

**Amlan Lahiri**

## **CLASH OF INTEREST AND ACCRETION OF DISSENT GROUPS WITHIN THE MATUA MAHASANGHA IN WEST BENGAL**

### ***Abstract***

*The proposed study aims to determine how the Mahasangha members ostensibly exploit the structural principles already in place in their organisation to forge political coalitions in support of their personal agendas. The existence of many interest groups inside the Mahasangha is seen as a defining characteristic that dates back to Sri Guruchand. Normally, these interest segments are broken up into various groups, but they may not always work as a stable unit because one group may presume to combine with others in a different situational setting. These interest groups are dynamic in nature since they do not follow any rigid rules and are not constrained by any one political or ideological tenet. They appear to be very adaptive in terms of their claims, demands, or aspirations. Matua Mahasangha interest groups frequently adapt to both the current socio-political context and emerging conditions.*

**Keywords:** *dissent groups, interest articulation, matua psyche*

### **Introduction**

The Matua Mahasangha, a Hindu Vaishnavite sect established by Harichand Thakur in the 19th century, is renowned for its dual identity: as a religious movement deeply rooted in devotion and as a vehicle for social activism championing the rights of the lower-caste Namasudra community in Bengal. Over time, this organization has evolved into a multifaceted entity, embodying both religious fervor and socio-political mobilization.

Central to understanding the contemporary dynamics of the Matua Mahasangha is an exploration of its internal factionalism, which has gained prominence in recent years. This study delves into the intricate web of interests and alliances within the Mahasangha, shedding light on how different factions navigate the organization's structure to advance their agendas. The evolving nature of these interest groups, marked by fluidity and adaptability, poses significant challenges to the traditional leadership and religious authority of the Mahasangha.

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Drawing upon insights from Oberschall (1973) and Olson (1965), this study employs a multidimensional framework to analyze factional dynamics within the Matua Mahasangha, emphasizing diverse interests and rational calculations driving individual behaviors (Oberschall, 1973; Olson, 1965). Through qualitative methods, it aims to uncover complex dynamics of dissent and adaptation, contributing to understanding the organization's transformation and implications for religious authority, socio-political mobilization, and community identities in West Bengal. Integrating Weberian perspectives enriches by examining organizational structure, leadership, and authority within the Mahasangha, using Weber's concepts of charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational authority to explore legitimacy and decision-making processes (Weber, 1947).

The sect being studied on this occasion is called Matua, and it is a part of the Hindu Vaishnavite tradition. Matua sect is known for its adherence to Guru Harichand Thakur and his biographical sacred book (Sri SriHarlilamrita), as well as its worship of gods and loyalty to its own philosophical viewpoint; those are all regarded as essential elements of the sect. Like other tiny Vaishnava sects in Bengal, the Matua sect arose in east Bengal in the later part of the nineteenth century (such as Balahadi Sampraday, Kartavaja, and Kishori Bhajan). It stood out from the other small sects because it originated from and was closely associated with the Namasudras' organised social activity. The group was founded by Harichand Thakur (1811/12–1878), a Namasudra Vaishnavite from the Gopalganj neighbourhood of Faridpur. Harichand Thakur and his disciples were "Matta" (absorbedly engaged) with "Haribol" to do virtue-based rituals while eschewing Vedic conduct and behaviour. As a result of their actions, Harichand's opponents—particularly the Brahmins and Kayasthas—referred to them as "Matto," "Mautta," and finally "Matuya." This word has been approved by Harichand Thakur. He stated, "Bhinna sampraday mora Matuaakhyan," which translates to, "We are a different community, specifically "Matua." The people who adhere to or respect his non-Vedic directives, visions, and philosophy are now referred to as Matuas. The cult developed its organisational clout and theological coherence under his son Guruchand (1846), when it became linked to the Namasudra social protest movement, which had its beginnings in 1872. The Matua sect established for its members a basic religion of personal devotion that did not require the mediation of a master, rejecting all Brahmanical ceremonies and the congested Hindu pantheon. They claim to be unique since adherents come from lower classes in Bengal. This organisation has never claimed the support of the vast majority of 'Hindu' people. 'They have, nevertheless, played an important role in the formation and spread of much of what is known as Hinduism.' (Bandopadhyay 2011, pp. 91-95)

The social structure of the Matua sect is very similar to that of clans and lineages. Parentage and filiation form the foundation of the power system.

