

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Sectarian Consciousness in a Changing World

Dr. Amlan Lahiri

Asst. Professor, Dept. of Sociology Cluny Women's College Kalimpong, West Bengal

ABSTRACT: The Matua Mahasangha, a major socio-religious Hindu sect in Bengal, has remained influential over time by maintaining a strong and organized institutional structure. This framework not only fosters religious and spiritual life among its followers but also plays a key role in shaping the community's visibility and influence in the socio-political sphere. Even as the political landscape of Bengal continues to change, the Mahasangha has adapted its strategies to stay relevant and assertive in public life. This paper examines the structural and organizational dimensions of the Matua Mahasangha, with particular focus on its hierarchical setup, collective mobilization, and sectarian consciousness. These elements have been crucial in maintaining the sect's unity and vitality, even as it faces internal challenges, including ongoing familial conflicts at the core of its leadership structure. This study highlights how unity, discipline, and adherence to central leadership have been key to the Matua Mahasangha's ability to stay resilient in the face of social and political changes. By exploring the ways in which the Mahasangha maintains its organizational strength and nurtures a strong sense of sectarian identity, the paper seeks to understand its deeper sociological significance in an increasingly dynamic and shifting world.

KEYWORDS: Matua Mahasangha, Organizational Resilience, Sectarian Consciousness, Adaptability

INTRODUCTION

In the socio-religious fabric of the Matua community, the organizational structure of the Matua Mahasangha functions as a central pillar, carrying profound sociological importance. From a functionalist standpoint, this structure is instrumental not only in facilitating religious engagement but also in shaping the broader social dynamics of the community. Originally established to foster and express religious devotion, the Mahasangha has grown beyond its administrative role to become a key institution for reinforcing belief systems, enabling collective mobilization, and preserving cultural identity. This essay critically examines the relationship between the organizational resilience of the Mahasangha and the evolution of sectarian consciousness among the Matua community. It argues that the Mahasangha's structural coherence and adaptability have played a decisive role in sustaining community identity amid internal tensions and external changes. The Mahasangha serves several core functions that contribute to the continued vitality of the Matua movement. Primarily, it acts as the institutional nucleus for spiritual nurturing. Through regular congregational worship (sanghikirtans), community festivals such as Baruni mela and Harichand-Guruchand Jayanti, religious discourses, and pilgrimages to Thakurnagar and Orakandi, the Mahasangha facilitates deepened religious experience and strengthens communal bonds. These activities not only sustain devotional fervor but also function as rituals of identity and memory, especially for Matua followers across the Bengal-Bangladesh divide. Over time, the Mahasangha's organizational framework has undergone significant transformation in response to changing societal dynamics, particularly in the context of migration, political mobilization, and increasing visibility in public discourse. Its leadership structure, once rooted in the spiritual authority of direct descendants of Harichand Thakur, has evolved into a contested political space, reflecting broader tensions between tradition and modernity, kinship and institutionalization, and sectarian unity versus political factionalism.

The organizational framework

The organizational framework of the Mahasangha is meticulously designed not only to benefit individual Matuas but also to bolster the collective combat-efficiency of the movement in the wider societal landscape. By establishing branches in diverse geographical locations inhabited by Matuas, the Mahasangha extends its reach and influence, creating a robust network of support and solidarity. This network empowers Matuas to collectively address common challenges, advocate for their rights, and assert their religious and cultural identity on a broader platform. The hierarchical structure of office bearers within the Mahasangha reinforces the bureaucratic setup and collective efforts aimed at sustaining sectarian awareness. Through the effective dissemination and implementation of

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

decisions and directives from the central office and Thakurbari, this structure ensures organizational coherence and unity. By preventing internal conflicts and divisions, it safeguards the integrity and strength of the Mahasangha as a unified entity.

