

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 religion¹, 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).

¹ '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* tradition² (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

²Bhakti 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'³ 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.

³ *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

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*⁴ (teacher-disciple tradition) is passed on by a distinct model, in which someone joins a sect by getting a distinctive sacrosanct oral technique (*Mantra*⁵). 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

⁴ 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".

⁵ 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 Sangha⁶ 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

⁶*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 Bengal⁷ as well as in North Bengal⁸ for the sake of specific information; both the

⁷ 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)

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

⁸ 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, Verstehen⁹ method was utilised. Weber argued that an individual's understanding

⁹ 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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