Clan and family dynamics are crucial in sectarian activity. The process of passing down the guru-sisya parampara is done in a unique way. A person joins a sect by receiving a special holy verbal formula (Mantra), and the person from whom they get it becomes their immediate guru. However, he only transfers the mantra of renouncers to the receiver. The image of the renouncer is homologized with the divine. A crucial aspect of the Matua sect is the descent and filiation of disciples. The metaphor of descent's capacity of consolidation and the concept of fictive kinship are key terms and focal points of Matua Mahasangha. An essential subject for sociological examination is the significance of lineage in the Sangha's organisational structure. Since Matua Mahasangha's establishment, an extensive network of political connections has been evident. The putative structure of the Matua Mahasangha has taken on new form as a result of the overt and covert criticism of Brahmanic doctrines and cladistics in Bengali political development before and after the partition and in regional politics, in addition to the demographic preponderance of their significant existence. The Matua Mahasangha has its own tenets and organisational objectives, much like any other religious group.

### ***1.1. Theoretical Framework***

This research is based on ideas of interest groups, factionalism in social movements, and collective action. It also incorporates advances in political sociology and organisational theory, as well as important works by Anthony Oberschall (1973) and Mancur Olson (1965). According to Oberschall's theory, social movements are complex webs of interest groups that constantly establish, break, and reorganise their coalitions in response to shifting sociopolitical conditions (Oberschall, 1973). To comprehend the Matua Mahasangha, which consists of several interest groups navigating the organisational structure to accomplish different goals, requires a comprehension of this viewpoint.

Olson's theory of collective action emphasises how people make decisions based on logical assessments of their own benefits, which might occasionally conflict with group objectives (Olson, 1965). This lens is essential for examining factionalism in the Mahasangha, as members may put their own or their group's interests ahead of the organization's larger goals. It makes clear why factions cooperate or clash while balancing the interests of the group and the individual. The study uses qualitative approaches to uncover intricate dynamics of dissent and adaptation by integrating these theories and providing a strong framework to explore factional dynamics in the Matua Mahasangha.

By emphasising leaders whose power originates from their own magnetism, exceptional traits, and perceived divine inspiration, Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority advances this analysis (Weber, 1947). Characteristics of weak leadership, in which leaders who lack institutional support or administrative abilities rely on their own charisma, are explained within the Matua Mahasangha by charismatic authority. When charismatic

power wanes or is tested, this reliance on charisma instead than formal frameworks may provide instability. In sum, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive approach to analyze how factional dynamics unfold in the Matua Mahasangha, shedding light on the interplay of personal motivations, organizational goals, and leadership challenges.

### **1.2. Methodology:**

This study examined the dynamics of factionalism within the Hindu Vaishnavite sect of Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal, India, using a qualitative research methodology. In order to have a deeper understanding of factional conflicts, qualitative methodologies were selected in order to explore the individual experiences, motivations, and subjective interpretations of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study used a number of techniques, including focus groups to get opinions from a range of participants, semi-structured interviews with members of various factions, and document analysis of old and new sources about the Mahasangha. Participant observation at political and religious gatherings also helped to shed light on the internal conflicts inside the organisation. Triangulation employed several data sources to assure the dependability of findings, and thematic and narrative analyses were employed to discern recurrent themes and analyse participant narratives (Flick, 2014; Riessman, 2008). Informed consent, participant anonymity, confidentiality, and other ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study

### **Clash of interest and accretion of dissent groups within the Matua Mahasangha:**

Clash of interest and accretion of dissent groups within the Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal among its member has been considered as a faction, which has been constituted either informally or formally within the Mahasangha. The nature and dynamics of factional rivalry within Mahasangha have been noted to be a phenomenon that frequently transcends official boundaries.

The process that leads to the creation of long-lasting warring groups is known as factional genesis. 'Internal opportunities, external threats, and objective or perceived economic, social, and political interests are among the variables linked together by an originating process' (Rastogi 1970, p. 14).

This study attempts to investigate how Mahasangha members appear to exploit the organisational structure to build political coalitions that serve their own 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.