Theoretical underpinning

Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy, based on rational-legal authority, provides a useful framework for understanding the organizational structure of the Matua Mahasangha. It exhibits core bureaucratic features such as hierarchical authority, formalized roles, and rule-based administration. The central office and the Thakurbari function as sources of legitimate authority, while local branches—each with designated office-bearers—implement directives from the top, reflecting bureaucratic decentralization aimed at administrative efficiency (Weber, 1947; Weber, 1978). At the same time, the Mahasangha incorporates elements of charismatic authority, particularly through the enduring veneration of the Thakur family. This reflects Weber's notion of charisma, where authority stems from the personal appeal or sanctity of leaders rather than formal structures (Weber, 1978). Theoretical insights from sect studies further illuminate the Mahasangha's dynamics. Stark and Bainbridge (1987) argue that sects often emerge in response to social dislocation, offering members a sense of solidarity and purpose—functions the Mahasangha continues to fulfill. Similarly, Troeltsch (1931) views sects as voluntary associations that differentiate themselves from dominant religious institutions, a perspective that aligns with the Mahasangha's efforts to assert its distinct religious and cultural identity within the broader Hindu framework.

The centralized organizational structure, iron discipline, and unity within the Matua Mahasangha serve as indispensable pillars for the functional operation of the Matua community. By providing a robust framework for religious expression, collective action, and social cohesion, the Mahasangha contributes significantly to the resilience and adaptability of the Matua movement, enabling it to navigate and thrive amidst the winds of change in society. The Matua Mahasangha, characterized by a hierarchical pyramidal structure, is led by three key figures: the Mukhoupodesta (Chief Advisor), Sanghadhipati (Chief Official), and Saha Sanghadhipati (Joint Organisational Head). This hierarchical setup embodies a centralized bureaucratic model, where all power, be it spiritual or political, emanates unidirectionally from the apex body down to the grassroots level. Rule number 18 in the constitution explicitly mandates that only members of the Thakurbari family, descendants of Harichand Thakur, are entitled to assume these prestigious positions. This ensures a lineage-based succession that underscores the organization's commitment to tradition and heritage.

Troeltsch distinguishes between two types of religious organizations: churches and sects. Churches are characterized by their accommodation to society, established hierarchies, and broad appeal, while sects are more exclusive, charismatic, and oriented towards a distinct religious or social vision (Troeltsch, 1931). In the context of the Matua Mahasangha, we can interpret it as exhibiting characteristics of both a church and a sect. On one hand, its hierarchical structure, centralized authority, and adherence to tradition align with traits typically associated with churches. The Mahasangha's centralized bureaucratic model and hierarchical leadership positions reflect a semblance of institutional stability and continuity, reminiscent of church-like structures. However, it's essential to note that the mechanism for selecting leaders in the Matua Mahasangha differs significantly from traditional church models. Instead of formalized processes, leadership succession is based on lineage, with only descendants of Harichand Thakur entitled to assume prestigious roles. This departure from conventional church practices highlights the unique blend of institutional continuity and charismatic authority within the Mahasangha, blurring the lines between church and sect characteristics. On the other hand, the Mahasangha also displays features of a sect, particularly in its emphasis on exclusivity, charismatic leadership, and distinct religious identity. In this sense, the Mahasangha's insistence on Thakurbari lineage for leadership positions can be seen as a way to maintain purity and authenticity within the organization, akin to the sectarian impulse to safeguard against dilution or deviation from core beliefs. The Mahasangha's centralized bureaucratic model, with power flowing from the apex body down to the grassroots level, reflects a hierarchical structure commonly associated with churches. However, the charismatic authority vested in the Thakur family, as descendants of Harichand Thakur, imbues the organization with a sense of spiritual legitimacy and exclusivity characteristic of sects.

