CHAPTER 10

Summary and Conclusion

I

Since the establishment of the temple of Taraknath in early eighteenth century by an immigrant Kshatriya king, and a Dashnami monastery later by a Saiva monk belonging to the Giri order, Tarakeswar has passed through several developmental phases. The emergence of the deity, however, is associated with a folk-legend having some historical basis which describes the interaction of certain uncanny events with a host of factors, e.g., dream, supernaturalism, plants, animals and humans, like in most legends from medieval Bengal. The main motive behind the establishment of the Siva temple at Tarakeswar by the non-Bengalee king, Bishnudas, was possibly because he wanted to maintain his status and dignity among the peasants and artisans who constituted the majority in this area as also to subscribe to or exploit the religious sentiments of the local people. He might have felt that there were the famous pilgrim centres of the Saktas in Kalighat and Tarapith, and of the Vaishnavites in Nabadwip located nearby but there was no Saiva centre of similar importance around, although the area was inhabited mostly by the low caste Saivites. In order to fill up the vacuum the king possibly brought the image, which is made of reddish black stone available generally in northern India but not in the alluvial soil of lower Bengal, from some place outside Bengal and established here.

From the very beginning the management of the temple was vested in the heads of the Tarakeswar monastery by the king. These sannyasis (ascetics) known as mahants were involved in the initial phase in religious activities mainly. They preached their particular philosophical doctrines, perpetuated
the "spiritual guide — disciple tradition", imparted religious instructions to disciples and rendered ritual services to the temple. They preferred the site for its vantage location, i.e., a secluded place surrounded by thick forests would make it difficult for any intruder to gain an easy access into the monastery and cause defilement or any other mischief. Whether or not these sannyasis themselves initially indulged in plunder, commercial activities and armed raids that were so common among the Giri order of the Dasnami sannyasis in the nineteenth century (Cohn 1974) cannot be ascertained, but in the later period they certainly did, as the data show. They showed an increasing interest in raising the income of this religious estate by procuring land through gift or purchase. Many people were brought in from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and adjoining areas of Tarakeswar to help in the ritual services and they were allotted free homestead land, and other provisions were made for settling them. The mahants reclaimed marshy lands, constructed roads, buildings, organised markets, schools and other cultural centres; In order to attract people from wider areas they introduced various rituals in the services of this temple, undertook pilgrimages to distant places and participated in religious conferences in different parts of India. They also spent a lot of time on zamindary matters, litigations, tackling issues concerning the estate and the people of Tarakeswar, and in the process imbied all the vices of the early zamindars. To achieve secular status they went to the extent of inviting European dignitaries to this place and displayed a luxurious way of life.

With the end of the Giri mahantship in the mid-twenties, the management of this religious estate took a new turn. Instead of private control it came under the management of a democratically selected committee as per the scheme framed by the State Government. The power of the mahant became limited and the
intervention of the public in the affairs of the temple-estate became frequent. The present Bengalee mohant has been paying much attention for the well-being of the residents — the donation of land for the establishment of a degree college, the installation of water-works and provision for municipal services to the town are but a few instances of his contribution.

Despite the prevailing urban features of Tarakeswar, e.g., its heterogeneous population, half of which is constituted by immigrants, and individuals connected with commercial enterprises, educational and recreational centres and communication net-works, the town exhibits a rural character in having particular sectors occupied by specific castes, low level of education and partially agriculture based occupation. The present structure of the town, revealed from the sample survey, shows its multi-caste pattern in which the high caste people, the Brahmins and Kayasthas, predominate. The immigrants mostly belong to neighbouring areas and some to places farther away. A substantial number of adult immigrants live singly. The majority of the residents live in nuclear families. Nearly one-third of the sample households are engaged in business, one-fourth in unskilled manual work, one-fourth in various professional jobs and the rest in white-collar jobs. The relatively educated high caste residents pursue non-manual occupations, the moderately educated middle castes occupy business and various entrepreneurial occupations, and the illiterate low caste individuals are in manual semi-skills/unskilled occupations. The occupational patterns of Tarakeswar have been shaped by the enormous on-rush of pilgrims. The deity and the pilgrims, both taken together, can in a broader sense, be considered to be the sheet-anchor of the economy which governs the vocational life of the people residing the area. Nearly half of the town-dwellers show their dependence on the religious economy of Tarakeswar which, however, is differentially distributed among the different
caste-groups. The higher the ritual status of a casta, the greater is its economic dependence on the temple-estate and pilgrims.