The factional conflicts within the Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal are a significant phenomenon that often transcends formal organizational boundaries. According to Anthony Oberschall's framework on social movements, these movements are complex amalgamations of various interest groups that continuously form, dissolve, and realign their alliances in response to prevailing socio-political contexts (Oberschall, 1973, p. 6). This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics within the Mahasangha, where multiple interest groups maneuver within and around the organizational structure to achieve their objectives. Faction within the Mahasangha, predominantly composed of younger members, seeks to modernize the organization's communication strategies and outreach efforts to attract a broader youth demographic. This faction might face resistance from older, more conservative factions concerned about preserving traditional practices and values within the community.

An interplay between perceived threats, internal possibilities, and a range of economic, social, and political interests leads to the establishment of long-lasting warring groups inside the Mahasangha. The presence of different interest groups within the Mahasangha has been a common characteristic since the time of Sri Guruchand. These groups, however, do not always function as stable entities; rather, they are dynamic and can merge or separate based on situational contexts. This flexibility in their development and operation is consistent with Oberschall's idea that social movements are dynamic networks with diverse interests, rather than monolithic entities. Mancur Olson's theory of collective action provides a critical lens for analyzing the behavior of individuals within these interest groups. Olson posits that individual's act based on rational calculations of personal benefit, which can sometimes conflict with the collective good (Olson, 1965, p. 8). This insight is vital for understanding the factionalism within the Mahasangha, where members might prioritize their personal or subgroup interests over the organization's broader goals. This behavior often leads to collaboration or conflict among factions as they navigate the trade-offs between individual benefits and collective goals. The interest groups within the Mahasangha are dynamic, as they do not conform to rigid ideological or political rules and are not confined to definite planks. They exhibit a high degree of adaptability, modifying their claims, demands, and objectives in response to the existing socio-political environment and emerging circumstances. This adaptability ensures the survival and influence of these factions, allowing them to remain relevant and effective in navigating internal and external challenges.

### ***2.1. Beyond the Directives: Negotiation and Influence within the Mahasangha***

Within the Mahasangha, small groups of dissenting members strategically influence the organization. These groups, driven by shared interests, hold meetings to rally support for causes they deem important. This fosters a common understanding and agreement on how to pursue collective goals, even if it goes beyond the directives of the Mahasangha's central authority. These dissenting members, who consider themselves the Mahasangha's intelligentsia, plan campaigns that involve lobbying political parties, media, and other influencers. They carefully weigh the costs and benefits before taking action. Similar to social movements described by Oberschall (1973, p. 5), these groups adapt and evolve based on the social and political climate. Despite their small size and unclear ideological distinctions from each other, their fluidity allows them to merge with other factions depending on the situation. This enables them to effectively challenge the Mahasangha's established order and influence its course of action. This phenomenon resonates with Oberschall's framework, which depicts social movements as intricate networks of diverse interest groups that adapt and evolve based on the socio-political landscape. Similarly, within the Mahasangha, groups coalesce around shared concerns, holding meetings to rally support for their causes. These activities cultivate a sense of collective understanding and pave the way for a consensus on how to pursue collective interests, potentially deviating from the directives set forth by the Mahasangha's highest governing body.

The dissenting members' perception of a shared interest might lack sufficient context. Additionally, the size of these dissenting groups is relatively small, and their ideological distinctions from each other are often unclear. This fluidity, however, proves to be an advantage. The lack of rigid ideological boundaries allows these factions to adapt and merge with other groups depending on the situation. This adaptability empowers them to effectively challenge the established order within the Mahasangha and influence the organization's course of action.

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

These dissent groups are very much contextual in nature. Imagine the Mahasangha as a large community. Within this community, disagreements often run in families, creating a long-standing pattern. These family groups act like smaller social units, with shared values passed down through generations. The culture surrounding the Mahasangha also plays a big role. It shapes how these family groups think and behave, similar to how unwritten rules guide a community. In India, the *guru-shishya* system (teacher-student) emphasizes complete respect for the teacher. This deep respect for authority can make it difficult to challenge established ideas within the Mahasangha.

Inner circles within the Mahasangha mirror the *guru-shishya* model. The leader has a close group of advisors and supporters who lack independent political power. Interestingly, even people outside this inner circle might act like temporary disciples on specific issues, despite the gap in status and their own existing followers.