At the helm of the Mahasangha was the revered figure of the Mukhoupodesta, initially embodied by Baroma Binapani Devi. Her tenure symbolized a supreme source of spiritual authority, embodying the grace of Harichand Thakur. Baroma Binapani Devi, hailing from Jabdakathi village in the Barishal District (now in Bangladesh), was married to Pramatha Ranjan Thakur at the tender age of fourteen. Together with her husband and a significant following of Matua bhaktas, she migrated to India in 1947, eventually settling in Thakurnagar. Following the passing of her husband in 1990, she ascended to the role of the first Mukhoupodesta, becoming the matriarch of the Matua Mahasangha. The Mukhoupodesta's responsibilities were multifaceted. Not only did she serve as the spiritual guru of the Matuas, but she also provided guidance to devotees in their daily rituals and societal conduct. As outlined in the constitution, the Mukhoupodesta held the authority to designate titles and honors to Matua sadhus (sages) and pagols (religious fanatics), supervise Hari Mandirs (temples), and oversee the formulation of codes of conduct and rituals. Additionally, all committees, sub-committees, and departmental administrators were appointed under her direction, underscoring her pivotal role in shaping the organization's structure and governance.

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

Competing claims to authority

Following the demise of Baroma Binapani Devi in 2019, the post of Mukhoupodesta remained vacant, temporarily filled by Mamata Bala Thakur, the wife of Kapil Krishna Thakur. However, this appointment was met with opposition from Manjul Krishna Thakur, Benapani Devi's youngest son, highlighting the complexities of succession within the Thakurbari family. According to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, leadership succession in religious movements can be a contentious issue, especially in charismatic-led groups where personal qualities play a significant role. The familial rift within the Matua Mahasangha, with competing claims to leadership, exemplifies the challenges inherent in maintaining organizational stability and legitimacy following the passing of a charismatic leader. Presently, Santanu Thakur, the younger son of Manjul Krishna Thakur, claims to head the organization. However, the followers are divided due to this familial rift. In collective perception, Santanu Thakur seems to wield more power than Mamtabala Thakur, as he served as a Member of Parliament from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This situation reflects the complexities of power dynamics within religious organizations, where political influence and family ties intersect with traditional religious authority structures. This scenario resonates with William W. Zellner and Marc Petrowsky's analysis of sects and charismatic communities, where succession struggles and intra-group conflicts are common features (Zellner & Petrowsky, 1997). The Matua Mahasangha's experience highlights the challenges of maintaining organizational cohesion and legitimacy in the absence of a clear succession plan and amid competing claims to authority.

In tandem with the Mukhoupodesta, the Sanghadhipati, represented by Kapilkrishna Thakur until 2014, served as the administrative head of the Mahasangha. However, similar to the Mukhoupodesta's position, the role of Sanghadhipati has remained vacant since Kapilkrishna Thakur's passing. The Sanghadhipati held significant authority, including the power to appoint office-bearers, intervene in departmental activities, and participate as a constitutional head in various ceremonies and events.

In the absence of the Mukhoupodesta, the Sanghadhipati assumes additional responsibilities, ensuring the continuity of administrative functions within the Mahasangha. However, the lack of clarity regarding the Saha Sanghadhipati's role poses challenges, potentially leading to confusion and a power vacuum during transitional periods. The absence of a clear succession plan or protocol for transitional periods exacerbates these challenges. According to Weber, bureaucracies are characterized by a rational-legal authority structure, where legitimacy derives from adherence to established rules and procedures (Weber, 1978). Without clear guidelines for succession or interim leadership, the Mahasangha may experience a temporary "power vacuum," where decision-making authority is uncertain and organizational continuity is jeopardized.

