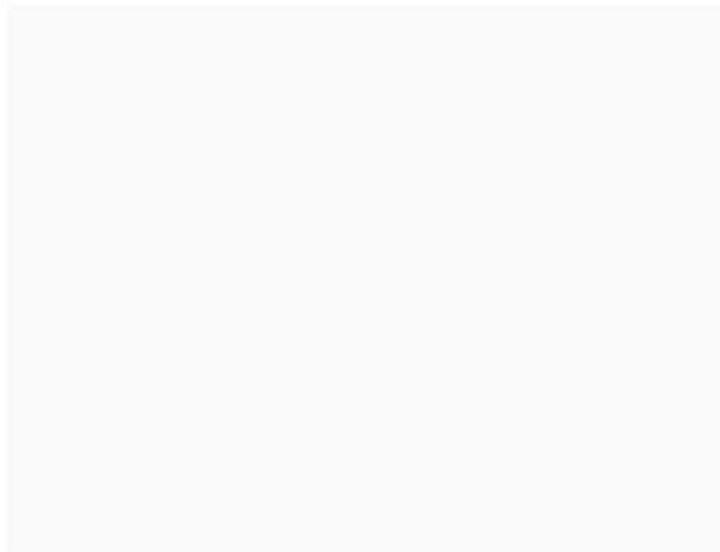


**Ph.D Abstract Submission for Pre-Submission Seminar
- Mainak Putatunda**

Title:

**‘Minor Traditions’ of Dissent: Comparative Study of the Matuas and
the Bauls 2000-2019**



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2023**

Statement of the Problem

Matuas are a group of Bengalis originally residing in the districts of Barisal and Faridpur of modern Bangladesh who predominantly come from the Namashudra caste which was considered an untouchable caste of Chandalas by the Caste Hindu society of pre-independence Bengal. Bauls are a group of rustic singers, musicians and philosophers which include both Hindu and Muslim followers. They are distinguished by their cryptic songs, their worship of the human body and their reclusive lifestyle. The present study, deals with the concept of dissent by these two groups. The word dissent, derived from the Latin 'dissentere' can mean 'differing in sentiment' as well as 'withholding assent'. The concept of dissent therefore includes an element of non-conformity to an established power structure. Since, power in society or a state is institutionalized by the political, social and religious organizations, therefore, dissenting against an organized, 'mainstream' religion is an important exercise in manifesting the agency of the oppressed.

In the European and American contexts, religious dissent took the form of establishment of millenarian sects such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons etc. in the Indian context too, religious dissent since the middle ages usually took the form of non-conforming sects who eventually managed to attract such a large congregation and develop such internal rules regarding the crucial aspects of inter-marriage and commensality that they eventually transformed into castes of their own and came to be accepted as a part of the dominant religions and social structure. The Lingayats and the Gaudiya Vaishnavas both are examples of such sects. However, it can be observed that when the caste identity of a dissenting sect is that of an untouchable or associated with Jati-based professions which were once considered as derogatory or unclean; such sects despite their success, remain an oppositional force to the established religion and can never be truly integrated.

This research work presents the Matua and the Bauls as two sects of such lower caste people belonging to the same geographic region and traces both their roots to Sahajiya Vaishnavism. The study first attempts to uncover the dissenting spirit of the Sahajiya

Vaishnavas and their opposition against Gaudiya Vaishnavism. It also addresses the issue of Sufi influence on development of the Baul sect and discusses how opposition against orthodox Islam forms the second layer of dissent in Baul theology and practices.

Despite the Matua and the Baul both being dissenting groups with a similar beginning; the outcome of their efforts appears to be very different. As members of their respective little traditions, success is measured in terms of maintaining their identity. However, since in the context of India, little traditions are inextricably linked with the question of caste, success is also measured in terms of their ability to challenge the system and either dismantling the structure or using it in their favour. The Matuas, by staying united and pressing their numerical advantage have been far ahead of the Bauls in terms of social, economic and political ascendancy. Bauls, on the other hand, by transforming into a symbol of idealized rural simplicity and secularism, have become the favourite cultural object for the urban Bengali. Misinterpretation of the message for the unity of the lower strata of both Hindu and Muslim society against oppression by leaders of both religions as a call for nineteenth century concept of secularism caused the Bauls to be the symbol of Bengal's religious toleration and helped to advance the narrative of Bengal's exclusivity in terms of identity-based politics.