A year after independence, Baruni Mela—which had its start at the birthplaces of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur in Orakandi village of Gopalpur, which is now in Bangladesh—was moved to Thakurnagar. Over 50,000 pilgrims, primarily Matuas followers, bathed in the sacred Kamanasagar tank, which is next to the Harichand-Guruchand Thakur temple in Thakurnagar, North 24 Parganas. The week-long festival was organised to mark the '*BaruniMela*' 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.

Olson's theory of collective action elucidates the rational calculations of individuals within these groups, acting based on personal benefits that may conflict with collective goals (Olson, 1965, p. 3). This is evident in the transformation of the Baruni Mela from a purely religious gathering into a platform for political mobilization, driven by the pragmatic interests of faction leaders seeking to leverage the festival for political gain. The initial reluctance of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur to exploit the Mela politically contrasts with his successors' strategic use of the event to enhance political influence, highlighting the rational, benefit-driven actions described by Olson. This dual identity of the Matua Mahasangha, balancing religious influence with political entanglements, reflects the complex interplay between individual interests and collective action within the organization.

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

The Matua Mahasangha has been undergoing considerable changes. It is taking on two key functions in two entirely distinct fields. Even though there is controversy regarding who should be the leader, the Mahasangha is still performing its basic function. It serves as a gathering place for families in the neighbourhood, focused on religious activities and ceremonies passed down through generations. This gives members a sense of comfort and familiarity.

The Mahasangha is likewise expanding and taking on new responsibilities in a completely other domain. It is increasingly involved in politics as MatuaMahasangha is playing a role of marginal political agent. This demonstrates that the Mahasangha is adapting to the changing environment around it, and it may even alter how it interacts with those outside of the community.

The Matua Mahasangha is facing challenges with its current leadership structure. The ongoing dispute might be better addressed by creating two distinct leadership roles. One leader could focus on the Mahasangha's traditional role as a spiritual and cultural center for the community. This leader would oversee religious practices and ceremonies, maintaining the core identity of the Mahasangha. The other leadership role could be more political in nature. This leader would represent the Mahasangha's emerging involvement in issues like social activism or political advocacy. This separation of roles allows the Mahasangha to address both its spiritual duties and its growing political voice.

After the demise of PramathaRanjan 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 MatuaMahasangha. Intra-family rivalries and external political interference have intensified intra-group rivalries within the Mahasangha, leading to organizational factionalism. This phenomenon can be explained using Oberschall's framework, where factions within a movement continuously form, dissolve, and realign based on internal and external pressures. The reduced rigidity of the Mahasangha's organizational structure due to clashes of interest reflects Olson's theory of rational actions by individuals or groups prioritizing their benefits over collective cohesion.

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 MatuaMahasangha at present. The ideological narrations of Matuaism as given by Harichand–Guruchand and religious compulsion (as directed from the authority structure) became the main point for expressing dissent.

### ***2.3. Participation in Politics: Moral Obligation Sensed by MatuaBhaktas during the time of P.R. Thakur***

When P.R. Thakur founded Thakurnagar (on 3 March 1948) after purchasing the land from Smt. JanadKumariDasi, he was identified as the prime leader and soul of MatuaMahasangha in Bengal. Even though different groups within the community might have shared political goals, their actions also strengthened each other's religious beliefs. In this context, Sinhary's



(2017, p. 148) 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 Matua Maha 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 leaders in West Bengal were more aligned with Congress because they were more interested in Nehru's strategy of providing a juridical answer to social justice issues. Caste did, in fact, play a significant role in the first election in independent India, which was conducted in January 1952, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, a leader from the Namasudra community, won elections for the West Bengal Legislative Assembly twice on a Congress party ticket. In 1957, from the reserved seat of Haringhata, and in 1962, from the reserved constituency of Hanskhali. He helped Namasudra families—refugees from violence—in finding new residences in various areas of India, where they might get land and rebuild their lives.

The followers of Matua Mahasangha had great trust in Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, and they adhered to his electoral decisions, believing it was their religious duty to do so. When people viewed an action as morally required, they felt a strong sense of responsibility to carry it out. This suggests that those who see political participation as a moral duty feel a significant obligation to be involved. 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 view political engagement in accordance with Mahasangha to be an expected act. Instead, they saw it as a righteous conduct.