Functional Divisions of Matua Mahasangha

The Matua Mahasangha, as defined in Rule 7 of its Constitution, operates as a socio-religious organization structured through a centralized authority model. Governed by the Central Executive Committee based in Sridham Thakurnagar, it functions through multiple subcommittees—such as the Branch Committee, Hari Mandir Committee, Householder Sangha, Women's Department, and others—each akin to functional departments. Secretaries are appointed with the approval of key leaders (Mukhoupodesta and Sanghadhipati), ensuring alignment with the core values of Matua dharma. The Branch Committee (Rule 13) plays a critical role in organizing religious events, forming new branches, and supervising development efforts, while the Hari Mandir Committee oversees temple construction under centralized directives, ensuring donations are registered as *Debottar* property. The Householder Sangha, a village-level unit formed by a minimum of five members, facilitates grassroots participation and emphasizes financial solvency, reflecting the Matua ideal of productive engagement with society.

This organizational model reflects Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy with its hierarchical structure, codified roles, and rational-legal authority (Weber, 1947). It also aligns with functionalist perspectives that view religious institutions as mechanisms for social integration and value reinforcement (Durkheim, 1915). Through its structured committees, the Mahasangha fosters religious participation, community development, and sectarian solidarity, serving both spiritual and socio-economic functions for its largely marginalized follower base.

Duties and functions performed by the Matua Mahasangha

The Matua Mahasangha emphasizes structured membership rooted in both spiritual commitment and organizational responsibility. Membership transcends social divisions, reflecting the sect's inclusive ethos. Joining involves submitting an application to a local branch or the central office, particularly in areas without formal branches. More than a symbolic gesture, membership entails active participation in Sangha activities, payment of fees, and adherence to central guidelines, aligning with Weber's rational-legal authority model (Weber, 1947).

Ritual practices, such as establishing a *Mangal Ghat* at home and contributing rice daily, reflect the fusion of religious devotion with collective responsibility. These acts serve as micro-level expressions of solidarity and organizational sustainability, embodying the functionalist view of religion as reinforcing social cohesion and shared moral order (Durkheim, 1915). Thus, the Mahasangha institutionalizes both spiritual and material contributions to foster unity and uphold sectarian identity. At the core of the Matua Mahasangha lies a deep commitment to the egalitarian and spiritual ideals of Sree Harichand and Sree Guruchand, who are revered as moral and philosophical guides. Emphasizing equality beyond barriers of caste, gender, or social status, the Mahasangha fosters an inclusive community where all members are encouraged to embody these values in everyday life. The organizational culture

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

promotes participatory governance, with Sangha meetings serving as forums for open dialogue and collective decision-making. While individual voices are respected, consensus-based decisions are binding, reflecting democratic functioning within a religious framework. Members are also urged to engage with sacred texts and teachings, reinforcing spiritual and ideological commitment. Education, particularly for children, is prioritized as a tool for empowerment and social progress. The Mahasangha espouses fraternity and solidarity, nurturing a strong sense of community and belonging. Discrimination in any form is explicitly rejected, positioning the Mahasangha as a progressive religious body advocating for social justice. The Mahasangha's inclusive philosophy and collective ethos align with Émile Durkheim's view of religion as a unifying force that reinforces moral order and social solidarity (Durkheim, 1915). Its participatory model also reflects aspects of deliberative democracy within a sectarian religious context, highlighting its sociological relevance in contemporary society.

The verse from *Guruchand Charit* (p. 547) — "*Pabitra, satya bakya, manusher biswas / Tin ratna yar ache hari tar bash*" — encapsulates the ethical and spiritual foundation of the Matua philosophy. Translated as "*Purity, true words, and faith in humanity— one who possesses these three gems is close to divinity,*" the line offers a moral triad that reflects the core values of Matua dharma and the expectations from its adherents.