The influence of the deity upon the socio-cultural and economic life of the town-dwellers seemed pervasive. In taking decision on issues like marriage, fertility, initiation, litigation, dispute and even community welfare, the religious character of the town is considered and the favour of the deity is sought. The residents' profound regard for the deity is reflected in their faith, devotion, cognition, beliefs and diverse practices. They take part in the affairs of the temple voluntarily, help pilgrims during the peak season and maintain frequent contact with the functionaries for the smooth functioning of the religious institution. They encourage their friends and relatives living outside to visit the place which is not always mingled with economic interest.

II

Structurally, the sacred complex of Tarakeswar is composed of three elements: the sacred geography, the sacred performances and the sacred specialists, conforming thus to the basic pattern of many Puranic places of pilgrimage. The sacred geography of Puranic sacred complex consists of: a well-defined boundary demarcating sacred from secular zones, large number of sacred centres of different sectarian relevance which are scattered either singly or in clusters and segments and shows a continuity. These sacred centres have varying degrees of importance judged by the number of pilgrims, patrons and the myths or the extent of popularity (Vidyarthi et al. 1973). At Tarakeswar the boundary of the sacred geography is not well-defined as in Gaya, Puri, Kashi, Deoghar, Dwarka, etc. Since there is no mention of this place in the Puranas, the continuity of these sacred centres from the ancient to the contemporary period cannot be traced. The sacred zone which is
known as Sivakshetra (place of Lord Siva) does not clearly demarcate the secular zone of the town as many secular establishments have grown up within it. The sacred centres are few in number and these have hardly developed into clusters or segments. Except the temples of Taraknath and Loknath no other temple or shrine has acquired all-India importance. But nevertheless, the presence of the sacred centres for the three principal Hindu sects — Saiva, Sakta and Vaishnavite and also folk-deities in the sacred geography of Tarakeswar in their diverse manifestations shows the similarity of Tarakeswar with many other Puranic pilgrim centres.

The sacred performances in a sacred complex are generally of two kinds: one organized by the management and the other by the devotees. The rules of worship follow those laid down in the scriptures. The devotees perform a large variety of rituals and offer ritual-offerings according to the sect and sex of the deity. In the temples of Taraknath, Kali, Lakshmi-Narayan and Damodar, services are conducted as per the scriptural rules but in the shrines of Rakhal Raja, Mukunda Gosh, earlier sannyasis, bulls and Sitala, these take place as per family and local customs. The nature of ritual offerings show, however, variations in terms of the sect and sex of the deity. As in other Puranic places of pilgrimage, in Tarakeswar also the pilgrims perform a large variety of rituals like, darshan (auspicious view of the deity), snan (holy bath), puja (worship), mundan (tonsure), etc. The practice of offering of the sacred water of the Ganges over Lord Taraknath after carrying it from a long distance reminds one of similar practice in Deoghar. The three main festivals, namely, the Sravan (July-August), the Sivaratri (February-March) and the Gajan (March-April), attract people of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The popularity of Tarakeswar among the people of neighbouring areas is mainly for the rituals of dharna and dandi. All these, and the
frequent repetitive occurrence of the vedic sacrifice, narration of scriptural and mythological stories, singing of devotional songs, etc., bear close similarity to the features noticed in other Puranic places of pilgrimage, and variations that were noticed in the sacred performances are only superficial and due to local reasons.

The sacred specialists in Puranic places of pilgrimage maintain more or less an orthodox way of life as observed by Vidyarthi in Gaya (1967), Patnaik in Puri (1977), Jindel in Nanddevra (1976), Vidyarthi et al in Kashi (1978), and so on. These specialists comprise people of various castes and sex. In Tarakeswar, except in the case of the mohant (head of the monastery) no such orthodox behaviour pattern has been found among the sacred specialists and associates. They comprise heterogeneous people. Both Brahmins and non-Brahmins are found among them; some of them work for the preservation and maintenance of the cultural traditions and eminence of this centre. The head of the monastery, for instance, acts not only as the spiritual guide of his disciples, priests, and pilgrims but also offers advice and instructions to the functionaries working in the sacred zone. He maintains link between the public and temple through the monastery. The duties, rights, and obligations of the pundits, priests, barbers, potters, florists, sacred water-carriers and other functionaries towards the functioning of the temple are fixed and varied and their is division of labour among them.