The research, in view of these problems, attempts to bridge a conceptual gap in determining how these two minor traditions of dissent operate within a contemporary timeline and what explains their very different position today in terms of their relationship with the dominant religions and the caste structure.

Scope and Objective of the Study

The scope of this study can be defined according to three different parameters. Spatially the study is limited to the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad and this has a bearing on the outcome of the study as well. A significant section of the Matuas who now live in Bangladesh and affiliated to the Orakandi based section of the Matua Mahasangha is not a part of the study. It is limited to the Matuas presently living in the two afore-mentioned districts and whose primary affiliation lies with the Thakurnagar branch of the Matua Mahasangha. The spatial scope of the study also directly affects the interaction of the

researcher with the Baul community because the study excludes the influential and more visible section of the Bauls who are based in the Rarh region. The geographical limitation led to an emphasis in the experience of the Muslim Bauls and Fakirs who comprise a majority of the Bauls living in the region.

The timeline of the study is from the year 2000-2019. this timeframe is particularly significant because it charts the rise of the Matuas as a political force in Bengal catered to by every major political party. At the same time this period marks a steady and perhaps irreversible decline of the Bauls as a distinct sect of dissenters and religious practitioners. The year 2000 marks a change of guard in West Bengal's political leadership from Jyoti Basu to Buddhadeb Bhattacharya. The period almost immediately after this is marked with a new attempt at industrialization and the resulting de-stabilization of the status quo in the well-defined organizational politics of West Bengal. The year 2000 not only marks a change of attitude on part of the then ruling left-front government who started approaching the Matua community as representatives of a particular caste and not as a part of its larger stance regarding the refugees. The 2010 marked the culmination of the left-front's acceptance of caste-based identity politics in Bengal by formally recognizing and awarding the members of Thakur family in huge public gatherings. The Trinamool Congress and BJP have subsequently tried and successfully exploited the Matuas who control the electoral outcomes of as many as 78 Vidhan Sabha seats in West Bengal. On the other hand, this period saw the creation of numerous state-sponsored and in some cases foreign-funded organizations and yearly festivals where Baul singers not only performed their traditional songs but also participated in curated research and exposure activities by government and non-governmental organizations. Such programmes coupled with the easy and continuous availability of Baul songs in formats acceptable to a modern urban clientele fundamentally altered what it means to be a Baul. Form a group of reclusive mendicants whose cryptic songs were their protests and who performed the ultimate transgressions with the only object they own, that is their own body, the Baul became a performer of international stature who was now wholly dependent on the support of the government and the educated middle-class rather than the peasantry to which it originally belong. Since the class identity of the Baul got blurred in the wake of his social ascendance, his caste identity, which was originally the source of his defiance also became less important for him.

The title of the study identifies the Baul and the Matua as ‘minor traditions’ of dissent. Therefore, it is within the scope of the study to show how the two function as minor traditions within the twin great traditions of Hinduism and Islam. Identification as a minor tradition also implies that the dissent of the two groups, notwithstanding their socio-political relevance and relative success, ultimately failed to fundamentally alter the dominant religious and political power structures. Rather, they are absorbed into the mainstream of society, rendering their dissent ineffective.

The study ends in the 2019 which is also the year when the Citizenship Amendment Bill was passed in the Parliament, addressing a long-standing demand of the Matuas for Citizenship. Since, the CAA was passed the Matua politics has largely revolved around it and the question of caste-identity has taken a back-seat. The study therefore justifies the timeline as a conceptual snapshot of the period of re-emergence of identity politics for the Matuas and loss of identity for the Bauls.

The objective of this study is twofold. Firstly, it attempts to locate the Bauls and the Matuas as two distinct but related sects both of which began as dissenters against an established religion. The study further attempts to identify both groups as essentially low-caste groups who adhered to Chaityanite Vaishnavism before discovering their exclusion from conservative Vaishnavism on account of their caste. Initially, despite the considerable gap in time between the formation of Bauls and the Matuas, their form dissent took a similar turn as shunning of Vedic rituals, disregarding the Brahminical rules of endogamy and commensality and religious innovations on the way to fulfilment were practised by both. Secondly, the study tries to analyse the political success of the Matuas and their ability to preserve their unique identity and contrasts this with the loss of Baul identity their political irrelevance.

Research Questions:

1. Which factors are responsible for the rise of the Baul as an oppositional sect of the excluded within the framework of Gaudiya Vaishnavism?
2. How did the Bauls transformed their dissent into acceptable cultural expressions of Bhakti-oriented and Sufi influenced religiosity?
3. How did the untouchable Namashudras emerge as Matua, a dissenting sect both within and without Vaishnavism?
4. Why do the Baul and the Matua sects differ so significantly in their reaction to the hegemonic advances of dominant monolithic religions?

