

E-THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis is an enquiry regarding how the two dissenting sects of the Bauls and the Matuas emerged as socially excluded groups who expressed their dissent against the caste system as well as of the major religions. They carved their own cultural and ritualistic expressions in opposition to the major religions which denigrated them. Their Bhakti and Sufi oriented theological background have been discussed. The 'Namashudra' identity of the Matuas, which was traditionally tied to the farmlands and rivers of certain districts of East Bengal has been given importance. Analysing the different reactions of the Matuas and Bauls against hegemonic advances by the major religions is a key part of the thesis. Alternative and nonconformist cosmologies which upended the traditional Varna-based social hierarchies are seen in both groups, are discussed. Both groups use deliberately ambiguous terminologies in their songs to conceal their secret, deviant religious practices. Despite such congruities, the most significant point of departure between the two group's approaches can be observed in their relationship with the modern state. The change in relations between religion and the state from pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial Indian state is discussed in this regard. Despite the special case of the Muslim Fakirs who still face persecution from the clergy, the modern state and the civil society have emerged as benefactors and saviours which has largely transformed the dissent of Bauls into an appreciated cultural artefact. Since the emergence of Matuas took place not in a pre-colonial state but under the British Raj, the necessities and means of survival have been very different. Realising that state power was a means to overcome the parochial barriers erected by the caste system, the Matuas have successfully utilised the colonial state for finding recognition. Therefore, the history of the Matua sect is one which is inseparable from the history of the colonial rule in Bengal and the subsequent freedom movement. The organizational capacity and political acumen of the Matuas, emerging as a result of their experience as a dissenting sect, is the definitive factor which distinguishes them from the Bauls.