Except for certain demographic and family composition traits, in most cultural behaviour, the priests resemble the general population of the town. In the absence of comparable data from other places of pilgrimage it cannot be asserted whether the preponderance of joint families, found among the Tarakeswar priests, is a feature of the priestly community in general. However, the characteristic
priestly features, e.g., priestly heritage, single-caste residence pattern, local caste-endogamy, close kinship network, low interaction with outer society, orthodox behaviour and professional monopoly, so common among the priests of Gaya (Vidyarthi 1967), Puri (Patnaik 1977) or other Puranic places of pilgrimage, are not marked among the priests of Tarakeswar. Not all the priests are completely dependent on priesthood; the majority of the priest families have additional sources of livelihood, viz., agriculture, business, service, rent of rest-house, etc. Economically, three categories of priests exist and they tend to differ in respect of social and professional behaviour. Thus, the priests belonging to the upper category comprising about one-fifth of the total priest families are least dependent on priesthood for subsistence and has a steady earnings from other sources. They are relatively highly educated and mostly live in joint families. They enjoy a high social status and a decision making role in the affairs of the town. Professionally, they maintain the traditional clientele (jalmani) relationship with the pilgrims whom they recruit usually on selective basis. The priests belonging to the middle category representing about one-third of the total priest families show a greater dependence on priesthood. Most of the additional earners in families are engaged in petty business and low grade services. They are moderately educated and are held low esteem for their disdainful behaviour. Most of them serve the pilgrims, contacted through pilgrim-guides, on contract basis. The priests belonging to the lower category are both educationally and economically backward. They reveal utmost dependence on priesthood for subsistence. They have small nuclear families. They render ritual assistance to all types of pilgrims recruited by themselves.
With regard to the number and types of pilgrims to Tarakeswar the data reveal a continuous increase in number and diversification of types. The flow of pilgrims varies greatly in terms of the nature of the ritual and festive occasion. The reasons for the increased rush in recent years are improved communication, growth of population, propagation of the glory of Lord Taraknath through film, radio, newspaper and proliferation of travel agencies organizing sight-seeing tours and pilgrimages. The majority of the pilgrims visiting Tarakeswar are from West Bengal belonging to the districts of Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapur, and are spread over a radial distance of about 80 kms. from the temple, which suggests a sub-regional spread of this sacred complex.

The data also reveal that the pilgrims come from 54 different castes among which five, viz., Brahmin, Kayastha, Mallahya, Bania and Pundrakshatriya form the majority. Nearly two-third of the sample pilgrims came from urban areas and belong to literate, joint and economically lower-middle class families. They pursue service, business, and manual factory work more than agriculture. These overall characteristics of the Tarakeswar pilgrims suggest that the cult of Taraknath has exerted a greater influence on the urban than on the rural people.

Typologically, the regular, Sravani and Gaor pilgrims are distinct from one another in respect of demographic and cultural characteristics. This has also been evident in their pilgrim behaviour and purpose of visit. For example, the regular pilgrims comprise mainly the middle-aged, literate, and married individuals who belong to high and middle caste Bengalee families pursuing mainly white-collar jobs or business. They come generally accompanied by family members. The Sravani pilgrims, on the other hand, comprise the relatively less educated, young, married and unmarried persons belonging to high and low caste families. They include
Bengalees and non-Bengalees who are engaged in petty-trades, factory labour and agriculture. They generally visit the temple with friends and co-workers. The Gajan pilgrims are mainly middle-aged married individuals with low literacy, from low caste rural families of both West Bengal and Bangladesh representing agriculturists, artisans and service caste people. They visit this place either singly or with neighbours on particular mission.

The motives behind pilgrimage are diverse and vary largely in terms of the pilgrims' demographic, cultural and economic characteristics. The young pilgrims come mainly for recreation, the middle-aged ones for fulfilment of vows concerning problems of the material life, while the old pilgrims, for receiving spiritual satisfaction. Irrespective of age, the female pilgrims are largely motivated by problems concerning the material life and they visit the temple in large numbers. Besides age and sex, the pilgrim's education, economic condition and rural-urban location also affect some purposes of visit. With the increase in the level of education and economic status, and change from rural to urban habitat, the incidence of pilgrimage for the fulfilment of material desires decreases but not for obtaining spiritual satisfaction.