From a sociological standpoint, this triadic ideal can be understood as both a personal ethical code and a collective social ethic that binds members of the Matua Mahasangha. Purity (*pabitra*) denotes not merely ritual cleanliness but also moral integrity—an internal discipline that aligns with the spiritual path laid out by Sree Harichand and Sree Guruchand. Truthful speech (*satya bakya*) is a commitment to transparency, honesty, and moral clarity in one's interpersonal and communal dealings. Faith in humanity (*manusher biswas*) reflects a radical egalitarianism at the heart of Matua ideology—an affirmation of the intrinsic dignity of all human beings, irrespective of caste or status. Together, these "three gems" function as normative pillars that guide Matua conduct, positioning ethical living as a prerequisite for spiritual proximity to the divine (*Hari tar bash*). Membership in the Matua Mahasangha, therefore, is not limited to formal affiliation, but entails a disciplined moral life shaped by these values. As *Guruchand Charit* further suggests, members are expected to actively perform their duties in accordance with these ideals (p. 547), reinforcing the idea that religious belonging is inseparable from ethical action.

The General Rules (Rule No. 11) of the Matua Mahasangha articulate a codified framework that integrates procedural regulation with spiritual discipline, reflecting a synthesis of bureaucratic rationality and religious authority. Annual membership renewal and structured family enrollment, with clearly defined financial contributions, exemplify Weberian principles of rational-legal authority and administrative coherence (Weber, 1947). These practices not only sustain the organization's functioning but also reinforce communal solidarity through symbolic acts, such as the monthly rice grain collection and distribution—a ritualized form of collective economic participation.

Indivisibility of Sree Harichand and Sree Guruchand

Doctrinally, the indivisibility of Sree Harichand and Sree Guruchand as *Hari-Guruchand* affirms the theological core of Matua dharma, while canonical texts like *Sree Harileelamrita* and *Guruchand Charita* are positioned as immutable sources of religious legitimacy. This textual fixity, combined with reverence for lineage-based spiritual authority, embeds the Mahasangha within a tradition-bound yet functionally adaptive religious system. Importantly, the rejection of individualized spiritual leadership—such as the titles *Acharya Gonsain*, *Pagol*, or *Guru*—reasserts Harichand as the sole spiritual authority, preserving doctrinal purity and preventing sectarian fragmentation. These rules thus serve not only as mechanisms of governance but also as instruments for maintaining sectarian cohesion and ideological clarity within the Matua community.

The verse from *Guruchand Charita* (p. 573)—"*Matuar ek guru vinnyo guru nai / Orakandi prabhu yini khiroder sai*"—encapsulates the centralization of spiritual authority in Matua dharma. In Weberian terms, this reflects charismatic authority, where legitimacy is derived from the perceived extraordinary qualities of a singular leader (Weber, 1978). *Orakandi Prabhu*, revered as the sole guru, embodies this charismatic ideal, commanding deep devotion and allegiance from followers. This exclusive spiritual allegiance reinforces the sect's cohesion by consolidating faith around a singular, divinely sanctioned figure. Such charismatic centrality, especially in a historically marginalized community, serves both a theological and sociological function—offering direction, identity, and resistance against dominant religious structures. The affirmation of one guru also acts as a safeguard against doctrinal fragmentation, sustaining unity within the broader organizational framework of the Mahasangha.

The verse "*Samal! Samal! tai Matua gan, Hajat kakhono keho karona haran*" (*Guruchand Charita*, p. 573) serves as an ethical injunction within the Matua Mahasangha, emphasizing the sanctity of religious offerings. In the context of a sect rooted in both spiritual devotion and social service, this caution underscores the moral responsibility of devotees to preserve the integrity of contributions made to the divine. Beyond its devotional meaning, the verse functions as a regulatory norm—guiding financial and ethical conduct within the Mahasangha's organizational framework. It reinforces the sect's foundational emphasis on honesty, accountability, and righteous living, especially critical for a community historically positioned on the margins of caste society. In line with Weberian thought, this ethical directive helps sustain the legitimacy of the Mahasangha's authority by upholding a shared moral order that binds the collective.

