' of the faction within the Mahasangha can be defined as the perception of common interest by individuals in the context of opprobrious relations that exist within the Mahasangha. These groups of individuals hold meetings to mobilise people around the issues that concern them. Such activities help to develop shared understanding, and also prepare for a feeling of agreement or consensus about how to pursue the collective interest beyond the prescription made by the apex body of Mahasangha. These groups of individuals claim to be Matua

intelligentsia and set to chart out campaigns that include lobbying with the political parties, media and other important makers of public opinion. These people always calculate costs and benefits before undertaking any action.

But such a perception of common interest made by dissenting members is hardly contextual yet it exists as principle behind the group cohesion. The dissenting member within Mahasangha is literally a small group of followers, and their mutual distance from each group is difficult to be clearly defined and is not even marked by any ideological marker.

### **5.2.1. Context Specific Nature of Dissenting Group**

These dissent groups are very much contextual in nature. The accretion of dissent group consciousness in Mahasangha is a long-standing family oriented patterned tendency which may be considered as endogamous and naturally differentiated social units. The cultures in which these factional structures are embedded provide abstract models and psychological predispositions that shape and sustain them. In India, *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) are terms that describe the relationship between a spiritual teacher and his disciple. Ideally, this relationship requires submersion by the follower of his identity with that of the teacher or guide. That is the total identification with the teacher. In Mahasangha, inner

circles are also based on such guru–shishya model, in that the faction leader has his closest confidants and cronies about him, who have little political standing of their own. Even a person outside this group may assume a pseudo-disciple stance on some common issue, despite the greater distance between the leader and himself, despite having his own political followings.

*Baruni Mela* that was initiated at the birthplace of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur in Orakandi village of Gopalpur presently in Bangladesh was shifted to Thakurnagar a year after independence. More than fifty thousand pilgrims, mostly devotees of Matuas, took a holy dip in the vast tank of *Kamanasagar* adjacent to the *Harichand–Guruchand Thakur* temple at Thakurnagar in North 24 Parganas.

The week-long festival was organised to mark the ‘*Baruni Mela*’ observing the birth anniversary of *Harichand Thakur*. A member of dissent circle asserted that, the *Mela* introducer Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, despite his political affinity with the Indian National Congress, hardly took any initiative for taking political advantage from the *Mela* or its followers, his successors made efforts to take political advantage with a view to develop the area as established by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur.

Soon after a large number of people of the sect from East Pakistan were compelled to cross the international boundary for their rehabilitation. But presently, the *Mela* has been virtually transformed into a gathering for political campaign by the political parties to fulfil the ruling party's political aspirations.

The influence of Matua Mahasangha as a religious agent amongst its non-politicised members may be different from the politicised Matua Mahasangha.

### **5.2.2. Politicisation and Interest Articulation in Mahasangha**

Matua Mahasangha is passing through a transition of role-playing it assumes two significant roles in two different dimensions. It continues to perform its traditional role which is religious and ceremonial practices at the familial level, in spite of leadership controversy over the Mahasangha. At another level Matua Mahasangha is also playing a role of marginal political agent.

The political dissent of Matua Mahasangha may, however, be discharged by a different kind of leadership constituted on the basis of politicisation and interest articulation. These two kinds of leadership roles are not likely to be discharged by the same person or the same body of persons.

Mahasangha has been passing through different political curves, from religious protest against the agency of upper caste (1872-1947) to deciding factor in election results in West Bengal since 2011. The Left with its electoral mobilisation around the issue of the class managed to make a mark in West Bengal. With the Matuas emerging as a distinct presence in the political sphere in the 2011 assembly election, the role of lower caste in politics in West Bengal became a point of political discussion.

After the demise of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, intra-family rivalries and outside political interference became a sustained phenomenon which accentuated intra-group rivalries, that left its effects on peripheral groups and subgroups of Mahasangha and, organisational faction has assumed some stable consequences over the Matua Mahasangha.

It has been observed that the clash of interest in Mahasangha to a certain extent has reduced the rigidity of the organisational structure. The uncompromising attitude among its members on different issues challenges the ideal nature of Matua Mahasangha at present. The ideological narrations of Matuatism as given by Harichand–Guruchand and religious compulsion (as directed from the authority structure) became the main point for expressing dissent.

### **5.3. Participation in Politics: Moral Obligation Sensed by Matua Bhaktas during the time of P.R. Thakur**

When P.R. Thakur founded Thakurnagar (on 3 March 1948) after purchasing the land from Smt. Janad Kumari Dasi, he was identified as the prime leader and soul of Matua Mahasangha in Bengal. Even at that time, the politics of sects, factions and political decisions could be identical, but at the same time, they confirmed each other in terms of their impact on the religious performance of the political act. In this context, Sinhary's (2016) observation is worth mentioning. He observes that, 'being a leader of Dalit, Thakur who had migrated from east Pakistan fought for the inclusion of a couple of Dalit in his Sangha from within Indian territory. But unfortunately, he failed to do so due to the upper caste dominance in political decision making. He was a pragmatic man who took the correct decision at the time of partition and supported the ruling Congress party to ensure the proper settlement of Namasudra refugees' (Sinhary 2016).

During the time of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, the Sangha had more or less stood in the corner and did not play any prime role in determining the electoral behavior of the members. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and other Namasudra leadership in West Bengal

were more aligned with Congress because their eyes were more on *Nehruvian* policy of offering a legalistic solution to the problems of social justice. Caste indeed became a major factor in the first election in independent India, held in January 1952, since all political parties had eyes on the reserved seats. Among the 39 reserved seats Congress had won 31 seats and the rest of the seats went to other political parties like CPI, Forward Bloc (Marxist), Krishak Masdoor Praja Party and Jansangha. The most significant aspect of the election was that Ambedkar's Schedule Caste Federation could not win a single seat though it had contested in all the reserved seats in Bengal. It seemed that the lower caste voters hardly shifted their loyalties from Congress as their elite leadership kept loyal to Congress Government.

Pramatha Ranjan Thakur was elected on a Congress ticket to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1957 from *Haringhata* reserved constituency and in 1962 from *Hanskhali* reserved constituency, and he became a Minister of State for Tribal Development. As a Congress leader, he encouraged *Namasudra* refugees to settle down in other parts of India where they could get land to settle.

The followers of Matua Mahasangha had strong faith in Pramatha Ranjan Thakur and his decisions on electoral politics were accepted by the Matua bhaktas because they believed that it was the

performance of a necessary religious obligation. People felt a responsibility to act when the action was felt to be morally obligatory. This finding suggests that the people who see political participation as a moral obligation would feel a strong responsibility to participate. But even, that time also, the peripheral group was not numerically fragile and its voting behavior merged with localised issues, and factions can be seen within different political parties. Therefore, they always found an alternative choice of political preferences. They did not consider that political participation in the tune with Mahasangha shall be an obligatory act. Instead, they viewed it as a morally virtuous act.

Around this time, there were two other rival scheduled caste organisations: one was led by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, which supported the Congress. The other one was Depressed Classes Association, led by Birat Chandra Mandal, who belonged to the Namasudra community, and the latter was more aligned to the Hindu Mahasabha. In other words, the Namasudra communities remained intensely divided on the issue of Partition in 1946-47 (Bandopadhyay, Chaudhury, 2014:4)

Soon after the CPI (M) led Left front came into power in 1977, gradually it was found that the political decision of Thakurnagar did not reach the followers in an effective manner. Many Left leaders,

like Brinda Karat, Biman Bose and Subhash Chakraborty had visited Thakurnagar and other places to seek support from two crore Matuas. Kapilkrishna Thakur in his book on Matua movement and marginalized section in Bengal “*Matua Andolan o Banglar Anunnoto Samaj*” in 1994, mentioned that, ‘Matua Mahasangha is closer to Marxism that focuses on the significance of hard work and self-emancipation. It is also an all-encompassing philosophy and you will find Matuas among *Krishak* and *Shramik*’ (Thakur 1994).

Unanimity or consensus especially in the field of political affairs or selection of the candidate, may not be possible at central level organisational decisions since it gets restricted owing to the weakness of central authority, intra-familial feuds and peripheral dissent over the different political affiliations. Moreover, dissent at a peripheral level and less unanimity at the central level are clear reflections of perpetual political differences within the Matua Mahasangha and less efficacy of family leadership to keep Mahasangha as the strong agent of power lobby.

With the passage of time after 2011, the feeling of ‘Thakurbari’ diminished, and it has been realised by the followers that preferred candidate from Thakurbari would hardly be of any use to them. Approved candidates from Thakurbari are found to be neither

necessarily committed to Matua Mahasangha nor sincere to community problems. Thus, the process of political participation, as well as political intervention in Matua Mahasangha, may provide conditions in which religious supremacy in everyday life and intra-group interaction may be found to be disintegrated in order to give way to a new sectarian and political equation with the state and the political parties.

Dissent at the peripheral level is found not because of the weakness of the central body and lack of leadership but it has been accentuated by changes in occupational and economic activities particularly at the village level and suburban areas.

#### **5.4. Emergence of Disagreement in Matua Mahasangha**

After the demise of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (1990), the peripheral group started behaving differently in response to local conditions and demands. Therefore, multiple factions grew within the organisation even with direct interference of political agencies on organisational matters. That had a lasting effect on the authority structure and cohesiveness of Matua Mahasangha as well. The frictions in authority at the familial frontiers put stress on the effectiveness of organisational structure.

Presently the old conception of Matua Mahasangha being a familial sect based organisation has been contested by many sections of its

members. These new tendencies tend to break the structure of organisational frontiers. The structural realignment of various groups and subgroups within Matua Mahasangha has turned flexible in terms of their traditional perception about the dominant society. Presently, upper caste dominance and refugee rights are no longer significant to the new generation. They rather take the Matua identity as an agent of political bargaining. Although the religious frontiers remain undisturbed.

#### **5.4.1. Development of Local Matua Community Psyche**

In this study, it was observed that though Matua Mahasangha has evolved as sect but it also reflects elements of a community life. At that level, the local Matua psyche is more predominant than Matua per se. Thus, the sub peripheral group was identified with the local Matua community psyche. This local Matua community psyche is a neighbourhood social group consisting of 10–20 families to 200–300 families, very closely knit together in terms of socio-economic and ceremonial interactions. Despite sharing common beliefs and observing of religious rites and functions they are less attached to Thakurnagar. It is also this group which decides whether to accept or reject sectarian decision at a particular election or in any such events. This peripheral local ‘Matua as a community psyche’ is

gaining more importance than the authority of Thakurnagar with regard to social and political decision making.

Emerging generations of Matua have posed new quests that are different from those of the old leaders. Such voices drew their sustenance from different local contesting values alongside and everyday life of Matua people in Bengal. Therefore, this upcoming young generation emerging from sectarian rivalries constrain and move away from the dominant paradigm that is cohesive Matua consciousness as it seems when released from Thakurnagar. Matua Mahasangha is now set to reconcile with the inclusion of sectarian ideas as a social collective for a community and is trying to negate cohesive supra political identity.

#### **5.4.2. Family Conflict Identified with Personal loyalties**

Family friction within Matua Mahasangha is being identified with personal loyalty to the sectarian values and other personal attachments to existing political culture. Thus it can be said that the ways in which such tendencies of changes originate and operate are best explained by functional adaptability of personal and group interest.

1. Sharp separation between family-run authority structures and the outer circle of participation.

2. The unuttered gap between religious value and organisational preferences that create segments around the inner as well as the outer circle.
3. Such a culture of faction develops because of their subjective non-ideological preferences than any organisational ethos and values.

Subjective preferences always play odd with sectarian values and expectations within the broader code of group behavior. Therefore, constitutional principles of Matua Mahasangha can never transact beyond the factional boundaries. Factional feuds became effective especially in the selection of candidates either in panchayat or in the legislative assembly.

In order to dispose of a greater role in the public domain, the hierarchy is more clearly depicted by the organisation through charts and formal rules, rank, and precedences. But all these appear to have temporal significance. The formal routinisation is suppressed by informal factionalism and segmentation of preferences. Therefore, ritualisation of sectarian rules and values appear to have lost significance.