Despite the difference in their socio-economic and cultural background, preparatory details, mode of travel, performance of rituals, length of stay in the pilgrim centre, etc., the pilgrims in general, and the Sravani pilgrims in particular, are united by a bond of old customs which inspires them to travel together for a common purpose. While on pilgrimage, they follow the local customs willingly and earnestly, utter the holy slogans in a common dialect and undertake the ordeals of the journey patiently. The social barriers of ethnicity, caste, class and language, however, still do not allow them to
merge into a homogeneous community — a feature also noticed by Karve in Maharashtra.

Knowledge about the efficacy of the pilgrimage is not equally clear to all the pilgrims. The educated group is relatively more conscious and vocal compared to the illiterates who are ignorant and, by and large, reticent. In certain cases, the rural uneducated pilgrims also come with reference to tradition for justifying their ritual conduct. The pilgrimage in this respect brings forth ideas from different sources of tradition: Brahmanical and folk. The majority of the non-BengaleeSravani pilgrims seem confused as to the reason for undertaking the journey on foot. Culturally, they seem to belong to the oral traditional level. Some Bengalee pilgrims, accompanying their wives or relatives and refusing to attach any religious importance to their visit but at the same time visit the temple and pay obeisance to the cult of Taraknath, show a change and continuity of the age-old institution of pilgrimage.

In spite of recent increasing incidence of Tarakeswar pilgrimage a declining trend appears with regard to the visit for the dharna ritual. During the last 25 years there is a consistent decrease in the number of dharna pilgrims in general (except for the period of 1950-51 when it recorded a slight increase), and the rate of decline is faster in the late sixties compared to the earlier periods. A distinct drop in the percentage of pilgrims coming from the metropolis and an increase from rural and urban industrial belt is apparent. Caste-wise, the incidence of the dharna attendance does not show any significant change over time, which possibly suggests that the decline in their overall number is caused not by the reduction of pilgrims from any particular caste.

The decline in the rate of dharna attendance may be attributed not to people's loss of faith in this ritual in the deity, but to many new and easily
available alternatives and the changing attitude of the people, mental make-up
and domestic composition making this ritual non-attractive and uneconomic. The
therapeutic utility of dharna or for that matter, similar divine aids, may,
however, persist to provide peace and generate hope in the frustrated, hopeless
and lonely souls with nothing much else to hold on to, and it is too early to
predict how soon, if at all, it will die out in future.

IV

The religious institution of Taraknath also has a pronounced secular
aspect in the economic sphere. The estate earns from various sources, e.g., regular
payment of annuities by the State Government, gifts and donations from pilgrims,
rent and tax from the houses and establishments, interest from the bank against
fixed-deposits, lease-outs through auctioning fishing-ponds, tonsuring centre,
sites for stalls, etc., collection of entrance fee from the vehicles, sale of
gold and silver donated by pilgrims, and so on. The investment of the fund in the
bank for interests, keeping buildings and other establishments for rent, and
leasing-out various sources of income show the secular aspect of this religious
institution. It is different from an economic institution in so far as the
religious estate is an institution without the usual profit orientation of an
enterprise. For instance, the income which it receives from different sources is
spent mostly for the daily worships, benefit of the devotees, enhancing the
religious image of the place, and spending on charitable and relief purposes.
A portion of the income is spent on salaries of the employees also who are res­
ponsible for the various services of the estate and the temple. These employees
are drawn from various castes, linguistic groups, and places among whom the
Brahmins predominate.
In an indirect way, the sacred complex of Tarakeswar has provided economic opportunities to a good number of professional castes who cater to the needs of the pilgrims by providing their caste-occupational services. The pundits, priests, barbers, potters and various other caste-occupations of the town and surrounding areas have been deriving considerable benefit out of the temple by a process of ritual re-inforcement, thereby retarding the professionalisation of occupations to a certain extent. Even places distantly located from Tarakeswar reap the economic benefits out of the temple. Thus, in Sheoraphuli, a small town situated about 55 kms from Tarakeswar, various cottage industries have developed of which the pottery, yoke-pole and reticulated sling are noteworthy. Besides the artisans, a large number of people of various castes and cultural backgrounds are involved in the services of the trekking pilgrims during the Sravan and Gajan periods. Some of the crafts and paintings find their markets in such distant place as Sultanganj in Bihar. All these show that the pilgrim centre of Tarakeswar fulfils not only the sacred needs of the locality and its neighbourhood but also generates economic opportunities.

