Chapter - VIII.

Tārakeswar pilgrimage: its bearing on fairs and festivals.
Tirtheeyatr̥s or, pilgrimages have the same cultural and religious importance in Hinduism as they have in other religions. Tirthasthala (place of pilgrimage) and kṣetramāhātmya (fame of the place of pilgrimage) are important segments of the Purāṇas which deal with the importance of pilgrimages in detail as well as the ideal way of life the pilgrim is required to lead during the tīrthayāṭra. The Savdakalpadrumah gives a list of two hundred and sixty-four tīrthas, on the basis of information from the Purāṇas and the epics. Incidentally, the epic Mahābhārata contains a section in the Vana-parba (chapter 78-158), entitling Tīrthayāṭraparba, which is exclusively devoted to pilgrimage.

The orthodox viewpoint laid down in the scriptures emphasises the purity of the motive arising from a devout feeling for undertaking a pilgrimage. Hence the pilgrimage always facilitates co-ordination between the purity of life and perfect knowledge, springing from the manifestation of divinity already in man.

Therefore, a place of pilgrimage has a greater attraction for the traveller rather than a secular tourist spot. Pilgrims often tolerate great hardship to reach holy places and also care little for the discomfort they may face while temporarily living there. Therefore, a pilgrim town with its invariably congested lanes infested with pestering beggars and clusters of shops around the temple dealing in items for worship must have the ability to arouse great religious fervour in those who take the trouble to visit it. Usually, the religious character of a pilgrim town is manifested through the work of a few special groups of people who are responsible for religious services to the presiding deity of the temple.

This is because of the all-pervasive influence of the presiding deity on those who throng the place of pilgrimage all through the year. This again helps creating a common bond between the inhabitants of the pilgrim centre and those from the surrounding regions. As the prosperity of a place of pilgrimage depends to a considerable extent on the pilgrims, secular and religious elements co-exist in its cultural heritage.

II

Tārakeswar, as a place of Hindu pilgrimage in Eastern India, has long been considered an ideal place of pilgrimage over the years. Despite being a Śaiva centre, Tārakeswar seems to have accommodated in course of time people from diverse sects of Hinduism. But the fact remains that this pilgrim centre has achieved its present status due to the inflow of pilgrims following the revelation of the cult of Lord Tāraknātha. The gradual increase in the flow of pilgrims, however, began only during the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the improvement in communication, especially the extension of the railway line that connected Tārakeswar with other places. Previously, only primitive modes of transport, such as the oxcart and the palanquin, were available to travellers in this region who preferred not to walk. Most of the people, however, had to travel on foot for financial difficulties⁴.

The pilgrims who wished access to Tārakeswar from Baidyabāti near Sheorāphuli had to get there on foot owing to the lack of conveyance prior to the extension of the railway line from Sheorāphuli to Tārakeswar in 1885. Although a bungalow had been built at Baidyabāti for the convenience of the pilgrims, nothing else was done to ensure their comfort and safety during this period. They were frequently attacked by the roving bands of dacoits and were robbed of their belongings on the way to Tārakeswar⁵. No sooner were the hindrances in the communication

system overcome, the urge to visit this place of pilgrimage increased dramatically.

W. W. Hunter noticed and typified this development in his "A Statistical Account of Bengal". He referred to a large shrine dedicated to Lord Śiva "where crowds of people assemble at all times of the year, but especially during the months of March and April". He also wrote about the pilgrims flocking at this place of great sanctity "principally for the fulfilment of vows on recovery from sickness. Two large religious gatherings for the worship of Śiva, the deity of the temple, are held every year. The first of them is the Śivarātri, held in the month of February, on the fourteenth day after full-moon, in the month of Phālgun, a day specially sacred to Śiva...... The second great religious festival held at the Tārakeswar temple is the Chaitra Samkrānti on the last day of the Hindu month of Chaitra and of the Bengali year, falling within April. It is also the day of the swinging festival. The temple of Tārakeswar is visited by a large number of persons from the surrounding neighbourhood, within a circuit of forty or fifty miles during the whole of the month of Chaitra".

From the month of Baisākh to that of Chaitra of the Bengali calendar year (corresponding to the period of one year from April to March) this "place of great sanctity" witnesses fairs and festivals of different types. Usually, casteism plays an important part in almost all the sacred performances before the presiding deity of this pilgrim centre. But it is only during the time of fairs and festivals that casteism assumes a secondary importance. In fact, these fairs and festivals, held at frequent intervals also represent the basic structural and functional features of the Hindu civilization. Moreover, these have traditionally been associated with the salient features of the purānic places of pilgrimage.