It has already been mentioned that the factional groupism within Matua challenges its very stability and survival. But in spite of such fragmentations among the Matua bhakta (Matua devotee)

irrespective of rank and position the bonds and patronage still prevail. The bhaktas expressed unquestionable loyalty to Baroma Binapani Devi.

This study indicates a pattern in which one type of network got prominence in the sectarian life of Matua Mahasangha for about a decade (till Kapilkrishna Thakur). Afterwards, that prominence was eclipsed by family feuds. Presently less-dominant networks remain more effective. Ideological issues are now matter of secondary importance despite the fact that in its official journal (*Matua Mahasangha Patrika*) ideological underpinning is highlighted with top priority.

### **5.5. Multilayered Complex Networking in Mahasangha**

There are some key personalities, who have formal networks and relations with other individuals and institutions. These personalities include prominent family members, ex-bureaucrat, politicians and others having their own networks and shared common interests. They often use Thakurbari lobby for vested interests and vice-versa. As power centres, they also serve to mobilise dissenters for expressing dissent.

Presently Matua Mahasangha is a multilayered body and encircled with complex networks of informal groups, with family members at the centre. Exercise of power in Mahasangha has been marked by

the fact that it has now to a great extent run informally and personally. It was found that family members of Mahasangha keep themselves engaged in inner conflicts with other members to gain better favour from the ruling government and political party in power and thereby to achieve greater control over Matua Mahasangha.

Many family members and close key personalities preferred to take advantage of their relationship with influential political persons and in getting the things done. Now personal influence and connection have become so important that there is an apprehension among the Matua bhakta and sect leader that nothing can be accomplished without regular sectarian activities and protest.

Owing to the partial collapse of authority structure some influential members within the Sangha, run a parallel mechanism. Such people meet once a week or month to discuss and pursue their matters of interest. Such networks of parallel arrangement sometimes encompass and overlap organisational rules and regulations as observed by family members of Matua Mahasangha. Such a group often takes major political or organisational decisions through which rivalries and faction percolate. However, majority of bargaining, negotiation and decision making take place at Thakurbari Mandir premises.

Apart from such a parallel arrangement, a small number of prominent individuals are playing a key leadership role in Matua sampradaya for the last two and half decades. Personally, they are quite familiar with most of the Matua bhakta. Even organisation shows reverence for them. But some of them are not well accepted by the organisation rather identified as deviant teacher of Matua Mahasangha. Normally such people do not adhere to the organisational rules and institutional directives. These groups of *Gosain* live in different places but exert considerable influence over the common devotees and act as preservers of Matua dharma through autonomous kind of existence. But the new generation is less inclined to accept the *Gosain* culture that forms the base of the theocracy. The new generation is ready to take sectarian identity but mainly for political gain.

#### **5.5.1. Lack of Leadership Charisma**

During the field work it has been found that unlike Kapilkrishna Thakur (Second *Sanghatdhipati* of Mahasangha) Manjulkrishna Thakur (*Saha Sanghatdhipati*) has lost importance in Mahasangha due to his whimsical behaviour in Sangha as well as in politics and thus he has been ignored by the dominant factional group in Matua Mahasangha. Being a victim of political bargaining and political indecision, he has been branded as indecisive, lacking charisma,

having less religious credentials in contrast to his father and elder brother.

He was an MLA, elected from the Gaighata constituency in the 2011 West Bengal state assembly election. In that election Majulkrishna Thakur stood in Trinamool Congress (TMC) ticket defeated Monoj Kanti Biswas of CPI and he had secured 55.58% votes.

When Manjul Thakur became a Minister of State for Refugee Relief & Rehabilitation (Independent Charge), distressed Matua bhaktas had found some hope and they felt that, age-long refugee and rehabilitation problems would be solved. People had very high expectations, perhaps they assumed that their *Choto Thakur* (Manjulkrishna Thakur) will do something for them. But actually, it has happened that Manjul Thakur became too arrogant and hardly he met any poor and distressed Matua bhaktas. When someone went to him with certain official problems (ration card and other) he sent them to respective official and did not take any steps to solve the problems, as reported by the *Sebayat* Gopal Thakur. Local *dalapati* Sanjay Biswas said that due to his rude behavior 'our *Choto Thakur* lost his credential and acceptability among Matua Bhaktas'. After demise of Kapil Krishna Thakur who was

elected in the 16th Lok Sabha elections from Bongaon constituency in Trinamool Congress (TMC) ticket, Manjulkrishna Thakur expected that following seat would be given to him or to his son he also expressed his desire in media to contest in by poll election.

But due to his lack of acceptability among the Matua masses, sections of Matua bhaktas stood against him and they had sent an open letter to Mamata Banerjee to re consider her decision to select Manjul Thakur as an MP candidate in Bongaon by poll election 2015. Mamata Banerjee sent Joytipriya Mallick (who was the MLA, elected from the Habra Constituency and present “Minister for Food and Supplies”) to *Baroma* Bena Pani Devi to know her decision in this regard. In closed door meeting with Baroma at Thakurbari , Mr Mallick said to the media that *Baroma* gave her blessing to Mamtabala Thakur to win the by poll election. Therefore Bongaon seat was given to Kapil Krishna’s wife Mamtabala Thakur for MP candidate.

Soon after the announcement of Mamtabala’s name in by poll election 2015, Manjul Thakur along with his youngest son Subrata Thakur joined BJP and resigned from his ministerial portfolio of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department. He accused the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government and party of functioning in a “whimsical” manner. He said that ‘No person with a principle can

remain in the Trinamool Congress (TMC). Mamata Banerjee is arrogant. She never lets me work for the welfare of refugees. She has no principles. After the Saradha scam, people are taunting Trinamool Congress (TMC) leaders. It was no more possible for me to continue in TMC.’ During the interview he also added that ‘My elder brother Kapil Krishna Thakur, who never wanted to join politics was forced by his wife Mamatabala Thakur’. He also added that, ‘my brother died an unnatural death not at our residence Thakurbari but at the home of one Sukesh Adhikary who is close to Mamatabala at Ballygunje and I asked for CBI investigation as the Matua bhaktas want to know the truth behind his death’. He said that they earlier voted for the CPI(M) but later shifted our loyalty to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) after Mamata Banerjee paid several visits to his mother Binapani Debi. He also accused that, ‘the Trinamool Congress Party is trying to divide our organisation, for that reason Mamata Banerjee is fielding my sister-in-law Mamatabala Thakur, as its bypoll candidate from Bongaon’. He also added that, ‘Mamatabala, who has studied only up to Class III, is a resident of Maharashtra and never visits Thakurnagar.’

Later on, Subrata Thakur was given a BJP ticket to contest from the Bongaon constituency against his aunt, Trinamool

Congress (TMC) candidate, Mamatabala Thakur. However, Mamatabala had registered a massive victory in the Bongaon polls with a humiliating defeat of BJP candidate Subrata Thakur.

The Lok Sabha constituency of Bongaon has seven assembly constituencies. Gaighata, where Thakurnagar is located, is one of these. The CPI (M) had put up Alakesh Das, and polled more than 4 lakh votes and it came second in 2009 and 2014 elections. In 2015, there was another by-poll after sitting Trinamool Congress (TMC) MP Kapilkrishna Thakur passed away, when his wife Mamatabala Thakur was elected. This time also, the CPI (M) came second, but with only 3.28 lakh votes, narrowly ahead of BJP's Subrata Thakur, who polled 3.14 lakh votes

### **5.5.2. Politics and the creation of division among the Matuas**

News which came out in *The Times of India* (24 January, 2015) mentioned that, 'Politics divides Matuas: Community Confused; *Boroma* Tries To Hold Flock Together', news mentioned that, 'Mamatabala Thakur had called a press meet at sridham in Thakurnagar, where Binapani Devi openly blessed her daughter-in-law Mamatabala, whom Trinamul Congress has declared as its official candidate for the Bongaon by-poll, and also said she did not have any relation with her son Manjulkrishna Thakur, who resigned as minister from Trinamool Congress (TMC) Government

and joined the BJP. A section of Matuas who were followers of Kapil Krishna group claimed that Baroma's blessings had "brightened" the electoral success of Mamatabala Thakur' (*The Times of India* 24 January, 2015).

The February 13 Lok Sabha by-poll (2015) was required due to the death Kapilkrishna Thakur. The tranquil and kirtan filled atmosphere of Thakurbari became tensed with at least 20 armed cops deployed in the courtyard of the *Harichand–Guruchand Thakur* temple. Some policemen sat outside the residence of Boroma, the 96-year-old Binapani Devi, the spiritual head of the community, guarding her in the difficult times'. The two warring contenders for the seat were the aunt and nephew from the Thakur family—Mamatabala Thakur, Kapilkrishna's widow who was backed by the ruling party, and Subrata Thakur, Boroma's grandson, whose father Manjulkrishna recently defected to the BJP.

The issue became complicated and left a lasting impact on every common Matua bhakta. 'There is no denying that Baroma has the maximum number of followers among the Matuas, but many of them are dissatisfied with the squabbles within the Thakur family and this might split the Matua votes', said Nikhil Biswas, a member of the All-India Matua Mahasangha and resident of

Thakurnagar. When reporters asked her about Manjul Krishna's defection to the BJP, Binapani Devi, 95, said, 'I do not have any relation with my elder son and my blessings are always with my daughter-in-law'. Asked why she was siding with Mamata Banerjee, Binapani Devi said, 'Because, there is no other option' (*The Telegraph* 15, January, 2015).

Later Manjulkrishna Thakur claimed his joining the BJP to be a 'mistake'. He requested West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee to forgive him and take him back into the party. In a press release, 12 May 2015, he said, 'Earlier I had applied to the party Trinamool Congress leadership to take me back to the party fold'. Irrespective of such perceived branding or propaganda of being indecisive, lacking charisma, being whimsical and having less religious credentials, Manjulkrishna Thakur still remains to be the central figure in Matua organisation next to the *Baroma*, particularly in religious matter, as mentioned by Sunil Das local bhakta in Thakurnagar. *Baroma* was often portrayed as being above the fray of any factional competition and conflict within the Matua Mahasangha, despite her support to Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal and chief of Trinamool Congress (TMC).

It is strongly perceived by some factional leaders that in Sangha, *Baroma* was referred to as an ultimate arbitrator as she wielded

unquestionable authority over the Matua Mahasangha and millions of *Matua* devotees all over the world. Schism and factions occurred out of a conflict over the issue about whether the supreme body would have the right to choose anyone from the family or get involved in direct politics? Familial disputes over the issue of supreme autonomy, authority and organisational tactics including the question of leadership made the chasms in different segments of Matua Mahasangha much wider. Such controversy acquired political overtones and factional feuds became a regular state of affairs inside Matua Mahasangha.

It has been found during the fieldwork that actual schisms within the Mahasangha obviously have their own particular cause in a particular source of discontent and specific occasion to demonstrate dissension by withdrawal. General theorising has been held back by the emphasis in the historical account on the motivation of factional leaders. 'If the notion of motive is to play a part it must be considered within the context of a discussion, about the circumstances under which such motives develop and translate into actions' (Bruce 1985:593).

In general analysis of genesis and development of schism, one respondent said that there is the heterogeneity of class interest, which is one of the preconditions for factionalism and schism. The

second precondition is the difference of interest between ideology and sectarian sustenance in adverse socio-political situations. This precondition is very interesting since the dichotomy between two contending alternatives creates a greater chance of internal disagreement. When the Matua Mahasangha was registered (1988), one could identify displaced regional identity and class position as two objective conditions behind the split in Matua Mahasangha.

The role of beliefs is producing different propensities to the schism which are intimately linked to those aspects of ideology which are concerned more with overarching questions of authority.

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 its actual practice.

Presently, 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, although both these

lineages and followers felt that they were supported by *Baroma* for real cause of Matua Mahasangha.

Indeed, the majority of followers mentioned that they originally supported the authority of Thakurnagar, because they felt that the younger brother Manjulkrishna Thakur had no reason to express dissent publicly against his elder brother's wife Mamatabala Thakur who later was elected as Member of Parliament.

In Thakur family, the general relationships with affinal and consanguineal kinsmen outside the household are facilitative and are available to those who wish to use them. Such type of involvement may be safely ignored although siblings are expected to avoid getting involved in such disputes publicly. Political understanding among its members is quite unknown to them. The strength of relationship among its family members varies along the amount of favour exchanged, and the notion of deceptiveness and frailty of relationship turns common among the core siblings of Matua Mahasangha.

