INTRODUCTION

Every religion prescribes certain places as sacred which men of faith visit periodically or cherish to visit at least once in their life. Monks, sages, wayfarers, and even kings, merchants, and ordinary householders have been drawn towards such centres with a sense of inner compulsion. Through their patronage such centres have grown up and flourished to become places of pilgrimage sanctified by tradition.

Unlike other religions, Hinduism is remarkably free from compulsion and coercion in tenets and directions to its followers. It does not lay down any concrete injunction to its followers to visit the holy places. Nevertheless, pilgrimage to holy places like Amarnath, Badrinath, or Pashupatinath in the Himalayan region; Somnath on the Arabian Sea; Puri on the Bay of Bengal; Rameswaram or Kanyakumari on the Indian Ocean; Jwalamukhi in the Punjab Hills; or Kamrup in Assam and many others are of inestimable value to the devout Hindu.

Being offshoots of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism share the liberalism of the mother religion. Pilgrimage to the holy places in these two religions is not a must. But Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinara have been prescribed as sacred in Buddhism for their hallowed association with the life and works of Lord Buddha and constitute centres of pilgrimage for the Buddhists all over the world. For the same reason the Jains regard Ajmer and Powaipuri as sacred.

Likewise, for the Jews and the Christians, Jerusalem and Bethlehem command their total spiritual and religious allegiance.

Islam issues categorical mandates to its believers to visit Mecca and Madina. This pilgrimage is not only a sacred duty that enhances the social
status of the visitor but also endows him with special qualities and religious privileges. To a Muslim, regional peregrinations to the tombs and graves of saints and seers are also acts of holiness.

India has innumerable sacred places associated with different religious faiths among which, as may be expected, those associated with Hinduism form the largest number. Their distribution all over the country and the regular flow of pilgrims to these places speak of the important role that these holy centres play in our society. The urge to visit a holy place transcends the interest in objects of culture and relates itself to the fulfilment of certain ultimate values in the realm of the spiritual and metaphysical, such as obtaining solace, spiritual satisfaction, expiation of sin, and so on. However, more often than not, the metaphysical and material interests and expectations are blended; and the propitiation of the deities may follow from a wide variety of needs of the devotees. Thus, disease, employment, fertility, nuptiality, and even ambition may lead one to the alters of the major pilgrimages.

I

During the last one and a half century, in India as well as in the Western countries, a vast amount of literature has been produced on Sanskritic tradition. A great deal of attention has also been paid to the institution of pilgrimage and to the different aspects of this tradition (see, for instance, Monier-Williams [1957], Dubois [1957], Kane [1957], Thomas [1957], Pavitranaanda [1957], Dave [1957], Datar [1961]). While these works provide one with valuable information about the utility of the institution, it was not until the mid-fifties of the present century that systematic studies on pilgrim centres were
initiated, particularly by the anthropologists. Redfield [1955] pointed out that for studying the complexities of Indian civilization and of the social organization of tradition, study of the traditional centres could provide valuable information. He introduced the concepts of great tradition and little tradition and paved the way for studying the temples and places of pilgrimage.

From the very beginning places of pilgrimage have been variously conceived by different scholars. The concept of orthogenetic transformation of cities set forth by Redfield and Singer [1954] provided useful tool for the study of a place of pilgrimage; Marriott and Cohn [1956] found the concept of net-works and centres in integration of Indian civilization particularly important in this respect and modified the earlier concepts of universalisation and parochialisation of Marriott [1955]; Bharati [1963, 1970] and Wayman [1966] also have shown considerable interest in the pilgrimage sites and pilgrimage institution from the point of view of the Indian tradition.

Among Indian scholars who made attempts at first, to study the places of Hindu pilgrimage, mention may be made of Vidyarthi [1967]. He conceived the place of pilgrimage as a dimension of Indian civilization and analyzed its structure in terms of three analytical tools: the sacred geography, the sacred performances and the sacred specialists. Since then a large number of studies have appeared centering around different places of Hindu pilgrimage in India and Nepal and a few more are expected shortly. Among others mention may be made of the studies on Bhubaneswar by Mahapatra [1973], Deoghar by Narayan [1972], Dwarka by Upadhyaya [1973], Janakpur by Jha [1973],
Pasupatinath by Roy (1963), Puri by Jha (1978), and Rameswaram and Tirupati by Sahay (1974). These studies indicate a wider applicability of Vidyarthi’s model of sacred complex. From his study of Kashi sacred complex Saraswati (1974) observed that in the tirthas (places of pilgrimage) of ancient origin a uniform cultural pattern is grounded on the canons of the smritis and puranas.