The verse from *Harileelamrita* (p. 217) — "*Mahatsawbe baje kotha kohite dibe na / Khabe ar harinam gabe sarbajana / Hari nam vinno ar nahi kar gandogal / Sudhu matro balaibe sudha haribol*" — articulates the sectarian discipline and devotional ethos central

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

to Matua practice. It mandates that during Mahotsavs (religious gatherings), all distractions must be set aside to maintain a sanctified environment centered exclusively on *Harinam*. This directive reinforces the Matua Mahasangha's emphasis on collective spiritual focus, where the chanting of Hari's name is not only a ritual act but a unifying force for the community. By prohibiting idle talk and emphasizing *Harinam* as the sole spiritual nourishment, the passage underlines the transformative and egalitarian power of devotional chanting. It also reflects the functionalist view of religion as a mechanism for social integration and moral regulation (Durkheim, 1915). Thus, the verse encapsulates how Matua sectarian ideology merges disciplined religious practice with communal solidarity, making *Harinam* both the medium and message of spiritual egalitarianism.

The resilience and adaptability observed within the Mahasangha

To understand the resilience and adaptability of the Matua Mahasangha, the social resilience perspective provides a useful theoretical framework. Social resilience refers to the ability of social systems—such as communities, organizations, or religious groups—to absorb disturbances, reorganize, and retain their essential identity, functions, and structures in the face of stress or crisis (Norris et al., 2008; Folke et al., 2010). Applying this framework to the Mahasangha reveals how a combination of cultural embeddedness, grassroots organizational strength, and adaptive religious practices have enabled it to survive and evolve amid socio-political and economic disruptions.

The Matua Mahasangha derives much of its resilience from the deep cultural and religious rootedness of Matua dharma, which centers on the teachings of Sree Harichand and Guruchand. These teachings offer not only spiritual guidance but also a counter-hegemonic discourse for marginalized Namashudra communities historically excluded from upper-caste Hindu frameworks. This enduring cultural narrative functions as a *stabilizing force*, giving the community a sense of identity, dignity, and historical purpose even in times of displacement, such as the Partition of Bengal or subsequent migration waves (Chakraborty, 1985). The ritual centrality of *Harinam*, annual pilgrimages to Thakurnagar and Orakandi, and collective Mahotsavs serve to continually re-anchor the group to this shared symbolic order. The Mahasangha's structure—comprising local units such as *dals*, *Householder Sanghas*, and *Branch Committees*—reflects an adaptive, polycentric governance system, which aligns with Folke et al.'s (2010) emphasis on the importance of multilevel, redundant institutions in resilience-building. These grassroots institutions perform multiple roles: organizing religious festivals, coordinating relief efforts during crises (e.g., natural disasters, COVID-19 pandemic), facilitating dispute resolution, and maintaining communication with central leadership. For instance, *dals* in rural Bengal often take on the role of mobilizing community participation in *Sankirtans*, rebuilding temples, or helping marginalized Matua households access state welfare schemes. Their capacity to act autonomously yet in concert with central directives enhances the Mahasangha's adaptive flexibility, a key trait of resilient systems. While the Mahasangha exhibits features of Weberian charismatic and bureaucratic authority, its ability to negotiate between tradition and modernity also contributes to its resilience. Leaders within the Thakur family have historically acted not only as spiritual guides but also as political mobilizers—shifting strategies across time to engage with changing electoral, legal, and administrative systems. The active role of leaders like Binapani Devi ("Boro Maa") and their successors in securing political representation for Matuas illustrates how transformative leadership helps in navigating systemic constraints and asserting community claims.