### **5.6. Intra Familial Feud Become a Medium of Narrow Political Agency**

Due to intra-familial dissent, the identity politics has been narrowed down to an ugly family feud and struggle among siblings in Thakurbari. It all began since the death of the head of the second

Matua Sanghapati, Kapilkrishna Thakur, family feuds turned overt since Nov 5, 2014, when Mamatabala lodged an FIR at Gaighata Police Station against Subrata Thakur, much to the embarrassment of the grand lady of the organisation and Matua guru Binapani Devi. Mamatabala complained to the police against Subrata and his men alleging that they led the siege on her family and vandalised Thakurbari. She also complained that Subrata Thakur threatened her family of dire consequences.

Several others from Thakurbari joined Kapil's family and staged a demonstration in front of the police station demanding immediate arrest of Subrata Thakur and his associates. Subrata Thakur, on the other hand, dubbed the complaint as a conspiracy hatched by his aunt Mamatabala Thakur and some others to evict him from Thakurbari and to malign his image in order to ensure that he is denied a Trinamool ticket from Bongaon. At the root of this rivalry was nothing but personal ambition using the devotion and loyalty of the Matuas. It was the Trinamool Congress (TMC) that first used the Matua card successfully, while the Left made a futile attempt to reach that. Now with the BJP gaining prominence, Thakurbari aspirants are free to choose but the Trinamool cannot afford a division in the Matua vote bank in the Bongaon by-poll, said Raju Singh. Therefore, the fight for Matua votes has also caused a split

in the community. Two clear-cut cleaved factions thus emerged within the family domain.

Mamatabala Thakur claimed that since her husband Kapil krishna's death, Manjul krishna Thakur and his younger son Subrata Thakur, were trying to take hold of her property. She also charged that Manjulkrishna and Subrata demanded a vast portion of the donations at the *Harichand Thakur* temple. When Manjulkrishna Thakur was questioned if his mother's blessing remains with his sister-in-law to an extent that would affect the chances of Subrata to win if he is nominated as a BJP candidate? Manjulkrishna's reply was 'my mother is aged and some people are trying to influence her but I believe that my mother will bless her grandson too if he is made the candidate' (*The Times of India* 16, January, 2015). On the other hand, 'K. D. Biswas, who had contested on a BJP ticket in the earlier (2014) Lok Sabha poll from Bongaon and came third by votes casted to him, said Matua devotees will show their anger if a member of the Thakur family was made the party candidate' (*The Telegraph*. 15, January, 2015).

Manjulkrishna Thakur was a minister in the cabinet of Trinamool government till he joined BJP along with his son Subrata. "During the last Parliamentary elections, the Gaighata Assembly segment gave Trinamool 21,700 more votes than the BJP. Quite a slim

margin even under the nationwide BJP wave, I think that the ruling party might actually get unsettled”, said Kamal Ghosh, a member of the Matua Mahasangha. The BJP candidate against Kapilkrishna Thakur was K D Biswas, who had got quite an impressive 2.44 lakh votes and his party showed a growth of nearly 16%. The candidate of BJP’s advent has not convinced the Matuas completely. Right from the time of Boroma’s husband, P R Thakur, who was a Congress MP and minister, the two crore Matuas have been demanding for their elusive citizenship rights. “For 67 years, the Matuas have suffered. There is no time to waste further. If the Citizenship Act of 2003 is not revised now, we will be pushed back by another five years”, said Ujjal Biswas, a dissenting member of Matua Mahasangha.

‘It’s routine for candidates to raise this issue up during elections, but, will Delhi understand that most of us are not eligible for even a domestic cylinder connection, a ration card or a BPL card’, said Samar Pal. ‘We are calling it a *‘Kala kanoon’* and need it repealed, but, we are not sure if these members of Thakurbari will do anything about it. They are only switching political affiliations for personal gains’, said Pratik Samanta.

The parliamentary poll results (2019) thus provide an agenda for political action to rework the existing relations of power in Bengal

politics and society which the Trinamool Congress's proposed development programmes did not accomplish. Identity politics and community solidarity for the reason of common cause were regarded as an important source to analyse recent poll results in Bongaon and other places like Nadia, 24 Parganas etc.

On 26 March 2019, the BJP released its tenth list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha polls. They mentioned Shantanu Thakur as the party's choice for the Bongaon constituency in West Bengal. Shantanu is the grandson of Binapani Devi. On 2 February, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started his campaign for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls from Thakurnagar, a part of Bongaon constituency. Before addressing the gathering, Narendra Modi met Binapani Devi. On March 5, Binapani Devi passed away at SSKM Hospital in Kolkata. Even before her funeral pyre Baroma was dragged into a political scuffle between her heirs with separated political loyalties.

Boroma passed away on Tuesday, March 5 and since Wednesday morning, there was a conflict in the community about when their beloved matriarch will be cremated. A section of devotees and followers of Mamatabala preferred to perform the last rites on Wednesday but the younger son of Boroma, Manjul Krishna Thakur, wished that it should be performed on Thursday as

hundreds of followers who reside outside the state were on their way to reach Thakurnagar to see her for the last time. A series of meetings led by the members of the All India Matua Mahasangha, Gosais and devotees were held to resolve the dispute and finally, it was decided that the last rites of Boroma would be held on Thursday morning. Expressing grief at her passing away, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the Matua leader as ‘an icon of our times’. He also recalled his visit to Thakurnagar to seek the blessings of the Matua matriarch in February 2019. ‘Boro Ma Binapani Thakur was an icon of our times. A source of great strength and inspiration for several people, Boroma’s rich ideals will continue to influence generations. Her emphasis on social justice and harmony will never be forgotten, last month, I had the honour of seeking the blessings of Boro Ma Binapani Thakur at Thakurnagar. I will always cherish the interaction I had with her. We stand in solidarity with the Matua community in this hour of sadness’ (Twitter, Narendra Modi, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2018). Mamata Banerjee, expressed her condolences and announced a state-funeral with gun salute for the departed matriarch. ‘I am deeply pained at passing away of Matua matriarch Boro Ma Binapani Thakur. My condolences to her family & my brothers & sisters of Matua Community at this moment of grief. It was a great

opportunity for me to meet Boro Ma last November, on the centenary of her birthday,' (Twitter, Mamata Official, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2018).

The Matua matriarch had been the sole unifying factor for the sect, but after her demise her household appears to be conflict-ridden. The friction within the family widened and the political stance of the community has become permanent factor. Boroma's grandson Shantanu has openly spoken against and blamed his aunt and Trinmool Congress (TMC) leaders for the death of Binapani Devi. Responding to the allegation, the Bongaon MP and Binapani Devi's daughter-in-law told local media, "In an attempt to grab power, Shantanu Thakur is politicising Boro Ma's death." The two warring factions live in the same compound but in different houses they had performed the *Sradha* (last rites ceremony) differently. Mamata Bala claims it was Binapani Devi who herself had appointed her to carry on with the work of the Mahasangha.

Shantanu has publicly said that he will never "contest elections." He even campaigned for "politics free Thakur family" and said he will work for the betterment of the Matua community but will never play "any role in electoral politics."

What makes the situation attention-grabbing is that both Mamatabala Thakur and Shantanu Thakur factions know that they will be able to exert political clout and be attractive to political powers only if they can control the Matua Mahasangha, over which Binapani Devi held sway.

After the BJP announced Shantanu's name, he mentioned "The Matua community demanded that I should contest the Lok Sabha election. Only for them I made a decision to contest from Bongaon." Shantanu opined that the community felt disappointed by Mamatabala Thakur's work, as she has been working against the Matua community. "She has finished the movement of immigrants, which is the foundation of the Matua community." Arabindo Biswas, spokesperson for the All India Matua Mahasangha, said that to save the Matua community, Shantanu would be contesting in the election. "Matuas feel that someone should represent the community at the floor of parliament and there is no better one than Shantanu Thakur," Biswas said. "His (Shantanu Thakur's) decision to contest election proves that all these years he has just lied. People are watching and they will answer on Election Day," Mamatabala Thakur mentioned.

Not everyone in the Mahasangha shared the sentiments of Shantanu Thakur, but he did represent the dominant view. The political campaign in Thakurnagar was centred on two major issues: justification of Citizenship Amendment Bill 2003 and depoliticisation of the Matua Mahasangha, making it free from the grip of the ruling party Trinamool Congress (TMC)).

The rift ultimately led to a division within the masses and split them into three warring factions. The majority being anti-ruling party and desirous of achieving higher political gain through BJP as they have been advocating core issues of citizenship right, which the Matua community has aspired for long. The others were divided into two groups: one in favour of the ruling party Trinamool Congress (TMC) and against any form of involvement from Manjulkrishna Thakur's family. The other one, the smaller one, wanted to depoliticise the Matua Mahasangha, making it free from all sorts of political involvement and interventions. During the political campaign for parliamentary election 2019, they had decided to stay away from both BJP and Trinamool Congress (TMC). Poll results showed that Shantanu Thakur had secured 48.85% vote compared to 40.92% by his aunt Mamatabala Thakur. In Lok Sabha polls, Shantanu Thakur appeared to have

taken an upper hand in the election by winning the Bongaon seat, where the Matuas form 67% of the voters.

Poll results reflected that a major section of Matua masses may have wanted to secure their citizenship rights prior to securing any other developmental goals for the larger Matua population. Development alternative for the Matua people, as forecasted by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, hardly made any dent among the distressed Matua population, to whom citizenship right became a prime concern.

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) issue intensified an existing political break up among members of the community. Two Matua factions owing adherence to the Bharatiya Janata Party and Trinamool clashed publicly on 3 October 2019, Wednesday, when they went to organise rival NRC-related campaigns at Thakurnagar. Faction based persisting tussle is now going on in manifesting itself in the NRC issue. The quarrel started in front of the '*Naat Mandir*' when Shantanu Thakur was organising a pro-NRC campaign.

A group led by Mamatabala Thakur and her associate Sukriti Ranjan Biswas also started campaigning against the NRC in the same place. In an interview, Mamatabala Thakur said that 'her purpose was to raise the voice in opposition to the NRC and we

want to make sure that the Matua community is completely aware of this NRC issue because many may be susceptible to the problem arising out of it'. Shantanu Thakur said that, 'we wanted to clear all misunderstanding that may relate with NRC'. He claimed, 'the rival faction was deliberately misguiding the Matua People and as a result of clash police were sent to Thakurbari at *Natmandir* courtyard to restrain the conflicts'.

Spokesperson of the All India Matua Mahasangha, Arabinda Biswas, said that, 'this unwanted incident was an attempt by Mamatabala Thakur to malign MP Shantanu Thakur's image and try to politicise platform of Matua Mahasangha that may badly affect our age long demand of Citizenship right'. He also clarified that, 'though we respect Mamatabala Thakur because she is a member of the Thakur family but she is implicated in a bad conspiracy against Mahasangha and Shantanu Thakur'. Both factions asserted they had filed complaints at local Police Station.

Sukriti Ranjan Biswas, first rank leader of Mamatabala's faction and president of the Joint Action Committee for Bengali Refugees (JACBR), pointed out that 'provisions of the CAA 2019 caused the problems for Hindu Refugees. Clause 2.1(b) and 3(c) of the 2019 Act has made it possible to identify first hand refugees as "illegal

migrants” and secondly disenfranchise their children born on Indian soil. Section 14(a), created by the same amendment, rationalised the process of mandatory registration of citizens, which was till then limited to the state of Assam’. Biswas also remembers his participation in protest movement at Kendrapara in Thakurnagar, two weeks after the first hunger strike held by the Matua community against CAB 2003. Over the subsequent 15 years, the community has led several agitations demanding citizenship, including a hunger strike in Delhi in 2011 and another one in Kolkata in 2015. In 2014, the JACBR had also filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court demanding full scraping of unconditional citizenship.