There is yet another aspect of Tarakeswar which must needs be mentioned. The expanded economic and market activities have led to the widespread tendency for immediate and quick pecuniary gains through covert and dubious methods. Manipulations of gifts, temple funds, illicit renting of accommodations meant specifically for the pilgrims by the employees and certain categories of ritual associate are but a few albeit glaring examples of this. It is not unusual to find humbly paid estate-employees maintaining a style and standard of living absurdly disproportionate to their declared incomes. Much more interesting is their rationalisation of such deviant conduct. They argue (when taken in confidence) that the all-pervasive sacred character of Tarakeswar will nullify their sins;
In conformity with the traditions of the Puranic places of pilgrimage, the non-Puranic sacred complex of Tarakeswar also shows the basic structural and functional characteristics of Hindu civilization. The catholicity of the Hindu religion and its syncretic ideals are well-discernable here; But religion appears to serve people here more on the practical than on the divine level; The cult of Taraknath not only relieves people from their worldly-worries concerning health, fertility, marriage and general well-being but also helps in their journey to the other world, as revealed by the slogan of "Par Karega" (will relieve of all afflictions). The structure of the Tarakeswar pilgrimage is based mostly on the elements of vow and worship rather than on spiritual upliftment; Further, Tarakeswar mainly serves the secular interests of a certain section of people, within a well-demarcated territory, with a radius of 40-45 kms; who derive material and psychological sustenance from the temple and, therefore, hold zealously to all its traditional ritual ramifications; For most of these people, however, such a religious belief is more an unconscious acceptance what appears to them as the basic tenets of Hindu philosophy and theology than a fully understood intellectual conviction; This unconscious acceptance of prevailing rites and practices is a general characteristic of tradition (Shils 1975, p.187); Not being based on any objective assessment, the concepts, beliefs and practices vary considerably among some ritual specialists and associates, particularly the priests, pilgrim-guides and a section of potters as also among the pilgrims. Such an inconsistency also seems to be a characteristic of tradition, in general.

The recent urban development and the changing socio-economic conditions in and around the sacred complex have altered some of the traditional values and
religious relationships, for instance, those between the priests and pilgrims, temple and priests, temple and pilgrims, and so on, into economic ones while retaining many others. The traditional clientele (jaishani) relationship between the priests and the pilgrims has been changing fast into contractual one. The priests look at the temple more as an economic rather than religious centre. Widespread dissatisfaction prevails among most of these priests whose acceptance of priesthood has been mainly decided by sheer economic compulsion and not by choice or free will. This dissatisfaction is also due to the prevailing notion that the priests are a spiteful extortionist group. The pilgrims, who constitute mostly the poor and middle class people lack resources to spend, are argumentative in every ritual details and inclined to adopt short-cut means. Another interesting point is the changing character of pilgrimage from an act of religious faith to tourism and search of amusement and pleasure; Because of rise in the level of education and improved modern conveyances, people have shown more interest in conducted tours now-a-days, which combine both religious and sight-seeing tours.

The present study has also revealed an ever-increasing interest in trekking pilgrimage, especially among the younger sections. The long trek with its necessary paraphernalia, including the "Bhola Baba Far Karega" slogan, poses some basic questions concerning the socio-economic situations of the contemporary society and cannot be treated as a passing phenomenon or efflux of errant enthusiasm. For instance, the increase of tension and frustration in life, the more loss of faith and self-reliance might occur. The utter loneliness and a sense of insecurity produced by the fast disintegrating nature of our contemporary society, in which the youth is denied of minimum education, recreation, shelter, security, love and appreciation and the pervasive atmosphere of oppression and exploitation, along with the usual craving for novelty and adventure among the youth may all have induced them to undertake this hazardous and tiring journey as an outlet of their
unused energy, Devotion plays rather a subsidiary role in this respect;

In summary, this study of Tarakeswar reveals that the wind of change in cultural values blowing over our society has affected the structure of this sacred complex and the beliefs and practices of the pilgrims, and that while people continue to seek fulfillment of material and psychological needs through religious acts as in the past, the educated urban people and especially the youth, undertake pilgrimage more as a temporary escape from the monotony, tension and frustration of everyday life. Tarakeswar remains, and may continue to remain, like most other places of pilgrimage, a refuge to the hapless, but the manner in which it soothes the weary souls may change in tune with changing times.