While anthropologists were engaged in structural analysis of the Hindu place of pilgrimage, some scholars from other disciplines like geography, history, town planning also, approached the problem from other angles. Thirunavaranan and Padmanabham (1957) studied the temple town of Tiruttani in South India and examined its pilgrim flow into the religious centre. Law (1940) described the geographical distribution of various holy places in India providing, of course, some information on the deity, sect or season of pilgrimage. Stein (1960) traced the economic networks of Tirupati temple showing how a sacred institution is catering to the secular functions of the society outside. He (1967) also studied the pilgrim centres as nuclear areas of intensive Hinduisation for analyzing the problem of state formation. Utilising the geographical concept of central place in the pilgrim centres, Stoddard (1968) tried to examine the relationship between the place of pilgrimage and the Hindu population, and found a negative association between the two. Following the lead of Sopher (1968) who analyzed the circulatory mechanism of pilgrims in Gujarat, another geographer, Bharadwaj (1975) studied nine Hindu places of pilgrimage in northern India conceiving them as a system of nodes having varying degrees of religious import. Pillay’s (1958) study of Sucindram temple discusses the architectural and certain religious aspects of the temple.

Under the initiation of Bose, studies of the organization of services in the Lingaraj temple of Bhubaneswar were undertaken by Patnaik and Roy (Bose,
Patnaik and Roy [1958]; and the study of iconography, caste participation and service pattern, modes of offerings, and purpose of worship of the four temples in Midnapur was made by Bhowmick [1965]; Saraswati [1965] studied a temple in Goa which symbolised the lineage, vitalized the kinship bonds and united its members to live under a common roof. Goswami and Morab [1970] examined the occupational change among a priestly caste of Mysore and observed a growing trend of shifting the traditional occupation among the present and younger generations of priests. Sinha's [1972] study of Kali temple at Kalighat describes in brief the role played by this temple in regional and national integration and the role of modern scientific media in the spread of the cult of the Kali temple.

Jindel's study on Nathdwara [1976], a celebrated centre of Hindu pilgrimage in Rajasthan, gives evidence of a multi-dimensional-cum-multi-disciplinary approach. In the study of the cultural tradition in Puri, there has been a further attempt to examine the sacred complex in its entirety after incorporating some new concepts for a structural analysis of Indian tradition (Patnaik [1977]). The collaborative work of Vidyarthi and his colleagues on Kashi [1979] is yet another example of a comprehensive work where, besides analysing the prevailing concepts of sacred complex, an attempt has been made to study the town elaborately. The South Asia Interdisciplinary Regional Research Programme, of late, has brought out a fairly comprehensive work on the cult of Jagannath and the regional tradition in Orissa approaching the subject from the points of view of indology, anthropology, history, and philosophy (Eschmann et al [1978]). Such varied experiences on Hindu places of pilgrimage suggest the increasing importance of such study.
II

The foregoing account gives a fairly exhaustive idea about the works on
the Hindu places of pilgrimage in India. The majority of them are centered on
such places which have more or less old history of origin and development and are
regarded as Puranic tirthas (places of pilgrimage referred to in the ancient texts); The regional or relatively minor places of pilgrimage with some exceptions
(Jha [1975], Bhowmick [1977]), generally escaped attention of workers. As a result, it is not known whether the patterns namely, (a) well-developed sacred geography
having defined boundary, multiple segments, clusters, and centres of varying
degrees of religious importance, (b) diverse sacred performances showing sanskritic
and folk elements, and (c) sacred specialists of different cultural levels,
observed by the students of Indian civilization in the major places of pilgrimage
also occur at the regional sacred complexes.

The above studies further show that not much attention has been given to the
local social milieu in maintaining the sacred character of the town. That the different
groups of people living at a place of pilgrimage have different commitments and
behaviours towards the deity and thus to the entire religious system of the town,
seem to have received very little attention. By being primarily interested in the
structural analysis of the sacred complexes, these scholars possibly ignored explo­
ation of the insiders' view of the pilgrim centre which is no less important to
explore;

Another significant feature of the earlier studies, particularly by anthro­
pologists, is a somewhat casual treatment of the pilgrims. The pilgrims have only
recently been called the "consumers of the sacred" (Vidyarthi [1977]). They, however,
have received considerable attention from the cultural geographers (Sopher [1968],
Bharadwaj [1975]); Even when the pilgrims received some attention, they have hardly
been considered in relation to their demographic, socio-cultural, economic, and
other characteristics so that the relevance of the institution vis-a-vis the pilgrim
centre could be properly assessed. It is not known, as a result, whether all cate­
gories of Hindu population participate in the pilgrimage; to what extent the
behaviour of pilgrims is influenced by their socio-economic characteristics;
whether the purpose of pilgrimage vary in relation to social background, and so on.
Such pertinent issues, however, are not discussed in most of the studies available.
Tarakeswar, a famous place of Hindu pilgrimage in eastern India, has for more than a century and a half, attracted many pilgrims from far and near. Its importance and development, as the a priori information goes, are mainly due to the temple patronage of Taraknath; The town of Tarakeswar minus Taraknath leaves nearly nothing.

