

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 11th 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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