In an interview Sataur Modak, who is presently the Secretary of Mamatabala Thakur and earlier was a close associate of Manjulkrishna Thakur, said that, ‘Modi did not remember the displaced people throughout his tenure and then started running to Thakurnagar when the Lok Sabha polls 2019 were around the corner. Instead of solving existing problems he multiplied problems through the NRC. Now, he is spreading lies by saying the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill will solve all the problems of the displaced people, whereas it will be almost of no use to any of them.’ He also clarified that the ‘Bill will create great difficulties for

those who have arrived earlier from Bangladesh and settled in as they will have to affirm their Bangladeshi origins'. He adds, 'If this act will be implemented, no Matua will become a citizen.'

### **5.7. Conclusion**

This study reveals consistent changes in factional alignments in Mahasangha depending on issues of interest and disputes frequently arising between close kinsmen including siblings. It is because family bonds are multi-dimensional and quarrels between close kinsmen are often more intense than conflicts between non-relatives.

There are some important features which were observed during the fieldwork:

- a) A sporadic factional congregation which is generally common within Mahasangha, is formed spontaneously when family members from Thakurbari suffer from strong emotions and without proper planning take their grievances and demand to the streets to vent out their anger.
- (b) Sectarian ideology-based congregations are rarely seen and are mostly episodic.

(c) Political issue based congregations are quite common and have clear-cut articulations that may represent the interest of the primary organisation.

(d) Small associational groups are explicitly formed within Mahasangha with members other than the family members overtly to represent the interests of Matua Mahasangha.

(e) Faction is an integral part of Matua Mahasangha. Localised interest is the prime cause for which the factions arise and persist.

(f) Each faction performs like a quasi-group and may dissolve if the goal of group formation is achieved.

(g) Each faction has its own political stand and they have own point of view about the performance of Matua Mahasangha.

(h) Members of each faction maintained their relations with the faction leader through personal contact. Personal contact plays a vital role in sustaining schism rather than ideological differences.

The overlapping and factional nature of the Matua Mahasangha is a source of its very stability and survival. But it is also a recipe for gridlock because the multiple power centres and factions tend to neutralise one another. Paralysis is normal, innovation and strategic decision making is abnormal. The power blocks within Matua Mahasangha are widely dispersed, and the result is that the organisation rarely begets strategic decisions without first

consulting with the political agencies. That may identify a broadly recognised threat to the survival of the organisation.

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 that support this pattern. Structural bonds amongst the factional members thus tend to be thematic variations of the social structure of the enveloping group.

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## **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 prespective 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.

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## STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS SECT OF MATUA MAHASANGHA INDIA: AN ANALYSIS IN THE WEBERIAN FRAMEWORK

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Socio-religious consciousness based movement of Matua Mahasangha in first half of twentieth century and current socio-political aspiration of sangha, which assumed academic significance and became socio-political factor that to be reckoned and source of subjective understanding of objective reality of Matua Mahasangha in a new sectarian dimension of sociological discourse. Matua Mahasangha, is intimately linked with the name of Sree Harichand Thakur and his son Sree Guruchand Thakur. They have spearheaded the lower caste sectarian movement against the upper caste Brahmanic hegemony in religious domain and it was mainly instrumental in popularizing it in the lower eastern part of India especially in Bengal. In this paper, the Vaishnavite religious sect is examined in Weberian perspectives. It is not my intention to provide a complete descriptive account of every aspects of Matua Mahasangha. On the contrary, this paper probes into the sect in terms of one fundamental analytical perspective only: the sect-church framework. The sect –church framework enable us to analuse various aspects of the movement-its belief system, value system, ideology of protest, leadership pattern, modes of recruitment, organizational framework, instilisation and routinisation.

**Key words:** ideology, leadership pattern, recruitment, organizational framework

*Matua Mahasangha* is an organization of lower caste Bengali call *namasudra*<sup>1</sup> *matuas*, organized and constituted by the *matuas*. This is the highest organization of the *matuas* in India, vis-a vis the entire world; its proponent being *Sri Sri Harichand Thakur*, an epoch incarnate and his rightful heir and son *Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur*, who promulgated *matua*'s religious discourse, work ethics and ideology to popularized and expand its scope among the masses. *Matua Mahasangha* is the only central organization or institution of the *Matuas*- approved by the *Sridham* Thakurnagar, Thakurbari, North 24 pargana. *Sri Promoth Ranjan Thakur*, the great grandson of *Sri Harichand Thakur* and grandson of *Sri Guruchand Thakur*, later on, became *Sanghadhipati* (organizational head). Immediately after the partition of India, in 1948 he brought a piece of land and established house in *Sridham* Thakurnagar, Bangoan, North 24 pargana, West Bengal, developed *namasudra matua* colony. Thakurnagar now become a major cultural and spiritual hub and preferred land for *matua* population in India.<sup>2</sup> In 1988 by the approval of the Indian Government *Matua Mahasangha* was registered as a socio- religious organization. Registration number is S/57349.<sup>3</sup> It therefore meant a symbolic return to the two iconic figures who represented the point of origin of the *Namasudra*

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social identity and their history of self assertion. As it once happened in the nineteenth century, the *gosains* and *pagols* the traditional preachers of the sect-once again toured the Namasudra and Dalit villages, organized *shanty sabhas* (religious meetings), sang Matua devotional songs and spread the messages of Hari-Guruchand through *Harijatra* (theatrical performances) and *palagaan* (musical performances). These days the MM takes recourse to more modern methods of producing CDs of Matua devotional songs and publishing booklets to disseminate the teachings of the gurus. Thakurnagar has become the spiritual centre of this new religious movement, as millions of matua devotees visit this place every year on the occasions of the *Barunimela* in March-a festival that was once celebrated in Orakandi to mark the birth anniversary of Harichand Thakur.<sup>4</sup>

*“Dalit and down trodden, all illiterate mortals*

*Live in abject misery till time death entails” (Harileelammrita)*

Matua Mahasangha strives to bring about an end to the abject misery in which poor and down trodden human beings find themselves in its objective is to provide education to illiterate, provide funds to penniless, lend support to weak and powerless. The *Matua Mahasangha* aspires to salvage the fallen by guiding them to the path liberation from the stringent customs of society. The main aim of the *Matua Mahasangha* is to spread universal humanity and fraternity till the vices meet their very end.<sup>5</sup> In terms of its religious philosophy, the Matua Mahasangha remains within the perimeters of the two texts which codified and textualised the teachings of the gurus: *Sree Sree Harileelamrita* and *Sree Sree Guruchand Charit*, as the constitution enjoins all its members to accept these texts as the most authentic representation of the gurus’ messages. These texts cannot be ‘changed, enlarged, added to or revised. Thus Matua has now seemingly become a religion of the book.<sup>6</sup>

*Matua Mahasangha* endeavours to work on the ideals shaped by Sri *Harichand* and *Guruchand*, substantiating these ideals in order to popularize Matua religious sect and its philosophy among the socially oppressed human beings. To accomplish this objective, *Matua Mahasangha* gives emphasis on family life and asks for religiously performing familial duties. While it must be recognized that collective worship with the family members is a vital part of matua’s family lives. Families should pray together, sing together, and listen *Sree Sree Harileelmritam*’s. *Hari nam* (name of *Hari*) will provides security, stability, wisdom, and maturation for family members.<sup>7</sup> *Matua Mahasangha*, through the practices of religious modernity is devoted to establishment of the ‘righteous State’ and irrespective of caste, color, religion, gender any one can absorbed in the organization.<sup>8</sup>

Organizational framework was conceived as a primary medium for fostering, renewing and expressing religious experience.<sup>9</sup> Further, organizational framework was design not simply for the purpose of obtaining benefits for the matuas but also

to enhance their as well as the movements combat- efficiency in the external world. Organisational framework is extended beyond the centre office. The fact that, branches will be established in almost all places, where matuas resided, and introduced hierarchal order of office bearer clearly indicate the bureaucratic setup and collective efforts for making sectarian awareness, which has been essential part and necessity of an organizational machinery to sustain sectarian zeal. It has been given that any form of inter-institutional feud; attempt to establish individual supremacy, deliberate disregard for Thakurbari and Central organization, may disrupt the unity within Matua Mahasangha. So it is imperative that every member of the Matua Mahasangha stringently abides by decisions and directives of both Thakurbari and the Central organization. Mahasangha stands for three important pillar, these are, centralized organization structure, iron discipline and unity within the organization.<sup>10</sup>

Mahasangha is characterized by a hierarchical pyramid structure headed by the *Pradhan Upadesta* (Chief Advisor) and *Sanghadhipati* (chief of the organization). All the power be it spiritual or political – followed unidirectionally from the apex body. Such posts must be fulfilled by the decedents of *Harichand Thakur*, no one from the outside will be allowed for holding that positions. Mahasangha functioned and operated resembles what we shall call term the centralized bureaucratic structure. Power follows from the centre the *Mukhoupadesta* is the representative of symbolic embodiment of divine spirit and *Sanghadhipati* shall act in advice of chief advisor, *Sanghadhipati* exercised the real constitutional power to operate the Mahasangha according to law enacted in Matua Mahasangha. *Sanghadhipati* carried out *Mukhoupadesta*'s advice and order to translating his power in action. *Sanghadhipati* is the official representative of the chief advisor and it is his duty to carry out the latter instructions. Generally he is in close contact with common devotees and general public. He guides and supervises the devotees as they go through their daily ritual activities and also observe their conduct in society. Seldom do the devotees get an opportunity to meet their prayers and grievances directly to the *Mukhoupadesta* i.e *Borama Benapanidevi* (i.e spiritual Guru of matua, she is daughter in law of Sri Guruchand Thakur, and subject of supreme order and reverence). For these matters are redressed by one or other of the intervening functionaries. As it has been stressed in constitution that, a religious organization likes the Matua Mahasangha cannot be run smoothly without proper respect shown to *Sanghadhipati* and *Mukhoupadesta* as well as harmonious bonding of love and affections among the members.<sup>11</sup> Any man and women irrespective of caste, colour following Matua Mahasangha's constitution, events and instructions and abiding by the Matua religious philosophy, work ethics, ideology, and actively participating in their outreach, paying regular membership and comply with the guidelines set by Central body, shall be considered as the member of Matua Mahasangha. Every member shall be part of one or the other unit and follow instructions of his/her respective unit and participate in daily

activity. For getting new membership person has to apply, to the Sangha's branch committee on appropriate form. Scattered or isolated matua devotees from different places, who are unable to create branches or facing various difficulties can directly collected membership form from the Sangha's head office.

As per rules regarding the membership and its allocation has been laid down in rules no 4, constitution of Matua Mahasangha that the head of the family who desirous of accepting membership of the Mahasangha can be included all of his family members in the prescribed membership form. It has been clearly mentioned that half of the subscription collected from one family shall be deposited with the central office and the rest half with the branch for their overall development. It is imperative on part of every Matua family to emplace a *Mangal Ghat* (well being pot) in the house and deposit at least one handful of rice in the pot before every meal in a day and with the amount collected at the end of the month should be sold and the portion of money received out of the sales should be used as subscription. Subscription either could be send through branch or directly to head office.

*Purity, true words, faith in humanity*

*One that posses these three gems, is close to divinity.<sup>12</sup>*

Being a member of Matua Mahasangha certain duties has to be discharged from the part of the matua devotees.<sup>13</sup>

1. It is imperative to all matua bhaktas's to maintain the highest ideals of *Sree Harichand* and *Sree Guruchand* in their lives at any cost. No other ideals will be entertained in the name matua. To maintain its sectarian ideology, devotees should be conceived that it is their paramount duty to make it pure the name of *Sree Harichand* and *Sree Guruchand*.
2. Women, man, race or colour, all members irrespective of their status of birth shall have same rights and must share equal responsibility towards duty.
3. All members without any hesitation must fully comply with the instructions of *Sridham* Thakurnagar, Thakurbari and the Central committee of the Matua Mahasangha.
4. Every member during the Sangha's meeting can express his or her opinion freely and openly. But the de cision taken or resolution passed should be observed compulsorily.
5. If the branch committee fails to come to a unanimous decision, they should inform the central committee in writing about such occurrence. The decision of the central committee in this regard should be considered as final and binding.
6. *Sree Sree Harililamrita, Sree Sree Guruchand Charite and Sree Sree Hari-Guruchand Charitra Sudha*, should be persuade everyday and regular

reading. Every member must remain informed about Matua ideology as given by *Sree Hari-Guruchand*.