From a theoretical standpoint, the Mahasangha's resilience also resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. The community's spiritual practices, texts (e.g., *Harileelamrita*, *Guruchand Charita*), and temple spaces function as repositories of symbolic power. This capital is mobilized to resist caste-based marginalization and assert religious autonomy, especially against mainstream Brahminical Hinduism. For instance, the insistence on recognizing *Sree Harichand* as the sole spiritual authority, and the rejection of other guru figures (*Acharya Gonsain*, etc.), reflects a sectarian boundary maintenance that preserves internal cohesion and identity. The *dals* of the Matua Mahasangha represent a vital grassroots structure that sustains both the spiritual and social fabric of the community. Typically comprising 100–150 members and led by a *dalapati*—formally recognized by the central Mahasangha—these local bodies function as decentralized nodes of religious practice, cultural continuity, and collective mobilization. Meeting weekly under traditional spaces like the banyan tree, dal members engage in devotional practices such as *Harinam*, *matan* (processional worship), and communal rituals, accompanied by instruments like the *danka* drum that anchor their shared rhythm and spiritual unity. From a sociological perspective, dals reflect the micro-level resilience mechanisms of the Mahasangha, providing localized platforms for spiritual reinforcement, moral guidance, and community cohesion. The *dalapati*, revered not only for administrative ability but also for spiritual leadership, embodies a form of localized charismatic authority, functioning within the broader bureaucratic structure of the Mahasangha (Weber, 1978). Additionally, the presence of *pagols*—individuals believed to possess mystical insight—adds a mystical and affective layer to dal gatherings. Their roles align with what Weber calls *charisma of the extraordinary*, further enriching the religious experience and sustaining a direct connection between the community and perceived divine power. Collectively, dals serve as a model of vernacular religiosity and decentralized governance, enabling the Matua Mahasangha to maintain cultural continuity, spiritual vitality, and social solidarity across generations. In times of both celebration and crisis, these grassroots units reinforce the community's resilience, adaptability, and deep-rooted commitment to Matua dharma.

The Matua Mahasangha, though institutionally structured, does not command universal allegiance across the broader Matua community. Multiple autonomous factions operate independently, often leading to disputes over the interpretation of Sree Hari-

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

Guruchand's teachings and the strategic direction of the movement. This internal divergence reflects the fragmented nature of contemporary sectarian authority. A key challenge lies in the weakening of centralized leadership. The current *Saha Sanghadhipati*, Manjul Krishna Thakur, has largely distanced himself from active organizational affairs, creating a leadership vacuum. In response, his son Santanu Thakur—also a Member of Parliament—has taken on a prominent administrative role, leveraging his political position to consolidate influence within the Mahasangha. His rise illustrates how political capital is now intersecting with religious authority. Meanwhile, Mamtabala Thakur and her faction challenge this consolidation, advocating for their own leadership model, further intensifying the split. The controversy around the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) exposed these divisions. While the Mahasangha has historically championed refugee citizenship rights, Santanu's political alignment with the BJP and conditional support for the CAB alienated segments of the community, diluting the Mahasangha's long-standing advocacy. Despite contestations, Santanu's leadership appears more stable, partly due to the patriarchal and guru-centric structure of the Mahasangha, which favors male lineage continuity. His position thus reflects how traditional authority patterns are being reshaped by contemporary political strategies, complicating the sect's internal cohesion and public orientation.

The quasi-decentralized structure of the Matua Mahasangha, supported by its grassroots *dals*, enhances its resilience by allowing responsiveness to local contexts (Zellner & Petrowsky, 1997). These *dals*—typically composed of 100–150 members—mirror the broader organizational framework and serve as vital units of religious and social life. Despite leadership disputes and institutional fragmentation at the central level, *dals* anchor the community through regular *Harinam* gatherings, *matan* processions, and spiritual mentorship under *dalapatis*. Thus, while the Mahasangha's apex authority may face internal divisions, the *dals* function as cohesive units that preserve Matua cultural identity and mobilize collective strength. Their resilience lies in their rootedness, adaptability, and unwavering adherence to the community's spiritual ethos—ensuring the continuity of the Matua movement even amid organizational flux.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the structural, ideological, and functional dimensions of the Matua Mahasangha through a sociological lens, with particular attention to its organizational resilience, sectarian consciousness, and internal contestations. Drawing on conceptual frameworks such as Max Weber's theory of authority, Émile Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, and the social resilience paradigm (Norris et al., 2008; Folke et al., 2010), the analysis has shown how the Mahasangha navigates complex challenges while retaining its foundational ethos.