During this period, the Namasudra community was split on political issues. One group, led by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur backed the Congress party. The other, the Depressed Classes Association led by Birat Chandra Mandal (from the Namasudra community), leaned more towards the Hindu Mahasabha. This shows the deep divisions within the Namasudra community regarding Partition in 1946-47 (Bandopadhyay, Chaudhury, 2014, p. 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 and intervention in Matua Mahasangha may create conditions in which religious supremacy in everyday life and intra-group interaction is dismantled, paving path for a new sectarian and political equation with the state and 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. These peripheral groups, influenced by their unique local contexts, form factions that dissent from the central leadership’s decisions, aiming to better address their specific economic and occupational needs.

#### ***2.4. 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. Mancur Olson's theory of collective action further elucidates this phenomenon, as members rationally pursue their interests, leading to the fragmentation of the traditional, unified identity of the Mahasangha (Olson, 1965, p. 2). The younger generation's shift away from concerns of upper-caste dominance and refugee rights towards using Matua identity for political leverage signifies a strategic adaptation to contemporary political opportunities. This realignment maintains the religious core of the Mahasangha while transforming its socio-political role, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual interests and collective organizational identity.

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

In this study, it was observed that though MatuaMahasangha 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 local Matua community psyche was used to identify the sub periphery group. In terms of socioeconomic status and ceremonial contacts, the local Matua community psychology is a neighbourhood social group made up of anywhere from 10 to 50 families.

Even though they observe religious rites and functions and have similar beliefs, they have less attachment to Thakurnagar. This group determines whether to endorse or repudiate sectarian choices made at a given election or other similar events. Thakurnagar's power in social and political decision-making is eroding in comparison to this outlying local "Matuaas a community psyche." The Matua community in West Bengal, traditionally known for its allegiance to Thakurnagar's guidance, appears to be asserting its own voice in the political sphere. This is evident in recent events, such as Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's outreach to Matua voters ([Chowdhury .S, 2024](#)). While Thakurnagar might have held significant sway in the past, political parties are increasingly recognizing the independent influence of the "Matuaas a community psyche." This suggests a potential power shift, with the community itself playing a more active role in determining its political affiliations, independent of centralized pronouncements.

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.

#### *2.4.2. 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.

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 frequently conflict with sectarian ideals and prospects within the overall signs of group behaviour. 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.

The organisation uses charts and official rules, rank, and precedences to more clearly illustrate the hierarchy in order to assume a larger role in the public realm.

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 MatuaMahasangha 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 (*MatuaMahasanghaPatrika*) ideological underpinning is highlighted with top priority.

#### **2.5. 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 Thakurbarilobby for vested interests and vice-versa. As power centres, they also serve to mobilise dissenters for expressing dissent.

Presently MatuaMahasangha 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 MatuaMahasangha.

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 Matuabhakta 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 MatuaMahasangha. 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 ThakurbariMandir premises. The Matua Mahasangha's current state, characterized by informal networks, parallel power structures, and evolving generational perspectives, illustrates the complex interplay of social movement dynamics and collective action theories. Oberschall's and Olson's frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the fluid, adaptive, and often contentious nature of organizational behaviour within the Mahasangha, highlighting the continuous negotiation between tradition and modern political realities.

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.

### 2.5.1. *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. Weber defines charismatic authority as deriving from the extraordinary personal qualities or supernatural powers attributed to a leader, which inspire devotion and obedience among followers (Weber, 1947, p. 328). Initially, figures like Kapilkrishna Thakur embodied such charismatic authority within the Matua community due to their perceived exceptional qualities and ability to articulate the aspirations of their followers.

When Manjul Thakur was appointed Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Refugee Relief & Rehabilitation, distressed Matuabhaktas 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 Matuabhaktas. 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 Trimanool Congress (TMC) ticket, Manjul krishna 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. The decline of charismatic authority can occur when leaders fail to sustain or adapt to changing circumstances. Weber notes that charismatic authority is inherently unstable and can diminish over time if the leader's actions or decisions are perceived as inconsistent or lacking in moral authority (Weber, 1947, p. 333). In the case of Manjulkrishna Thakur, his erratic behavior and controversial political alliances contributed to a loss of charisma among Matua devotees who expected principled leadership.