7. In order to deliberate on the dereliction, failing and flow of any member's proceeding, action or function in Sangha's meeting, that has to be done in presence of that very member, and criticism of that member during his absence in the meeting shall be considered as slander. The accused member shall have the right to defend himself, speak for himself in self defence or abjure his violations.
8. Sangha's unity and solidarity have to be protected. For this members must speak truth with an openness and frankness. Nothing should be kept in secrecy.
9. Proper education has to be provided to children of every devotee.
10. The Matua must remain bound to one another in bond of brotherhood; no step motherly attitude should be seen in the behavior of the devotee.
11. The community should be diligently served the members must remain ceaselessly in contact with the community.
12. Any differences whether constitutional or official must remain confined within the central committee and has to be mitigated through the process of continuous dialogue. No person other than members of the Matua Mahasangha should be consulted in this regard. Any important subject or document disclosed outside Matua Mahasangha will be considered as an act of faithlessness or betrayal.

In regards to structural division of Matua Mahasangha, it has been claimed in constitution; rule no 7, said that Matua Mahasangha is a social service oriented a religious organization. In consonance with the instructions and approval of the religious heads of Matua Mahasangha (Presently Baroma Benapani Devi), there is a necessity to structurally divide *Matua Mahasangha*.<sup>14</sup> *Sanghadhdipati* (administrative head) and *Mukhoupodesta* (advisory head) are place at the apex. Next to apex authority, there is a central executive body and, under this nine sub committees are working in correlation with one another.

These committees are:

1. Religious department
2. Education and cultural department.
3. Social welfare and service department.
4. Socio-economic and social-political department.
5. Youth welfare department.
6. Department for women.
7. All India branch committee.

8. Regional Mandir committee.
9. Branch or homey Sangha.

Secretary of each department/committee is appointed by central executive body through the approval *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati*. It is laid down in the constitution that customs and procedures of the constitution has prepared in such a way that no kind of opportunistic, selfish and impious ideology can eclipse sectarian spirit of *Matua Mahasangha*. Since matua dharma is the religion to salvage the fallen and the downtrodden hence it is imperative that the department heads must obey basic tenants of Sangha as given in Constitution. The decisions and instructions of the central committee formed at the behest of the *Sridham*, Thakurnagar, Thakurbari, the Spiritual and administrative head of *Matua Mahasangha*, must be stringently followed by all members belonging to different committees can seek solution from the central committee if certain problems do arise and the central committee's instructions after reconsideration shall be final and must be carried out without fail. From the very beginning of the constitution, *Mahasangha* wants establish it full centralized authority structure over its sub committees.

There are some specific rules lying in constitution in regards to branch committees (see rules no 9)<sup>15</sup> as instruction from the *Mukhoupodesta* (advisory head) the head or secretary elect of the registered branch of all India *Matua Mahasangha* must organize after every five years, an yearly religious representative's conference. Chairman of each religious conference shall be either *Mukhoupodesta* or *Sanghadhipati* and instead of their presence nominated person can presided over the meeting.

*'Central rights of jamindari are useless; in holy place*

*Gonsai (friend) don't create different sects while in holy embrace'*

This message of *Sree Harichand* is used as a fulcrum to resolve aforementioned arrangements.

Rule no 10 in constitution has outlined functional aspects of central executive committee as which is highest administrative wings of *Matua Mahasangha*. This committee is order the direct supervision of the *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati*. The term of central executive committee is one year and members are chosen or elected through operational head of *Matua Mahasangha* e.g *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati*. This committee in *Matua Mahasangha* shall remain in charge of administrative responsibilities of all other committees or agencies.<sup>16</sup>

Construct the *Hari Mandir* (Temple of *Sree Harichand*) in different places is the tenth command or religious instruction as which is comes under twelve commands of *Sree Hari-Guruchand*. This *Mandir* will be region based. The *Mandir* committee will be formed by putting in collective effort as of the All India branch committee members, branch sangha and homey committee members following the instructions and approval as of the *Mukhoupodesta*, *Sanghadhipati* and central

committee. All members of the temple committee should be Matuas by religion and must be member of either the sangha branch or All India committee. This committee must be conducted in accordance with the constitutional rules.

To maintain its sacrosanct and religious goal of *Matua Mahasangha* under the guidance of Mukhoupodesta one advisory committee shall form, members in the advisory committee must be apolitical, highly educated and loyal to Sridham Thakurnagar<sup>17</sup>. It has been found that most of the cases selected persons in advisory committee are happen to be closed associates of Mukhoupodesta and Sanghadhipati. The Sanghadhipati announce the names of the members of advisory committee, along with the central committee during the annual religious and delegates' conference. This committee shall remain completely under the supervision and control of the chief advisor.<sup>18</sup>

Functions of advisory committee:

1. Members of the advisory committee shall act as aide and counselor to the chief advisor.
2. Members of the advisory committee must take all responsibilities of Matua Mahasangha and help the chief advisor I religious preaching and assist him in smooth running of Matua Mahasangha.
3. Members of this committee can take crucial duties of other departments of Matua Mahasangha and also be incorporated in to post of importance.
4. The most important responsibilities of the advisory committee shall be to preach and see the outreach of Matua religion throughout India. The committee's responsibilities and duties will be also on a similar line in case of International activities.
5. No member shall have right to start a different Matua organization in his own name.
6. Help the chief advisor in drafting policies through help and counsel.
7. Help the chief official in administrating the organization.
8. Draft policy for all organizational activities, interpretation of constitution and bringing in changes and amendment and addition in the constitution.
9. Managie and supervising the developmental assignments of Sridham.
10. To plan the travel itinerary (time table) of the chief advisor (Mukhoupodesta).
11. To tackle emergencies, the chief advisor and chief official can appeal to the members of this committee for counsel and advice.

Rule 13 in the constitution of *Matua Mahasangha*, has laid down functions of the all India branch committee, regional Mandir committee and Sangha branch<sup>19</sup>, these are,

1. All matua devotees, *Sadhu* (sage), *Gonsai* (friend), and all the learned and knowledgeable believers must compulsorily be members of any committee, subcommittee, departments or units of all India branch committee to the sangha.
2. The members must have faith, belief and respect for matua religion, *Matua Mahasangha* and Sridham Thakurbari. None of the members can be office-bearers of any political party.
3. Members of the branch committee shall be wholly committed for formation of new branch committee in their area. The branch committee shall act as a bridge between the devotees and *Matua Mahasangha*.
4. The functions of the branch committee shall also include encouraging all the heads, who have not yet managed to form new branches to constitute them and conduct them in the most befitting manner; news of all upcoming events in Sridham and keep a keen watch on all the activities.
5. The principal task of the branch committees shall be to construct the *Sree Mandir* (temple), all embracing in nature, in their respective regions. Besides the committee members along with the regional heads and devotees shall arrive at the temple compound at a specific time or on the second or third Wednesday of the month and actively participate in *Harinam Sangkritan* ( collective devotional song), lection and discussion of *Sree Sree Harileelamrita*, *guruchand Charit* and *Sree Sree Hari-Guruchand Charit Sudha* in order to create inspiration in the minds of the devotees and also decide on the roles and regulations for developmental activities.
6. The responsibility of appointing Sebayat (attendant priest) shall be at the best of the members of branch committee and sangha branch, at the instruction of the the chief advisor of Sridham Thakurbari and by the approval of *Matua Masangha*. An accountant has to be appointed by the sangha branch in order to keep the accounts of the said temple.
7. If any person wants to denote land or wealth for the construction of the embracing temple, the aforementioned wealth has to be registered in name of *Sree Hari-Guruchand* as *Debottar* (property belongs to God) property. The property of the all embracing *Mandir* cannot be registered in name of person or registration.
8. (a) An all embracing *Matua Mahamilan mela* ( matua religious congregation) or conference has to be organized at every level of state, district, block or region. Members of all branch committees should collectively form a festival committee and the name of the said festival should be *Matua Mahamillan* festival in place of Matua conference.

- (b) To organize this kind of festival, the written approval of Sridham Thakurbari and *Matua Mahasangha* is a must. With the approval of Sridham Thakurbari and *Matua Mahasangha*, the *Matua* devotees must not partake in any kind of festival.
- (c) If any invitation is wanted to the head of the sangha branch for participation in *Matua Mahamilan* festival, he must take cognizance of the fact as to whether there is a written approval of the Sridham Thakurbari and *Matua Mahasangha* for the said festival. If necessary, the head can collect the requisite inform from the central office of Thakurbari.
- (d) No approval shall be granted to any branch other than registered ones organizing the *Matua Mahamilan* festival.
- (e) The festival committee authority of the *Matua Mahamilan* festival has to be a member of the sangha branch or any unit. As a member of the advisory committee he can take local devotees as part of festival committee with approval from the Thakurbari and *Matua Mahasangha*. However they cannot be office-bearers of political parties.
- (f) That speaker that shall be invited to speak has to be believers in *matua* religion, respectful to Sree Thakur and loyal to Sridham Thakurbari and *Matua Mahasangha*.
- (g) The local devotees cannot collect subscription or distribute bill books in areas outside their region for the organization of *Matua Mahamilan* festival.
- (h) Devotees of every region, honest and upright young men, *sadhu*, *Gonsai* or others who are loyal to *Matua Mahasangha* and Sridham Thakurbari has to be invited for the *Matua Mahamilan* festival.
- (i) The festival committee has to submit the accounts of income and expenditure along with bill book to the central office within one month.
- (j) No bill book can be printed without prior approval of the central office of *Matua Mahasangha*.
- (k) The members of branch committees and sangha branches shall assist the *gonsai*, *sadhu* or devotee in preaching and outreach of the *matua* religion. But a watchful eye has to be kept on people who are frauds and in guise of devotees, so that they cannot harm the simple, poor devoted *Matuas*. The person suspected of being a fraud must ask to produce the credentials or identity card issued by *Matua Mahasangha* and see whether it is genuine.
- (l) Regional translation and interpretation of *Matua Mahasangha's* instructions in different states must be done in order to keep the

devotees from different states closely knit. Promptness should also be shown in order to translate the religious texts like *Sree Sree Harileelamrita*, *Sree Sree Guruchand Charit* etc in different regional languages.

- (m) Assist and collect donations for development of Sridham Thakurbari, organize relief funds in different regions and distribution of relief materials among the members.
- (n) The members of the branch committees and sangha branch from every section of *Matua Mahasangha* should endeavour to prepare a list of youth delegates and submit the name of two such delegates to the youth welfare department of the central committee. The Sridham and central committee can ask them to participate as members of volunteer group and be part of Mahasangha's activities.
- (o) If there are incidents of indiscipline, internal feud or indecision, the members of branch committee and sangha branch shall collectively strive to resolve the issues. In case of failure to solve those issues, the members can apply to the central committee in writing for intervention and instructions of *Mukhoupodesta* and *Sanghadhipati* shall be abiding and final in these cases of disputes.
- (p) Any conference organized without the approval of the central committee or Sridham should be completely avoided by the head and the devotees. They should also not give any form of donation or subscription for such conference.
- (q) It is forbidden for all devotees to participate in any political meeting or association with any form of musical instruments like *Danka* (trumpet), *Kashi* (Gong) or flag.<sup>20</sup>

Sangha branch or other homey sangha branches are the basic foundations of Matua Mahasangha.<sup>21</sup> Any sangha branch can be found with five members in village, town or part area. A sangha branch is usually constituted with the president, secretary, accountant and other members. A *Matua Mahasangha* branch is formed by depositing subscription, collected from at least five families, in the central office. Disorganized or scattered Matua devotees living in different places who is unable to form a branch organization or is facing various problems and hence unable to create one, can directly communicate to head office and can avail the opportunity to be member of *Matua Mahasangha* homey branch. All members of this sangha branch have to be matua in religion and cannot be office bearers of any political party.<sup>22</sup> All its members are required to fill an application form and are given a membership card with photo for identification. This certainly gives the idea of a modern voluntary association.<sup>23</sup>

The major mode of recruitment into the order of matua is adaptation certain conditions, prescriptions has given which need to be followed while adopting the matua dharma. Presently any one can adopt matua dharma, the restriction has removed which had prescribed that only lower caste people could joined in matua dharma. After the change of constitution 2005, any one absorbed in matua mahasangha if he or she has real reverence to Harichand, Guruchand, and Baroma, and considers them as real embodiment of supreme power in Kaliyuga. It has been considered that members of the Thakur family revered as a divine spirit and they must kept isolate from the rest of the community and they should not be counted along common matua devotees. Matua religion is the religion of *Bhakta* (devotees), *Sadhu* (sage), *Gosain* (friend) and *pagol* (frenzied in name of Hari). Along with the four major sub divisions as referred in Sree Guruchand charit, there is a another set of local congregational leader is called local Dalapati( leader of matua devotees in each area or villages). Selections shall be done by head office; they will select some names of preachers and *gosain* across the India and put the record the list of dalapatis in Matua Mahasangha. They are main vehicle to disseminate and propagate matua dharma in respective area.