At the heart of the Mahasangha's endurance lies its quasi-decentralized structure, where grassroots units like *dals* play a critical role in sustaining religious practices, cultural identity, and social solidarity. These local bodies mirror the organizational ethos of the central Mahasangha, yet retain the flexibility to respond to community-specific needs, exemplifying bottom-up resilience. The central tenet, "*jar dal nai tat bol nai*" ("those without an organization lack strength"), encapsulates the lived philosophy of collective strength and spiritual fellowship within the Matua community. Simultaneously, the study has explored the limitations of centralized control and the fragmentation caused by internal political rivalries—notably the contest between Santanu Thakur and Mamtabala Thakur—highlighting the tension between inherited spiritual authority and contemporary political ambition. Despite this, the charismatic and symbolic authority of Sree Harichand and Guruchand continues to serve as the moral and ideological anchor for the community. Theologically, texts like *Harileelamrita* and *Guruchand Charita* function as fixed doctrinal sources that guide behavior and structure community life. Verses such as "*Samal! Samal! tai Matua gan...*" and "*Mahatsawbe baje kotha...*" reinforce a disciplined religious life centered on *Harinam*, ethical conduct, and communal worship. These are not merely spiritual injunctions but sociological instruments of cohesion and norm enforcement. Ultimately, this study intended to demonstrate how the Matua Mahasangha, as a dynamic religious sect, articulates sectarian resilience by fusing charismatic devotion, organizational rationality, and grassroots participation. In doing so, it provides an important case for understanding how marginalized communities use religious institutions not only as a source of spiritual meaning but also as platforms for social reproduction, cultural resistance, and political expression. The Mahasangha's ability to balance tradition with adaptability, hierarchy with participation, and doctrine with everyday practice illustrates the complex workings of a lived religious modernity in contemporary Bengal.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- 1) *Guruchand Charita*. (n.d.). Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha Publication. (*Primary Religious Text*)
- 2) *Harileelamrita*. (n.d.). Thakurnagar: Matua Mahasangha Publication. (*Primary Religious Text*)
- 3) Fieldwork Data. (2022–2024). Author's ethnographic research and interviews conducted across Matua-dominated regions in West Bengal, including Thakurnagar, Cooch Behar, Nadia, and North & South 24 Parganas. (*Primary Field Data*)

Secondary Sources

- 1) Chakraborty, R. (1985). *Dalit Movement in Bengal: A Sociological Study*. Calcutta: Minerva. (*Secondary*)

Matua Mahasangha's Organisational Resilience and Secretarian Consciousness in a Changing World

- 2) Durkheim, É. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (J. W. Swain, Trans.). London: George Allen & Unwin. (Original work published 1912). (Secondary)
- 3) Folke, C., Carpenter, S., Walker, B., Scheffer, M., Chapin, T., & Rockström, J. (2010). Resilience thinking: Integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4), Article 20. <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-03610-150420> (Secondary)
- 4) Norris, F. H., Stevens, S. P., Pfefferbaum, B., Wyche, K. F., & Pfefferbaum, R. L. (2008). Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(1–2), 127–150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6> (Secondary)
- 5) Sarkar, S. (2018). *Marginal Sects and the State: The Politics of the Matua Mahasangha in West Bengal*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers. (Secondary)
- 6) Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1987). *A Theory of Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. (Secondary)
- 7) Troeltsch, E. (1931). *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (Vol. 2, O. Wyon, Trans.). London: George Allen & Unwin. (Secondary)
- 8) Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (A. M. Henderson & T. Parsons, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Secondary)
- 9) Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Secondary)
- 10) Zellner, M. L., & Petrowsky, M. C. (1997). Decentralization and social resilience: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, 25(1), 1–16. (Secondary)



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.