But due to his lack of acceptability among the Matua masses, sections of Matuabhaktas 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* BenaPani 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.

Manjul Thakur and his youngest son Subrata joined the Bharatiya Janata Party shortly after Mamtabala’s name was declared in the 2015 campaign. Manjul Thakur also resigned from his position as minister of the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department. He said that the Trinamool Congress (TMC) party and government were acting in a “whimsical” way.

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 Matuabhaktas want to know the truth behind his death’. He claimed that when Mamata Banerjee visited his mother Binapani Debi multiple times, they changed their allegiance from the CPI(M) to the Trinamool Congress (TMC). 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, Subrata Thakur was handed a BJP ticket to run in the Bongaon constituency against his aunt, Trinamool Congress (TMC) candidate Mamatabala Thakur. However, Mamatabala won the Bongaon poll by a landslide, handing BJP candidate Subrata Thakur a humiliating defeat. The Bongaon Lok Sabha seat is made up of seven assembly segments, including Gaighata, where Thakurnagar is located. The CPI (M) fielded Alakesh Das, who received more than 4 lakh votes and finished second in the 2009 and 2014 elections. Following the death of the TMC MP Kapilkrishna Thakur in 2015, a by-election was held, with his wife, Mamatabala Thakur, being elected. In this by-election, the CPI (M) finished second with 3.28 lakh votes, slightly ahead of the BJP’s Subrata Thakur, who received 3.14 lakh (Indian Express, 2015)

### 2.5.2. *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 LokSabhaby-poll (2015) was required due to the death Kapilkrishna Thakur.

At least 20 armed police officers were stationed in the courtyard of the Harichand–Guruchand Thakur shrine, creating a tense mood in the normally serene and kirtan-filled Thakurbari. Police officers stationed themselves outside the 96-year-old Boroma's home, Binapani Devi, the community's spiritual leader, to watch over her during her trying times. The ruling party supported Mamatabala Thakur, the widow of Kapilkrishna, and Subrata Thakur, the grandson of Boroma, whose father Manjulkrishna just defected to the BJP, as the rival candidates for the seat. The issue became complicated and left a lasting impact on every common Matuabhakta. There is no doubting that Baroma has the greatest number of Matua supporters, but many of them are unhappy with the disputes within the Thakur family, which could split the Matua votes, according to Nikhil Biswas, a Thakurnagar resident and member of the All-India Matua Mahashangha. The 95-year-old Binapani Devi responded, "I do not have any relation with my elder son and my blessings are always with my daughter-in-law," to questions from reporters regarding Manjul Krishna's defection to the BJP. Binapani Devi responded, "There is no other option," when asked why she was supporting Mamata Banerjee (The Telegraph 15, January, 2015).

Manjul krishna Thakur later declared that it was a "mistake" for him to join the BJP. He asked Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, to pardon him and allow him to rejoin 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 Matuaorganisation 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 MatuaMahasangha, 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 MatuaMahasangha 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 MatuaMahasangha much wider. Such controversy acquired political overtones and factional feuds became a regular state of affairs inside MatuaMahasangha.

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.

At present, it has been noticed that, while faction membership was not synonymous with lineage links, the majority of people belonged to the same faction as other members of their lineage, particularly 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 indicated that they first accepted Thakurnagar's authority because they believed Manjul Krishna Thakur, the

younger brother, had no reason to openly oppose his elder brother's wife, Mamatabala Thakur, who subsequently won election as a 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.

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

Due to intra-familial dissent, Thakurbari's identity politics have been reduced to a bitter family quarrel and sibling rivalry. It all started with the death of Kapilkrishna Thakur, the head of the second MatuaSanghapati. Family rivalry became public on November 5, 2014, when Mamatabala filed a FIR against Subrata Thakur at Gaighata Police Station, significantly to the embarrassment of the organization's grand lady and Matua guru Binapani Devi. Mamatabala filed a police complaint against Subrata and his crew, stating that they led the siege on her family and vandalised Thakurbari. She further stated that Subrata Thakur was pestering her family with terrible consequences.