Sree Guruchand Thakur had paid highest emphasis on education. At around the same time He too recognized that education can be the only way to uplift the degraded namasudra matua. Thus he begun the first school for them in 1880 at Orakandi and the first teacher of his school was Raghunath Sarkar of Dhaka (at present Bangladesh). Gradually he established 1812 schools altogether because alike the Phule couple, he too understood that 'Education, Wealth and Political Power' were the key areas that can help the namasudra matua to live a life of humans.<sup>24</sup>

It has been laid in constitution that *Matua Mahasangha* shall materialize the educational vision of *Sree Guruchand*, and keeping the educational policy at the top priority. In this regard one eminent educationist from Matua community will be given responsibility to spread the educational vision of *Sree guruchand* among the down trodden matua massese across the India. That assigned person will keep in constant contact with all the writers, litterateur, who are respectful to the Matua religion and choose from them couple o names and present the list of such names to *Sanghadhipati*. These writers and litterateurs shall engage in writing the biograph of the eminent devotees and their playful and glorious life. The *Sanghadhipati* in consultation with the central committee members shall appoint them members elect for the education and cultural department. The president, vice president, chairman, vice-chairman, sub-editor, accountant and other members shall be chosen from these member elects, inconsonance with the decision of the *Sanghadhipati* after consultation with the central committee members. The central committee members shall remain as chief supervision of the educational and cultural department. The principal job of this department shall be to establish school, college,

hostel for students in consonance, with the ideals of modern education dissemination of *Sree Hari-Guruchand Thakur*. The intent is to create an ideal atmosphere of an ashram for the ideal education of men and women. The aim shall be to pursue research, look for research related materials and information and outreach, drive illiteracy, educational campus for social awareness organize exhibitions. Encourage and help the young talented achiever, along with the distressed and orphans students. Adopt modern form of education for the outreach of *Sree Thakur's* name and fame.

*Baroma Benapani devi*<sup>25</sup> considered the highest source of power and blessed who is a living embodiment of Harichand Thakur's grace. So it is expected that every matua bhakta must pay unconditional homage to the *Baroma. Mahasangha* has two important tasks or functions, these are, preservation and propagation of doctrines, texts and literature, secondly formulation of codes of conduct and method of rituals, holding the religious congregation in order to keep alive the precepts and practices of the *matua mahasangha* as laid down by the founding father and his son. *Mahasangha* serve as store house and custodian of the matua religion and texts. The rituals evolved by the matuas and made obligatory on all members of the sect mark distinct change from those associated with the *Gouri Vaishnavism*<sup>26</sup>. *Mahasangha* professed the equality of the sexes irrespective of castes. They have univocally states that, all *bhaktas* of *Harichand* who used to pronounced *harinam* in *tri sandhya* (three times in a day) are equal in the eyes of God and free from any social bondage and prohibition.<sup>27</sup>

### **FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL WELFARE DEPARTMENT**

Matua Mahasangha considers that work is religion, follower must engage in work with name of hari. One engaged in rightful duties and frequently taking the Guru Name (*Hari Nam*) is actually participating and enacting the main mantra of the matua religion. As matua dharma stand for the family or it could call as the religion of the homey. Hence to participate in this homey activity monetary solving is equally important. A person who is economically solvent can devote himself for the benefit to and overall development of the human beings, society as well as nation whenever required. Engaging himself in the spiritual act and work of God no more remains a problem then. Hence to lead a comfortable and solvent life, the matuas have to be extremely worked efficient. A person who does not work will be considered as a blemish to the matua *dharma*. All the matuas have to participate in trade and commerce, in agriculture, administration, in the fields of medicine and engineering in order to keep the right pace with the greater civilized society. Action less spiritual life is an against the matua ideology and also a major impediment in its way.

*'Kindness to animals, penchant for good name and devotion to man  
All other actions are but banal'*

Love and kindness to other forms of life, love towards is an essential duty. To adhere to the aforesaid maxim of *Sree Harichand*, the *Matua Mahasangha* shall have to create a social welfare department. One of the members of executive, who is a social worker and a devotee, shall be entrusted with the responsibility of the social welfare department. He shall handover a list of names of people, matua in religion, social workers across India to the chief official of *Matua Mahasangha*. Member of the central committee shall be the chief supervisor of this department. One of the members of the central committee shall be the ex-officio secretary of the social welfare department.

#### **YOUTH STUDENT AND VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENT**

The youth student volunteer department shall be constituted with matuas who are devotees of the matua dharma, inspired by the ideology of *Sree Hari-Guruchand*, honest in character, and fearless and undoubted in action. The functions and activities of these volunteers shall include participation in different projects of *Matua Mahasangha* like superintendent the religious congregation, training the youths and students, rendering active service to the maintain a healthy environment of *Matua Mahasangha*. The youth student wing or welfare department shall be constituted in the way the other departments are constituted. A committee should be constituted in consonance with the decision taken by the central committee and the *Sanghadhipati* of *Matua Mahasangha*.

#### **DEPARTMENT OF WOMEN**

Department of women shall be constituted with the women devotees of matua dharma in order to fulfill the aims and goals of matua dharma. This committee is named as '*Shanti Satyabhama Nirvana committee*'. Though the committee is made for women but to administer this committee a man aged 50 years or more (married), a matua devotee and a man of honest character shall be appointed in consonance with the unanimous decision of all women members on the said committee and approved by the chief advisor. This committee shall be under direct supervision of the *Matua Mahasangha*. This committee shall be administered according to the order and instruction of the chief advisor (*Mukhoupodesta*) who shall be acting head of this committee. This committee shall strive to ensure self-determination and self-reliance of women and see to the expansion and outreach of women's education. Establishing night schools and manages them, resist dowry violence against women, slaying housewives, taking part in *kirtan* (devotional song), preaching of *Sre Thakur's* messages through *jatra*<sup>28</sup>, setting up cottage industries for orphan women, shall be some of the major objectives of this committee.

Rule number 17 of *Matua Mahasangha's* constitution has laid down the guide line of discipline and punishment, which are as follows-

1. **Warning:** Any action which is against Matua Ideology, done mistakenly or without knowledge by a member, should be taken into cognizance and in concerned member should be warned at the outset. Warning is first step towards the disciplining the members of Matua Mahasangha.
2. **Admonition:** in spite of repeated caution and warning, if a member commits the same mistake, it should be considered that person may lacks any serious desire to rectify himself or person may have some hidden motive or serious lack of capability. In that case the concerned member has to be admonished in presence of the members of the committee.
3. **Suspension:** Even in spite of several admonitions or it punished according to penal laws, or committing social crimes for which the Mahasangha gets a bad name, the member concerned should be suspended. Criminal offence in this case shall mean theft, robbery, hooliganism, snatching, hypocrisy, and defalcation.
4. **Expulsion:** Any action that is against Matua ideology like adultery, marrying in spite of existing wife, religious conversion anything which is against matua religion shall be considered in same according to law and one punished under penal laws for criminal offences shall be expelled in order to safe guard Mahasangha's interest. Defalcation of Sangha's fund shall also be expelled. Any person disobeying *Sree Dham Thakurnagar's* decision and instruction or slandering them shall be considered a crime which is fit for expulsion.

The procedural system of Matua Mahasangha id laid down in rule number 18. which are as follows-

- A. The chief Advisor (Mukhoupodesta) and Chief Official (Sanghadhipati) should be at the head of administration of Matua Mahasangha. Sree Guruchand Thakuris Matua Mahasangha's container and bearer. The members approved by Sridham Thakurnagar, Thakurbari shall take the posts of The chief Advisor (Mukhoupodesta) and Chief Official (Sanghadhipati), only members belonging to Thakurbari family and capable can take over the said post.
- B. Chief Advisor is a spiritual head of Mahasangha. The Thakurbari family as the essence of spiritual energy is also the repository and hence the major succor for the administration of matua dharma and Mahasangha. A spiritual person having the requisite spiritual energy from the Thakurbari family shall be considered as the Mukhoupodesta of Matua Mahasangha and he shall head the Matua Mahasangha. The Mukhoupodesta and his family shall approve of the person as the head of the Matua Mahasangha. Sanghadhipati shall be the true protector and constitutional head of Matua Mahasangha. To designate the matua *sadhu* (sage), *Gosain*<sup>29</sup> and *pagol* (religious fanatics) with suitable titles

and honour and distribute *karango kanthohar*<sup>30</sup> among devotees shall be under the jurisdiction of the Mukhoupodesta.

1. All committees, sub committees, departmental administrators and members shall be appointed in consonance with the order and permission of the Chief Advisor.
  2. In order to change, enlarge and amend the matua constitution, the Chief Advisor has to approve of the same and endorsed by the members of the central committee.
  3. All *Mandirs* (temple) in Sridham shall be under direct Supervision of the Chief Advisor. All donations in the form of money or other objects shall be deposited in the personal fund of Sridham.
  4. If any Matua devotee or devotees constructs a new *mandir*, only the Chief Advisor reserves the right to inaugurate the new *mandir*. If required his chosen representative can also inaugurate the newly constructed *mandir*.
  5. In trying times- such as natural disaster, epidemic, civil war, economic downturn, the Chief Advisor can use his emergency powers to ouster people who defies the Matua Mahasangha constitution, or resist self serving individuals.
  6. The Chief Advisor can choose one Assistant Chief Advisor (*Saha Mukhoupodesta*) from Thakurbari family. If he considers it essential.
  7. The Chief Advisor, if he feels can participate and present his views in any festival or ceremony of Matua Mahasangha.
  8. In absence of the Chief Advisor, the Chief official can officiate and take decisions if required.
- C. The Chief Official is the administrative head of Matua Mahasangha. All activities of Matua Mahasangha shall centre on him. All office-bearers of Matua Mahasangha shall be appointed on recommendation of and approval of the Chief Official.
1. The chief official shall be the head of the administrative i.e the Central Executive committee of Matua Mahasangha. He shall be the true carrier and bearer of Matua Mahasangha's ideology.
  2. The Chief Official according to suggestions and advice by the Chief Advisor shall appoint the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of the Matua Mahasangha Central Executive Committee.
  3. President and General Secretary, Chief Advisor and Chief Official shall approve all the members of the central executive committee.
  4. The Chief Official in constitution with the administrators and members of the Central Executive Committee.

5. He shall take cognizance of all the activities and information related to Mahasangha from the general Secretary. The general Secretary shall remain responsible to the Chief Official for all activities related to Matua Mahasangha.
  6. The Chief Official can directly interfere in activities of any department of Mahasangha and can take disciplinary action against any member of the Mahasangha. But in this case he shall of course take suggestions and advice of the Chief Advisor and Secretary of Mahasangha.
  7. In case of emergency, the official shall call a meeting of the central committee for detailed discussion and after permission from the Chief Advisor can take timely suitable action to deal with the emergent situation.
  8. The chief official can, with powers vested on him, can participate as the constitutional head during the constitution of all committees and appointments of the administrators and members. He can also advice, criticize and evaluate the activities of the committees and its members.
  9. If any person coming under the umbrella of Mtua Mahasangha anf starts engaging in offensive activities against the Mahasangha's constitution or participates in activities that are detrimental to the health of matua religion and Matua Mahasangha, then the Chief Official with powers vested in him can recommend of cancellation the membership of the person, to the Chief Advisor without giving the concerned person any right to justification of self. The Chief Advisor can investigate the whole issue and on finding suitable evidence can cancel the membership of the accused person or discuss with the members of central committee if required.
  10. The Chief Official can officiate as the head of the first assembly of the Executive Committee of the Matua Mahasangha. Besides he can also officiate in special meetings.
  11. The chief official or his approved representative can raise the flag or deliver lecture either in Sridham or in any Matua religious festival or ceremony.
  12. Through the help of the media the Chief Official can preach Sree Hari-Guruchand's ideals or principals.
- B. Central Executive Committee: The Chief Advisor (*Mukhoupodesta*) and Chief Official (*Sanghdhipati*) shall remain head of the central committee. The Chief Official shall appoint the President and General Secretary of Matua Mahasangha's Central Executive Committee while seeking advice from the Chief Advisor. Latter the President of Central Committee shall appoint other members of the central committee following the orders and approval of Chief Official and Chief Advisor. This Central Committee is the highest and single most powerful organization. All other agencies of Mahasangha's shall work

under this Committee. For convenience of daily activities, the central committee shall appoint members of the All India Branch Committee, Central Subcommittee, *Mandir* Committee, *Sangha* Branch Committee to work in unison on the state, district, block and regional level.