The present study proposes to examine the various processes operating in this minor regional centre of pilgrimage. It also would throw light on some social functions of religion, particularly how does religion help the existence of a society as an ordered and continuing system of relationships. More specifically, the idea behind this intensive study of Tarakeswar is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the variety, complexity, and richness of the culture of this religious complex: to examine the structure and function of this relatively recent and non-Puranic place of pilgrimage, and to assess how it compares with Puranic places of pilgrimage and reflects the characteristics of the Indian civilization. Besides the analysis of its history of origin and development, socio-economic condition, sacred complex, pilgrims and pilgrimage, its diverse impacts on the local, regional and extra-regional populations would also be examined. While discussing the functional aspects of the pilgrim town, the persistence of traditional values and the emergence of newer ones, if any, will also be considered. In sum, the present study aims at answering the following few questions:

1) What are the salient characteristics of Tarakeswar as a place of Hindu pilgrimage? How do they compare with Puranic places of pilgrimage?

2) Do the modes of living and behaving of the residents of Tarakeswar town depend on the functioning of the temple? If so, how do these vary in terms of their socio-economic dimensions?
3) Who are the priests? Do they constitute a separate group in respect of their social and cultural life?

4) What is the role played by the priests and other functionaries to retain the eminence of this pilgrim centre?

5) Who are the pilgrims? How do they vary in their socio-cultural background, pilgrimage behaviour, and purpose of visit?

6) Do the characteristics and motives of pilgrims change with time and if so, what does the change indicate?

7) What is the nature of relationships established by the temple with its town and hinterland?

The following propositions were formulated:

(a) The three basic elements of a sacred complex i.e., sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred specialists, found in the Puranic tirthas (pilgrim centres referred to in the texts) may also be present in a non-Puranic place of pilgrimage, namely, Tarakeswar.

(b) Tarakeswar, being a pilgrim town, has a characteristic socio-economic structure depending largely upon the temple and pilgrims.

(c) Because of exposure to the wider socio-economic milieu, the nature of relationships between various sets of clients has started changing towards the secular direction.

It is hoped that this study will fill up some of the gaps in the past study of Indian civilization. A lot of research work has been made by eminent scholars about the big famous centres of Hindu pilgrimage from different angles of vision. But it will not be, perhaps, wrong to say that a thorough and systematic anthropological study of small centres of regional pilgrimage is yet to be undertaken. This anthropological study of Tarakeswar is an attempt to provide some missing links left in the earlier works, as discussed earlier.
Field investigation was carried out by the author between 1973 and 1977. The field-trips were spread out so as to cover the various seasons of the year.

The research was conducted in several stages. Before beginning the field investigation, textual materials such as the published and unpublished data from the Census, Municipal office, Estate office, Court records, private documents in the form of annual registers, letters, manuscripts, etc., were collected. The author had to rely upon a number of field methods for the collection of data. Depending upon the purpose of the specific inquiry and the unit of investigation, the following methods were used: (a) observation, (b) household enumeration, (c) case history, (d) genealogy and (e) interview. During field investigation, two or more of the above techniques were often used. Although the subject of the present research had been to study this pilgrim town, information was collected from a large number of people from both within and outside the town about their caste, occupation, education, family composition, etc.

Field work was conducted among the priests first. A preliminary census was taken to ascertain their number, lineage, domicile, and length of priesthood. The genealogical method was used to collect the detailed information on kinship, marriage, migration, education, and occupation. The census was taken at the working place but genealogies were collected from the heads of the priest households at their residences. For quantitative information like income, landholding, etc., data were collected through schedules. The working condition had been observed throughout the entire course of the field investigations. The cases of professional disputes were collected by the interview method.

The field investigation was conducted among the pilgrim guides along with other functionaries namely, the barbers, potters, sacred-water sellers,
owners of houses, employees of the temple-estate, etc., through interviews. The observation method was also applied to get a clearer picture of their economic interaction with the pilgrims and among themselves.

Among the residents of the town, data were collected on a sample basis from the heads of the selected households through interview. The census household list, duly updated, served as the sample frame, from which a 20 per cent sample of households was drawn with the help of a random number table. Information relating to the place of origin, demographic particulars, relationship with the temple, etc., were collected from the respondents using schedules. In all, a total of 470 heads of households were surveyed from the town.