Hypothesis:

1. The different caste identities of the Matua and the Baul result in different priorities regarding their relation with hegemonic religions.
2. The Bhakti influenced secretive method of sadhana is not an inherent character of the Baul but one acquired due to their history of suffering atrocities from orthodox Hinduism and Islam made them adopt this path.
3. The numerical strength of the Matuas coupled with the emphasis of their founders on financial and religious self-sufficiency resulted in their success in negotiating with modern state power and hegemonic religion.
4. The desire to receive patronage from the state as well as the influential Bengali 'Bhadralok' class has eroded the integrity of the Baul as a religious dissenter to a very considerable degree and made the rituals associated with Baul identity secondary to many.

The study is proposed to be divided into the following chapters:

1. The Many Facets of Sectarian Dissent: Locating the Baul and the Matua

This chapter will introduce the two groups of Baul and Matua, explain the basic characteristics and attempt to project this study from a broad viewpoint of Sociology of Religion. As is necessitated by this approach, the chapter will delve into the conceptual questions of the relationship between religion and social and political structures. The problematic of the difference between the political and social achievements of the two sects emerging out of a similar predicament of resisting major religious beliefs. This chapter will geographically place the two sects and will introduce the reader with basic tenets of the two sects. This chapter will also elucidate the methodology used in the entire work and attempt to familiarize the reader with the unique social settings of the somewhat detached settlements of the Baul and Matua and introduce the characters necessary for participant observation.

2. The Journey from Vaishnava to Sahajiya: The Spiritual Trajectory of the Baul

This chapter shall introduce the reader with the concepts essential to the Baul identity and religious life and attempt to chart the emergence of Bauls as a group of religious dissenters arising out of post-Chaitanya Vaishnavism. The chapter focusses particularly on the caste identity of the Bauls and argues that it was their caste identity, rather than their heretical and profane practices which resulted in their virtual exclusion from the Vaishnava fold. The chapter presents literary evidence of the existence of Sahajiya currents of thought in ancient Indian religious thinking and discusses Tantra, Nath Pantha and Tantric Buddhism to establish this claim. Finally, the chapter presents the fascinating secret practices of the Baul Sadhana as a rebellion against the established order using the body as a site for rebellion. While the Baul songs and their Sahajiya texts as an expression of infrapolitics, which is a low key, non violent method adopted by oppressed people and groups.

3. The Matuas of Bengal: Their Origin, Beliefs and Social Position

This chapter describes the beginning of the Matua sect and focuses on the life and teachings of the two founders of the sect, namely, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. It pays particular attention to the role of education among the Matua and the early realization of the founders that state power was the way to uplift their people. History of the Matuas present a fascinating insight into the ways an untouchable sect identifies their immediate oppositional forces and navigates the treacherous path of national movement and nation-building championed by the upper castes. The chapter will pay particular emphasis on the effect of financial self-sufficiency of the Matuas and the total absence of their Jati related restraints on profession. It will further deal with the question of their identity and discuss the relevance of the concepts of caste, sect, cult and sampradaya in relation to this. Further, the chapter will deal with the revisionist effect of Ambedkarite Buddhism among a section of the Matuas and whether this has affected the common Matua follower. Finally, the chapter will shed light on the secret rituals and practices not commonly acknowledged within the Matuas which links them more closely with the Bauls as a dissenting sect.

4. Transformation of Baul and Matua Identity in Contemporary Bengal: Immersion and Consolidation of Identity

This penultimate chapter deals with the findings of the primary research as well as reflects on the contemporary observations made in secondary sources regarding the present status of the Bauls and the Matuas in Bengali society and politics. It presents the somewhat disappointing finding that Bauls, at least in the geographical area under study, have almost completely lost their identity as a dissenting religious sect as far as Hindu Bauls are concerned. They have turned into professional performers who only maintain a façade of esotericism and detachment which is a conscious performance for their urban and foreign audience who already have that image of a Baul in their minds. The chapter shows the clear differences existing between Hindu Bauls and Muslim fakirs in the region and explains the difference with the Baul scene in Rarh Bengal. Furthermore, the chapter delves into an understanding of the world of the Muslim Fakir in whom the characteristics of dissent is still very much alive. The chapter narrates the incidents of continuous religious persecution felt by the Muslim fakirs, the replication of caste structure among the rural

Bengali Muslim society and its implication for the Fakirs and their forced displacement and loss of identity in the face of an apathetic state and civil society. Moving on to the second part, the chapter presents the findings of primary research work on Matuas and analyses the importance of the sect identity, religious affiliation and opinions of the common Matua as well as presenting their view regarding political decisions taken by the leaders of the community. The chapter also attempts to test whether the Matuas have transcended from a dissenting sect to the political assertive Dalit identity.