Along with Kapil's family, a number of other Thakurbari residents organised a protest in front of the police station, calling for the quick arrest of Subrata Thakur and his allies. However, Subrata Thakur labelled the allegation as a plot by his aunt Mamatabala Thakur and a few others to force him out of Thakurbari and damage his reputation so that he won't be able to get a Trinamool ticket from Bongaon. Personal ambition fueled by the Matuas' dedication and devotion lay at the heart of this conflict. The Left attempted in vain to achieve what the Trinamool Congress (TMC) did in using the Matuacard for the first time. As the BJP is becoming more and more prominent, Thakurbaria candidates have more freedom to select, but Raju Singh stated that the Trinamool cannot afford to lose the Matua vote bank in the Bongaon by-poll. Consequently, there is now division in the community as a result of the struggle for Matua votes. This led to the emergence of two distinct groups within the family domain.

Mamatabala Thakur asserted that Manjulkrishna Thakur and his younger son Subrata Thakur were attempting to seize her belongings ever since her spouse Kapilkrishna died. Furthermore, she claimed that a significant amount of the donations made to the Harichand Thakur temple were demanded by Manjulkrishna and Subrata. When Manjulkrishna Thakur was asked if Subrata's prospects of winning if he is nominated as a BJP candidate would be

impacted to some degree by his mother's blessing being with his sister-in-law? In response, Manjulkrishna stated, "I think my mother will bless her grandson too if he is made the candidate. My mother is elderly and some people are trying to influence her" (The Times of India 16, January, 2015). However, "K. D. Biswas, who had run for the BJP in the previous (2014) Lok Sabha election from Bongaon and finished third in the count of votes cast for him, stated that Matua supporters would express their displeasure if a member of the Thakur family was selected as the party's nominee" (The Telegraph, January 15, 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 MatuaMahasangha. K D Biswas, the BJP's nominee against Kapilkrishna Thakur, garnered a phenomenal 2.44 lakh votes, and his party had a roughly 16% increase in membership. The Matuas have not been entirely persuaded by the BJP's prospective candidate. The two crore Matuas have been fighting for their unfulfilled citizenship rights since Boroma's husband, P R Thakur, was a Congress MP and minister. "The Matuas have suffered for 67 years. There's no more time to waste. A dissident member of Matua Mahasangha named Ujjal Biswas warned that "we will be pushed back by another five years if the Citizenship Act of 2003 is not revised now."

'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 Bangaon and other places like Nadia, 24 Parganas etc.

The BJP released their eleventh list of candidates for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections on March 26, 2019. They stated that the party's nominee for the West Bengali constituency of Bongaon is Shantanu Thakur. Binapani Devi's grandson is Shantanu. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched his campaign for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections on February 2nd, starting in Thakurnagar, which is an area of the 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 died away on Tuesday, March 5, and the community has been at strife over when their beloved matriarch will be cremated since Wednesday morning. Some of Mamatabala's devotees and followers wanted the final rites to be performed on Wednesday, but Manjul Krishna Thakur, the younger son of Boroma, requested that they be performed on Thursday instead, since hundreds of her followers from outside the state were travelling to Thakurnagar to see her one last time. The controversy was settled through a series of meetings presided over by Gosais, devotees, and members of the All India Matua Mahashangha. In the end, it was decided that Boroma's death rituals would take place on Thursday morning. Prime Minister Narendra Modi mourned the Matua leader's loss and praised her as "an icon of our times." He also talked about his February 2019 trip to Thakurnagar to ask the Matua matriarch's blessings.

'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, NarendraModi, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2018). Mamata Banerjee conveyed her condolences and declared that the late matriarch would be remembered with an official funeral and gun salute. "The loss of Matua matriarch Boro Ma Binapani Thakur pains me deeply." My condolences to her family & my brothers & sisters of Matua Community at this moment of grief. It was a great opportunity for me to meet Boro Ma last November, on the centenary of her birthday,' (Twitter, Mamata Official, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2018).