(a) Power and Functions of the President of Matua Mahasangha's Central Committee.

1. The President of Matua Mahasangha is a distinguished rank holder and one of loyal and devoted persons of the Chief Advisor and Chief Official.
2. The President has to be a believer in *matua dharma*.
3. He must have depth in and command over *matua* philosophy.
4. He must be capable enough to officiate in any *matua* religious congregation and speak on relevant religious topics.
5. He must have enough knowledge and ability to participate in critical dialogues engaging *matua dhrama* along with other religion.
6. He must possess ability to interpret *matua dharma* and *matua* constitution and besides he has to be an apolitical person.
7. He must officiate in all the meetings of the Central Executive Committee after its formation. He can call for an emergency meeting whenever it is required.
8. He can advice the Chief Official, if he feels that there is an immediate need to annual any organization or committee.

(b) The rank, merit and functions of the Vice-President of Matua Mahasangha

The Vice President like the President of Matua Mahasangha is also a distinguisnet rank holder, he can officiate the meeting in absence of the President and in case the post of President remains vacant he shall take all the responsibilities of the President and act accordingly.

(c) Power and functions of the General Secretary.

The General Secretary shall be important rank holder and loyal person to the Chief Advisor. The Chief Advisor and Chief Official shall take a collective decision to nominate him and he must be a person who has complete devotion and allegiance to *matua dharma*. To protect the *matua dharma*, *Sridham Thakurbari* and Matua Mahasangha shall be his main objective.

1. He shall implement all the committees, sub-committees and departmental committees of Matua Mahasangha.
2. The General Secretary shall be an apolitical person. He must take under his supervision the notice book of the Central Executive Committee, book of resolution, other documents and records; he should call for meetings of

Central Executive Committee and other committees in regular interventions. He should look into implementation of work plan, monetary transaction approved by the accountant; keep a regular check on requisite purposes. He shall present the record of the balance of accounts with the Matua Mahasangha in every annual conference and shall also present the detailed activities in a written report. He shall strive to construct *Sree Hari Mandir*, schools, all developmental works taking into confidence the President, Vice-President, Assistant Secretary and also other members. The General Secretary can keep his observation in any conference across India.

3. The main function of the Assistant Secretary shall be to help the General Secretary and help him all possible manner and to officiate in absence of the General Secretary. To carry the responsibilities entrusted upon him by the General Secretary.
4. Power and Functions of organizational Secretary: The Secretary shall advice administer and help in all forms of organizational and constitutional matters. If there is any confusion with the interpretation of the roles of the constitution, he shall try to resolve the raised problem in consultation with the General Secretary and Central Committee and shall also supervise and instruct the Secretary of the sub-committee. It shall also help the General Secretary in preparing the organizational report and advice the General Secretary to call for a Chief Executive Committee meeting.
5. Functions of Office Authority: The office authority must preserve the documents, and records, files of the Matua Mahasangha. Detailing the activities of the office, exchange of letters to the General Secretary and maintaining the Secretary of the office shall be main function of the office authority.
6. Power and Functions of the Secretary of Departmental Committee: The Secretary of Departmental Committee must act according to the instructions and advice of the General Secretary, Organisational Secretary and Central Committee. He can however implement work plan and see it enacted in his respective field.
7. Power and function of the treasurer : The treasurer shall keep records of the amount collected, and deposit it with the bank. He shall check the record of accounts every year and place it at the Matua conference and get it endorsed. He must obey the instructions of the General Secretary and act as his assistant.
8. Powers and function of the Accountant: The accountant must keep a check on whether the cash back is properly preserved, whether transaction of the money is in order and give suggestions and help the treasurer in collection and spending of through voucher.

General rules of Matua Mahasangha which has laid down in rules number 19.

1. Half of the monthly subscription collected by the branch members and the primary members should directly be deposited with the Central Committee fund.
2. All money collected in form of monthly subscription or monthly donation, one time donation by a person or institution, grant-in-aid of the government shall have to be collected via a voucher approved by the Central Executive Committee. No money should be collected without any approved voucher.
3. The General Secretary and Treasurer cannot keep rupees five hundred and rupees two hundred respectively with them.
4. The records, documents, files and necessary registers should be deposited in the office under the responsibility of the office authority.
5. The authority of Matua Mahasangha has to keep its own seal. Without proper seal, no letters for communication shall be considered valid.
6. If there is a requirement to file law suit, the General Secretary in consultation with the lawyer shall proceed to take appropriate action.
7. If the constitution needs amendment or addition it can be done in consonance with the order and approval of the Chief Advisor and Chief Officer along with the approval of 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the members of the Central Executive Committee.
8. The members of the Matua Mahasangha have to renew their membership in every year at the earliest. The membership has to be renewed within the month of January or February. The renewal fee shall be rupees one for one's year. The collection amounts to be deposited in the Central Office.
9. The main person of the family shall be accepted as the member of the branch. The main person shall include names of his family members in application and brought under membership. The monthly subscription of the family shall be fixed at a specified rate. Half of the subscription stipulated for every family shall go to the head office while the rest amount shall be kept with the branch for developmental purposes. Secondly just as every Matua family replaces the *Mangal Ghat*<sup>31</sup> in the house, they shall put a handful of rice grain in the container, before they proceed to cook their food. After the month ends, the amount of rice grains collected has to be sold and the amount received shall be divided into two halves one half shall go to the head office and the other half has to be deposited with the branch office. The scattered and detached Matua family who are unable to establish a branch organization due to some impediments can directly collect an application form and after depositing the filled up form can get the opportunity to be a member of the homey branch of

Matua Mahasangha. But in this case, the family has to pay monthly subscription at a stipulated rate.

No decision can be passed without the approval or consent of 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the members present in the meeting of the Central Committee i.e. Central Executive Committee. However in case of primary branch unit, decision can be approved with presence of 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the members. In regards to notice for meeting it has been laid in constitution that all India branch committee meeting has to be given before the meeting. As for other committee or departmental meetings, a notice should be issued 15 days before the actual meeting. The General Secretary shall call on meeting of the Central Executive committee with a notice seven days prior to the meeting. This rule shall be application to all forms of executive committee. At the end of five years tenure of the all India branch committee. A month's notice has to be given prior to the appeal for a religious conference. The Central Executive Committee on behalf of the all India branch committee shall evaluate the activities of the past and also present a written a document containing the future work plan for the next five years.

Instructions on ideals and customs to be followed by Matua devotees:

1. Sree Harichnd and Sree Guruchand should be seen as indistinguishable and inseparable in relation to power and grace, all devotees must see as identic i.e as Hari-Guruchand.
2. Persons those are in apex body are eldest decedents of Sree Harichand, they are blessed, spiritual embedded graced directors of Matua Mahasangha. All rights strictly reserved for the family members for steering the mahasangha.

All devotees of Matua Mahasangha shall be administered according to their order and instruction.

3. *Sree Harileelamrita, Sree Guruchand Charita, Sree Hari Guruchand Charita Sudha, Sree Sree Maha Sangkritan, Sree Sree Hari sangkritan* are some texts has to be accepted as conclusive records. These texts cannot be changed, modified, added or rectified. However information is made available, based on research, of religion that can be added to the main texts as adjust.
4. One who considers Sree Hari-Guruchand as his great teacher and who shall consider and accept the *Harinam Mahamantra*<sup>32</sup> as his life's meditation, consciousness, prayer and main means of leading a spiritual life and has immersed himself in the *Harinam Sangkritan* or has decided to lead his life on the ideals of Sree Hari-Guruchand Thakur shall be considered as a Matua.
5. The matua have no other teacher than Harichand. Hence no matua can be Acherya Gosain, Pagol or Guru. Because they are guides to *Sree Thakur* hence they are respected but not of the same status as that of Guru.

*“Matuas have one and only one guru.*

*He is Orakandi Prabhu one that is perpetual master of Khirod”*

*Guruchand Charita, 573.*

6. A person suffering from hyperdisorder or disease can submit his/her vow, *hajat* or donation directly to Sridham Thakurbari.  
*“Caution! cautio! O matua devotee  
Donation made to god cannot be given to robbery”*  
*Guruchand Charita, 573.*
7. *Acherya, Gosain* or *Pagol* can personally take obeisance from devotees. But that obeisance has to come from willing devotees.
8. All devotees have to be associated with one another unit in order to actively give shape to the ideals of Matua Mahasangha. In case there is no branch or unit in the locality, one can be a homey member of the Mahasangha.
9. The *Sarbojanin*<sup>33</sup> *Sree Hari Mandir* or personal *mandir* can be erected according to modern architect and process. There shall be a memorial erected in the *Sree Thakur Mandir* as indicative of the ideals. There shall be a victory trumpet in between two ensigns.
10. No except that of Harichand, Shantimata and Guruchnd, Satyabhama can be kept on the altar of Sree Hari Thakur. If someone wants to keep the portrait of father, mother inside the temple can be kept in separate place. However it has to be observed that the altar of Sree Thakur always remains on a higher platform. The rules of the mandir shall be applicable everywhere. The matua *Hari Sangeet* should be given the highest priority while singing.
11. a) *‘Jai Jai Hari Chand, Jai Krishnadasa’* this anthem has to be sung together in accompaniment of musical instruments during the religious congregations.  
b) During the ceremony, *Harileelamrita, HariGuruchand Charita Sudha* or portion of *Guruchand Charita* has to be recited followed by devotional songs.  
c) No person should enter into unnecessary utterance in the Devotional Song Specially at the time of *Kirtan*. During the religious congregation inside the meeting place smoking is strictly prohibited.  
*“Unnecessary conversation shall not be entertained in Mahotsav,  
Harinam should be song and staple of masses.  
Only name of Hari forgetting any form of rumpus.  
The only ambrosia shall be the name if Hari in cmpus”.*

*Harileelamrita.217*

- d) During the *Kirtan* and *Mahotsav* (religious congregation), the left side should be hosting the seats of men while the right should host the seats for women. As pace should compulsorily be kept vacant in between. Care must be take that there is no difficulty while paying obeisance to Sree Thakur and general greeting to all devotees inside all must take their respective seats.
  - e) During the weekly religious congregation devotional song like *Kirtan* and discussion should be between 9am and 12.00 and be concluded latest by midnight.
  - f) During the *Nam Sangkirtan* and annual religious celebration, many parties shall stay awake in night and take rest according to their respective turns while taking rest in between so as to complete the ceremony according to the pre planed work schedule.
12. a) *Sree Sree Harimandir* has to be emplaced or erected in every region either by regional branch with help from all sections of the society or in individual households in personal capability. The *mandir* should be emplaced in south west direction, with the door towards the west.
- b) Barring these four months of *Joistho*, *Bhadro*, *Poush* and *Chaitra*<sup>34</sup> the holy statue can be placed on any Wednesday of month in the morning. The entire night of Tuesday shall pass in continuous *Namsangkritan*.
  - c) The holy water must fill the container with one year of its emplacement. The date more than the day shall be considered important in this regard.
  - d) While replacing two holy statues, on the altar, in name of *Sree Harichand* and *Shanti Mata*, every statue or receptacle must be adorned with five mango leaves, coconut with ear, flower garlands and new *Gamucha*.<sup>35</sup> Sree Thakur's receptacle should be smeared with sandal wood powder and Shant Mata's receptacle should be smeared with vermilion. If required rice, meadow grass and *Tulsi*<sup>36</sup> can be used. The holy water in receptacle can be changed only once in a year. Every Wednesday, the receptacle should be filled with holy water. After emplacement of the receptacle, *Sree Sree Harileelamrta* should be chanted thrice in name of *Sree Thakur*.
- Ingredients of *Bhog* or offering meal to Sree Thakur
- i) Fruits, parched rice, sweets should be offered as according to capacity.
  - ii) Rice offering: Vegetable food or rice cooked in new brass or earthen container should be offered to Thakur and kept front to him.
  - iii) After completion of *Kirtan*, the food to be offered to Thakur before religious congregation should be offered to him for blessings and subjugation. After the end of subjugation the *Bhog* should be

distributed. But food cooked for devotees cannot be offered to *Thakur* and strictly prohibited.

