

CHAPTER V

CLASH OF INTEREST AND ACCRETION OF DISSENT GROUPS WITHIN THE MAHASANGHA

5.1. Introduction

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

The present study tries to find out how the members from the Mahasangha apparently take advantage of the existing structural principles of their organisation in the formation of political alliances for their vested interests. The presence of different interest groups within Mahasangha is considered to be a common marker that existed since the time of Sri Guruchand. At present these interest

segments are divided into certain groups, but may not always function as a stable body, as each segment can assume to be merged with others in a different situational context. These interest groups are dynamic in nature as they do not conform to any hard and fast rule and are not confined to any definite ideological or political plank.

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

5.2. Perception of Common Interest Developed by the Dissent Group

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

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

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

5.2.1. Context Specific Nature of Dissenting Group

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.2.2. Politicisation and Interest Articulation in Mahasangha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.4. Emergence of Disagreement in Matua Mahasangha

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

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

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

5.4.1. Development of Local Matua Community Psyche

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

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

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

5.4.2. Family Conflict Identified with Personal loyalties

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.5. Multilayered Complex Networking in Mahasangha

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.5.1. Lack of Leadership Charisma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.5.2. Politics and the creation of division among the Matuas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the case of Matua Mahasangha, ideology was a very crucial aspect for lower caste sectarian movement. But the verdict of ideological supremacy was kept aside when the question of earnestness and seriousness came into the path of its actual practice.

Presently, it has been observed that although faction membership was not identical with lineage ties, most of the people belonged to the same faction as did other members of their lineage, especially their brothers and first cousins. Factions and schism among the Thakur family began between two brothers. Later they turned into the largest faction in Matua Mahasangha, although both these

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.7. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faction within the Mahasangha is the fallout of ideological, philosophical and personality conflicts, among the constituent members which may or may not be necessarily economically or socially determined. They are identifiable in a variety of socio-political contexts. Factional structure denotes the role played by persons within a group and the psychological predispositions that support this pattern. Structural bonds amongst the factional members thus tend to be thematic variations of the social structure of the enveloping group.

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