The third stage of fieldwork was conducted among the pilgrims. Considering cost, time, labour and the nature of the present study, it was decided to interview 450 pilgrims in total. In order to get an appropriate coverage, the survey was spread over a period of two years and into three different occasions within each of them: (a) the period of maximum attendance of pilgrims, (b) the attendance period of minimum, and (c) a period in between. Only the adult pilgrims aged 15 years or more were surveyed excluding those who were minor and/or found involuntarily associated with the head of a pilgrim group. The selection of adults was guided by the assumption that they would be able to respond clearly and unambiguously compared to minor pilgrims. As the sampling frame was not available in any form and the population of pilgrims was a floating one, the selection was not strictly random. Non-randomness was also due to other factors e.g., non-response. The sample individuals were selected on the basis of the inflow or out-flow of pilgrims into the temple, or at some other places where they had been put up. The selection of pilgrims, thus was not random but it was not purposive.
either. The interview was continued till the desired quota was filled. The analysis, however, had to be made finally on 456 schedules, for 14 schedules against which certain information were found to be missing later, were rejected:

While the socio-economic, religious and other related information of the sample pilgrims were collected by interview, data relating to the pilgrimage had been gathered either through personal participation in the event or by systematic observation of the behaviour;

From the key informants such as the head of the monastery, local political leaders, teachers, leaders of the priestly organization, leaders of rest-house owners' association and pilgrim guides' organization, etc., information was collected by depth interview, sometimes using a tape-recorder. The activities of the clubs, libraries, and other voluntary organizations were noted from the individuals associated with them; The same individual was interviewed more than once when necessary. Information was generally cross-checked from different sources.

On several occasions, field work was extended from Tarakeswar to other places in order to trace its economic and religious net-works; Moreover, for cross-checking certain information, many individuals who lived far away from this town had to be interviewed; Thus, to gather the migration history of Bharamalla family — the founder of the temple — its descendents at Bahirgarh, Champadanga, Haripal, Ramnagar (all located in Hooghly district), and other places, were interviewed. At Sheoraphuli, Hamargachhi, Singur, Lokenath and Kalighat, extensive interviews were made among people engaged in the economic activities connected with the pilgrims; Villages around Tarakeswar were visited for gathering information about the nature and extent of economic
and religious relationships they had with Tarakeswar. Several monasteries located at Bhatbagan in Howrah, at Baidyabati and Santoshpur in Hooghly, at Amtala in 24 Parganas were visited to get an idea as to how these religious institutions were being influenced by Tarakeswar sacred complex.

The study has been organized into ten chapters; Chapter one presents the legend and history of Tarakeswar for tracing its origin and growth as a place of Hindu pilgrimage in West Bengal. Possible explanations for the successive stages of development of this religious town have been given.

Chapter two analyses the present socio-economic condition of the pilgrim town Tarakeswar. Emphasis has been given on to the ways in which the social net-work, relationship and the modes of living of its inhabitants are influenced by the working of the temple.

Examination of the sacred-complex in terms of sacred geography and sacred performances has been made in Chapter three. The locational and functional significance of sacred centres has been discussed; Various rituals with their significance have been discussed; The service-pattern in the temple of Taraknath has also been dealt with.

The next topic examined in Chapter four is the social organization of the priests. It has also been discussed in what respects they exhibit similarity with the priests of other places of pilgrimage.

Chapter five presents the socio-economic characteristics of the Tarakeswar pilgrims by types; The point discussed is what sorts of people come to Tarakeswar as pilgrims and why.
The next Chapter presents a case study of Sravani pilgrims. It answers the questions: (a) what do the pilgrims do in course of their pilgrimage to Tarakeswar, and (b) in what way are the pilgrims' diverse activities related to the institution of pilgrimage, in general, and to the sacred place, in particular.

A time-series analysis of data relating to a section of pilgrims viz., Dharna pilgrims, for the period from 1945-46 to 1970-71, has been undertaken in Chapter seven. The nature and extent of change in the pilgrims' rate of visits vis-a-vis other societal attributes have been assessed and related the change to the broader societal context.

The economic importance of the temple on the life of the local and outside population has been studied through some selected occupational groups at the sacred complex in Chapter eight. The idea is to understand who at a place of Hindu pilgrimage gets what out of the religious economy and in what way.

For tracing the economic net-works of the temple spatially the inter-relationships of the temple, town and hinterland have been studied in Chapter nine.

Finally, in Chapter ten, the salient findings of the present study have been presented by way of summary and conclusion.