

## **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.