5. Conclusion

The final chapter deals mostly with the present and attempts to present a rationale for the changing perception regarding the importance of the Matua as a political force among the political parties of Bengal. The chapter also shows the limitation of a pan-Indian Dalit political consciousness among the Matuas and the separation of their religion and politics in their eyes. It will further show evidence of a return of identity politics in Bengal primarily due to the political success of the Matuas. At the same time, the chapter will focus on the utter of loss of identity, commercialization and lack of cohesion the Bauls and point to the factors responsible for the decline of their identity as a dissenting religious sect.

Methodology:

This research, being a study of two religious and social groups and their modes of dissent from political and religious authority, is essentially qualitative in nature. A flexible approach was undertaken during the fieldwork. However, a few quantitative methods were also used during the process. For example, a cross-sectional study was undertaken where the study population was decided to be the residents of three villages bordering Bangladesh in the Bongaon subdivision of Nadia district. These villages were selected as there is a significant Matua population residing in these villages, many of which has migrated after 1971. Therefore, the question of citizenship, a key component of the questionnaire was put forward to them, with provision for anonymity of the respondents. Thereby, these villages had more chance of yielding rich data than other locations in the same area. A framework

was prepared to analyze the responses, with help of spreadsheet software, assigning codes for both closed and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. For close ended questions, such as profession, age, marital status, whether migrated before or after 1971, whether regularly participate in Matua religious programs (Matam) or not etc. Codes were assigned to measure and connect results based on predetermined parameters such as frequency of occurrence and willingness/unwillingness to answer specific questions. All close ended questions were either simple yes/no questions or clear multiple-choice questions. For example, for the question 'how frequently do you attend a Matua religious gathering', the options were, once a year or less, two to five times a year, more than five times a year. But the study design more commonly used was one-one-one interviews, group interviews and non-participant observation. It is to be mentioned that group interviews were of two types. In the first type, undertaken under a more informal setting such as a village tea shop or the sitting area of a temple, average participants were engaged with full disclosure of the researcher's purpose. These interviews were more freewheeling and veered more towards gathering a sense of a common sentiment on an issue like the dominant Matua Thakur family's involvement in politics. The second type of group interviews were undertaken during a festival or a special occasion when many Matua gurus, gosai or community leaders were present. An attempt was made to incorporate local Vaishnav and Muslim educated and influential participants in these groups where the discussion, more structured than the one described above, was geared to develop an understanding of the connections between the Namashudra Matuas and the other locally dominant but non-elite members of society. One on one interviews always involved specifically chosen special respondents who are knowledgeable leaders of their communities. It has been the most common type of design used by me to gather data regarding Bauls since it has been my experience that it is extremely difficult to gather meaningful information from people claiming to be Bauls or Fakirs who are too professional to engage in a general discussion regarding their beliefs or practices in front of a researcher. Another problem which led to the use on one on one interview being the primary method used by the researcher for Bauls is the realization that most respondents professing to be Bauls actually were mere performers of folk songs and knew nothing about the beliefs or secretive practices of a Baul sadhak. That realization however, was in itself, a source of interesting observations as the number of such Bauls and their percentage among sizable samples selected during festivals such as the Sati Ma mela

in Ghosh Para Kalyani and Agradwip mela in Agradwip, Bardhaman indicates in an empirical manner, to the present status of the Bauls.

Secondary data was also extremely important for the research and both vernacular and English sources were pursued. A good number of sources available on the Matuas were collected as a result of fieldwork. It revealed a world of sectarian vernacular publications, in book, journal and newspaper formats which otherwise would not have been accessible. Perusal of these resources also revealed the identities of Matua intellectuals who, may not always be formally educated but possesses impressive knowledge on Matua literature and religious views.

Throughout the research, non-participant observation remained the most important tool of the research. The inability of the researcher to perform participant observation due to the barriers of caste and social position bars this research work from being considered an ethnography. Reflective Journal Logs were kept throughout the primary research process in order to organize the thoughts and findings of the researcher.

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20.02.2023

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20.02.23

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