The Matua matriarch had been the sole unifying factor for the sect, but after her demise her household appears to be conflict-ridden. Family strife increased, and the community's political position is now a constant factor. Shantanu, the grandson of Boroma, has publicly denounced and accused the leaders of the Trinmool Congress (TMC) and his aunt of being responsible for Binapani Devi's demise. The daughter-in-law of Binapani Devi, the Bongaon MP, responded to the accusation by telling local media that Shantanu Thakur was politicising Boro Ma's death in an effort to capture power. The two warring factions live in the same compound but in different houses they had performed the *Sradha* (last rites ceremony) differently. MamataBala claims it was Binapani Devi who herself had appointed her to carry on with the work of the Mahasangha. Shantanu declared in the open that he will never "contest elections." He even ran on a platform of "politics free Thakur family," promising to work towards improving the Matua community but to never "play an active part 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 MatuaMahasangha, over which Binapani Devi held sway.

After the BJP revealed 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 stated that the community was unhappy with Mamatabala Thakur's actions since she has been fighting against the Matua group. "She has finished the movement of immigrants, which is the foundation of the Matua community." Arabindo Biswas, spokesperson for the All India Matua Mahasangha, stated that Shantanu would run for politics in order to safeguard the Matua community.

"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 MatuaMahasangha, 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 MatuaMahasangha, 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 '*NaatMandir*' 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), said 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 recalls his participation in a protest campaign at Kendraparain Thakurnagar, two weeks after the Matua community's first hunger strike against CAB in 2003. Over the subsequent fifteen years, the community launched several protests for citizenship right, including a hunger strike in Delhi in 2011 and another in Kolkata in 2015.

In an interview Sataur Modak, who is presently the Secretary of Mamatabala Thakur and earlier was a close associate of Manjul Krishna 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.'

## 2.7. Conclusion

This study reveals consistent shifts in factional affiliations in Mahasangha based on conflicts of interest and disputes that frequently arise between near kinsmen, including siblings. It is due to familial connections are multifaceted, and disagreements between close relatives are frequently more intense than those 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 MatuaMahasangha.
- (e) Faction is an integral part of MatuaMahasangha. 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 MatuaMahasangha.
- (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 MatuaMahasangha 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 result of ideological, philosophical, and personality disagreements among its constituent members, that might or might not be monetarily or politically motivated. They are discernible in a number of sociopolitical settings. Factional structure refers to the roles that individuals play within a group, as well as the psychological predispositions that promote this pattern, are referred to as the factional structure. Morphological relationships between factional members tend to represent thematic variations of the enclosing group's social structure. The factional dynamics within the Matua Mahasangha reveal intricate patterns of conflict and cooperation among its members, which are influenced by a variety of socio-political factors and organizational intricacies. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from scholars like Anthony Oberschall and Mancur Olson provides a lens through which to understand these complexities. Anthony Oberschall's framework on social movements emphasizes that such movements are not homogenous entities but rather complex amalgamations of diverse interest groups that continually form, dissolve, and realign alliances in response to socio-political contexts (Oberschall, 1973). This perspective is crucial for interpreting the Matua Mahasangha, where multiple factions maneuver within the organizational structure based on varying interests and objectives. The fluidity and adaptability of these factions, as observed within the Mahasangha, reflect Oberschall's notion of dynamic networks constantly reshaping strategies and alliances to address external pressures. Mancur Olson's theory of collective action further enriches the analysis by highlighting how individuals within interest groups act based on rational calculations of personal benefit, sometimes diverging from collective goals (Olson, 1965). This rational self-interest can explain why factions within the Matua Mahasangha prioritize personal or subgroup interests over broader organizational objectives, leading to conflicts or collaborations depending on perceived benefits.

In conclusion, the framework of rational self-interest offers valuable insights into the dynamics of factionalism within the Matua Mahasangha. By focusing on individual and subgroup interests, this perspective elucidates why factions within the organization often prioritize their immediate gains over the collective goals of the Mahasangha. This prioritization can lead to both collaborations and conflicts among factions, depending on their calculations of perceived benefits. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the intricate interplay of power, strategy, and competing agendas within religious and socio-political movements like the Matua Mahasangha. Moving



forward, further research could look deeper into how these factional dynamics influence the organization's governance, leadership dynamics, and its role in shaping community identities and socio-political mobilization in West Bengal.

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**RECEIVED:** 18<sup>TH</sup> MAR 2024

**REVISED:** 04<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2024

**ACCEPTED:** 20<sup>TH</sup> AUG 2024



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