13. For name and fame no devotee should resort to unfair means and cannot take advantage or steal from other devotees. Making devotees drink the water that has washed feet of someone is completely offensive and prohibited and is go against the *Matua Dharma*. No incantation can be given in the ears of the devotees.
14. No one should collect money from devotees to create personal wealth. money can only be collected in order to spend it on work of *Thakur*, social welfare or developmental work of *Matua Mahasangha*.
15. *Sree Thakur's* ideology should be preached according to religious deals and scientific methods as ascribed in *Sree Sree Harileemrita*, *Sree Sree Guruchand Charita* etc. no criticism of other religious incarnations, religious teachers or great personalities should be allowed. The main aim shall be to preach the greatness of *Sree Thakur*.
16. Special *Gosain*, *Pagol* and *Bhakta* or devotees shall observe the ideals of *Sree Thakur* with great care and dedication.
17. The photographs of *Sree Thakur* cannot be vitiated under any circumstances.
18. The *Matua* devotees must practice observance in consonance with the principals laid down by *Sree Hari-Guruchand Thakur*.
19. The twelve commandants as laid down by *Harichand Thakur* have to be observed with utmost diligence and great reverence. These commandants as follows-
  - i. Always speak the truth.
  - ii. Consider others wives as mothers.
  - iii. Show respect to parents.
  - iv. Distribute love in the world.
  - v. Do not discriminate against holy person of character on basis of class and caste.
  - vi. Beware of the six instincts.
  - vii. Do not malign other religions.
  - viii. Do not fall for fatal attractions.
  - ix. Emplace *Sree Harimandir*.
  - x. Work in hand name of God on lips.
  - xi. Pray regularly.
  - xii. Devote whole devote whole heartedly to God.

**Sree Promotho Ranjan Thakur** has offered another **eleven commandments** for *Matua Mahasangha*.

1. *Matua Mahasangha* is my life. If necessary, I can sacrifice my life for *Matua Mahasangha*. The chief attributes of *Sree Hari-Guruchand's* devotee is in keeping *Matua Mahasangha* alive. How can I consider someone a Matua, if the person is unable to love *Matua Mahasangha*.
2. A branch must be established in regions where at least ten matua devotees live. These devotees must congregate every week or at least once in order to sing spiritual hymns and discuss spiritual matters related to Thakur and *Sangha*.
3. Every matua devotee must strive for the best to support the *Sangha*.
4. Every matua devotee has to participate in Matua religious *Mela*<sup>37</sup>, on the occasion of advent of all embracing *Sree Harichand*, at *Sree Dham* Thakurnaga.
5. Every devotee has to participate in the devotee congregation at *Sridham* Thakurnagar for the *RasMela*.<sup>38</sup>
6. The main aim of devotee congregation thus *Matua Mahasangha*:
  - i) Create an ideal family life.
  - ii) Establish the power of *Matua Mahasangha*.
  - iii) Exchange the views.

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

7. When someone becomes a post bearer in the *Sangha* or becomes the leader in *Mahasangha*, all shall follow his orders or instructions; the *sangha* leader shall elect the next leader of the *Mahasangha*.
8. The leader of the *Mahasangha* shall be the only controller and decision maker. The *Sangha* shall be administered in accordance to the decisions he takes. If he so desires he can put into action, any rule or law, which is in sake of the general well being of all matua devotees within the *Sangha*.
9. The name of *Sree Harichand*, through religious preaching and welfare shall out reach the devotees.
10. The regional *sangha* shall be constituted with number of branches and all the regional *sangha* shall form the district, state and central committee of the *Matua Mahasangha*.
11. All matua devotees of *Matua Mahasangha* are close to my heart and hence no one should accuse one another. Everyone is brother to one another and bound by heart.

*"Do not accuse one another without knowing the essence.  
The internal conflict shall destroy every one's existence".*

*Sree Sree Harileelamrita. 226*

The institutional structure of Matua Mahasangha claims its control over the preachers as well as the devotees. They have asserted that commanding over the matua devotees naturally follows from the domain of the Thakur family. Thus the Mukhoupodesta is authorised to entitle the matua *sadhu, gosain and pagol* with *Chhota*<sup>39</sup> and any other title. It shows the power of distributing the baton of authority, the eventual authority over the *samprady* could be consolidated. Apart from these, followers of Matua Dharma in both rural and urban areas form local bodies to organise different activities in their localities according to their own desire and design and it is not necessary they may have close correspondence with central body for organizing such events. Often they may communicate and received the sanction letter or blessing from the Mukhoupodesta or sometimes they may not be officially encouraged to perform any sorts of religious functions. In reality the Matua Mahasangha does not enjoy the allegiance of all matuas. There are few other organizations function autonomously with their own objectives and having maintained no connection with Matua Mahasangha as such. Some times their relation with the Mother Organisation became too much strain in regards to motto Sree Hari-Guru Chand and activities of Matua Mahasangha. There may be many members of the matua sampraday who live their activities without much bothering about directives and organizational activities of Matua Mahasangha. However they have their own ways of organizing them at the village level, generally the most important activity for them in a calendar year is organizing a religious gathering sometime with in one month from the day of *mela* at Thakurnagar. In a locality where there are followers of Matua in good in numbers, they may form a group or *dal* to carry out the religious activities and congregation matua dharma.

Most of the cases *dal*<sup>40</sup> in locality bears the same sorts of structure as followed by Matua Mahasangha. Generally dal in a village or other locality is headed by *Sabhapati* or President and next to *Saha Sabhapati* and Accountant. The principal executive office bearer is *Dalapati*, who is expected to be senior with considerable known and faithful among the matua devotees. *Dal* acts as a consolidated group in locality and they supposed to meet I regular intervention, especially on Wednesday, which is the weekly congregation day of the Matuas. The congregation are organized either at devotees home in rotation or at common places.

### *Notes*

1. The etymology of the word 'Namasudra', which is not mentioned in any of the pre-nineteenth century Medieval Bengali literature, is extremely uncertain; colonial ethnologists like James Wise and Herbert Risely believed that it was derived either from the Sanskrit word 'namas' or adoration or the Bengali word 'namate' i.e. below or underneath. In the first case it would mean those who were bound to show obeisance even to the Shudras. In the second case, the word would perhaps mean a lower grade of Shudras, a status the Chandalas of Manu had gained promotion to. But these two explanations appear to be highly improbable in view of the new sense of self respect associated with the Namasudra identity. The different

synonymous of the Namasudras are Chandal, Charal, Namasud and Namah . In the census of 1901, at which caste names and caste precedence were scrutinized and registered rather minutely, the Chandalas of Bengal, who were otherwise known as Namasudras. Though the Namasudra people were considered as Chandal in earlier text of India, but that can't be authentically accepted. Because it is only Ballal Sen, then the Lord of Bengal considered the Namasudra people as Chandal and untouchable.

2. Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan. Preface. Pp-1.
3. Bandyopadhyay(2011). 'Csate, Protest and Identity in Colonial India'. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. Pp265.
4. *Ibid*, 266.
5. Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan. Preface. Pp-1.
6. Bandyopadhyay(2011). 'Csate, Protest and Identity in Colonial India'. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. Pp266.
7. These References are from the interview to *Matua Gosain*. During the Field work, December 2016.
8. Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan. Preface. Pp 2.
9. Bali, Arun. P. (2008) 'Organisation of the Virasaiva movement: An Analysis in the Sect-Churuch Framework' in Rao. M.S.A. "Social Movements in India" Manohar Publication. New Delhi. Pp. 241).
10. Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan. Pp. 3.
11. *Ibid*,
12. Guruchand Charit. Pp 547.
13. Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan. pp 5-6.
14. *Ibid*, pp. 6.
15. *Ibid*, pp. 8.
16. *Ibid*, pp. 9.
17. *Ibid*, pp. 10.
18. *Ibid*, Pp. 9.
19. *Ibid*, pp. 10.
20. *Ibid*, pp 13.
21. *Ibid*, pp. 13.
22. *Ibid*, Pp 13.
23. Bandyopadhyay(2011). 'Csate, Protest and Identity in Colonial India'. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. Pp 267.
24. Ruman Sutradhar. 'Dalit Struggle for Education: With Special Reference to Barak Valley'. International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR) Volume 3 Issue 12, December 2014 [www.ijsr.net](http://www.ijsr.net).
25. Matua Mahasangher sangbidhan. Pp-15.
26. *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, also known as Bengali Vaishnavism, is a mystical theistic tradition which originated with the advent and teachings of Caitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1533) in Bengal, India. The term "vaishnavism" refers to the broader cluster of Indian bhakti (devotional) traditions centered on the worship of Vishnu or any of his avatars or incarnations

as the Supreme Being. As a branch of Vaishnavism, the Gaudiya tradition emphasizes the personal nature of God and *bhakti yoga* (the path of union with God through love and devotional service) Gaudiya Vaishnavism gradually turned into through which upper caste rules took into grips in and orthodox trend became dominant as the brhamin *gurus*, sacred by threat to their authority posed by the ever-increasing number of lower caste converts, began to introduce caste rules and codes of differentiation. Ramakanta chakraborty. ‘Vaishnavism in Bengal’

27. Reference is drawn during the field interview from the matua gonsai.
28. A folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre.
29. A title given to common devotees or leaders of the Vaishnava tradition.
30. Chain for matua devotees which are made out of the dry coconut shell.
31. Vessel filled with water or grains for an auspicious occasion.
32. Great Sacred spell for deliverance.
33. The word *Sarbojanin* comprises of two words ‘*Sarbo*’ in Bengali meaning or all, and ‘*janin*’ meaning people so the word *Sarbojanin* means for all people. *Sarbjanin Hari Mandir* understands no restriction in respect of colour, creed, caste and class.
34. Second, fifth, ninth and twelfth of the months respectively in Bengali calendar.
35. Gamucha (also *gamocha*, *gamchcha*, *gamcha*) is a thin, coarse, traditional cotton towel found in India and Bangladesh that is used to dry the body after bathing or wiping sweat. Gamucha is the local term for a sweat towel.
36. A kind of basil which is cultivated by Hindus as a sacred plant. Scientific name is *Ocimum tenuiflorum*, also known as *Ocimum sanctum*, holy basil.
37. Mela is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘gathering’ or ‘to meet’ or a ‘fair’. It is used in the Indian subcontinent for all sizes of gatherings and can be religious, commercial, cultural or sport-related. In rural traditions melas or village fairs were (and in some cases still are) of great importance.
38. In the Bhagavat Purana and in the Vishnu Purana, the Rash Yatra of Sri Sri Krishna is mentioned. In the later autumn, Sri Krishna’s union with the Gopinis with Dance & Songs is expressed in the Rash Lila. Raas mela celebrations commence from the auspicious day of Purnima in the month of Kartik according to Bengali calendar
39. Chhota is the commanding baton carried by the leader of group within the sampradya, is a symbol of authority.
40. Dal is group, the concept of dal is important among the matua, Guruchand Thakur once commented ‘*jar dal nei, tar bal nei*’ it means people who do not have their own organization have no power as such.

### *References*

- Bali, Arun. P. (2008). ‘Organisation of the Virasaiva movement: An Analysis in the Sect- Church Framework’ in Rao. M.S.A. “Social Movements in India” Manohar Publication. New Delhi. Pp. 241).
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