L. S. S. O’ Malley referred to the pilgrims coming “to the shrine throughout the year and on all the days of the week, but Monday is the favourite day, as it is considered the day most auspicious to Siva” 7. Usually, most of the regular pilgrims take a holy bath in the Dudhpukur, the sacred tank adjacent to the temple of Lord Tāraknāth, prior to performing sacred rituals as directed by orthodox practice. Thereafter, they worship the presiding deity with flowers, garlands, sweets and a small pot, full of water of the Ganges mixed with unboiled milk bought generally from the shops dealing in goods for rituals. Most of the pilgrims take primary interest in the worship of Lord Tāraknāth and only secondarily do they offer oblations to other deities within the sacred complex.

Of the many rituals performed by regular pilgrims, munḍan (tonsure) and dandi (prostration) seem important. These are performed “principally for the fulfilment of vows on recovery from sickness” 8. The “form of treatment—which can hardly be called a system of medicine and was designated the ‘religious system’ by Crawford—was to seek benedictions of the gods for effecting magical cure of ailments...........” 9.

Although the males are primarily found to perform the munḍan(tonsure) on almost regular basis, widows are also subjected to this ritual as is also common in Kāshi, Prayāga, Brindāban or in other places of pilgrimage in India 10. Incidentally, this ritual has been initiated at the kāmānsālā (tonsuring centre)


Also, Swāmī Saradānanda – Śrī Śrī Rāmākrishna Līlā Prasanga. Vol.I. P.-320. - 164 -
under the supervision of the temple administration. The number of pilgrims performing this ritual increases or decreases in keeping with the flow of pilgrims.

This ritual is also performed within the sacred complex at major religious ceremonies like *annaprāşan* (the first time a baby is fed rice) and *upanayan* (the wearing of the sacred thread) on auspicious dates given in the Hindu almanac. Irrespective of castes, both male and female babies, six or seven months old, are tonsured at the time of *annaprāşan* and are, incidentally, fed the *paramānna-bhog* (rice boiled with milk) of Lord *Tāraknāth*. But the *upanayan* is exclusively meant for the sons of the *Brāhmin* caste of a given age. These two ceremonies are generally held within the sacred complex during the lean pilgrim seasons.

The reference to *munḍan* as a traditional religious rite can be had in the *Skandapurāṇa*11. Besides, the *Korān Shareef* has also prescribed this ritual for a devout Muslim in connection with the vow (*wājeb*) undertaken for a pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to *Kabā Shareef* in Mecca, and its consequent fulfilment12.

11. **Munḍañcopavāsasaśa sarvatīrtheśvayam vidhiḥ/**

   **Varjjayitvā Gayāṁ Gaṅgāṁ Visālāṁ Virajāṁ tathā/**

   (*Munḍan* (tonsure) and *upabāsa* (fasting) are to be performed at all the places of pilgrimage excluding Gayā, places in close vicinity to the Ganges, Visālā as well as Virajā.)

   *Krishnachandra Smrititirtha(ed.)- Āryāchār Paddhati or Purohit Darpan, Vol.II. P.-131. 'Parishista Khaṇḍa'.

12. **Korān Shareef – 3(95-97).**
The ritual of *dandi* (prostration) is performed over the years by the regular as well as seasonal pilgrims at Tārakeswar. It follows the fulfilment of desires, believed to have been possible by the grace of Lord *Śiva*. The pilgrim performing this ritual is always found circumventing the temple, or, in some cases, covering a part of the way to the temple through consecutive prostrations, each prostration measuring out the distance equal to the length of the pilgrim’s body. This ritual is also followed by those on pilgrimage to Deoghar, where also Lord *Śiva* is the presiding deity.

In fact, this ritual is in no way peculiar in relation to the cult of Lord *Śiva* as it is generally performed in honour of other gods and goddesses with local as well as regional importance all over India by the devotees. Reference can be made to the performance of the same particularly in honour of the sun-god, on the auspicious date of *Mitra Saptami* in the month of *Agrabāyan* (Nov.- Dec.) of the Bengali calendar. However, the aforesaid rituals performed at Tārakeswar always adhere to orthodoxy as the pilgrims are traditionally required to complete the whole process while worshipping Lord *Śiva*.

A few of the regular as well as seasonal pilgrims at Tārakeswar also perform the ritual of tying a fragment of a brick to either hair or with a string. Thereafter, the same is fastened together with other similar fragments on an upright column erected at the rear of the temple of Lord *Tāraknāth*. This ritual, indeed, stands for a prayer for a favour sought for long from the Lord, the fulfilment of which is believed beyond human endeavour. If the pilgrim feels that he or she has been obliged by virtue of divine grace, the necessity of honouring the unilateral contract assumes priority over others.

The Muslims also have a similar folkrite. This is evident not only from their visits to the *Māzār Shareef* of famous *sufī* saints like Moinuddin Chisti in Ājmer or of Selim Chisti at Fathepur Sikri but also from the visits to the sacred places associated with the *pirs* elsewhere in India. The hope for the fulfilment of
worldly desires similarly acts as a driving force in this context too.

Apart from these, the ritual of inflicting wounds on the chest after the fulfilment of vows on the part of the devotee must also be mentioned. Despite being an abomination to rationalism, this folkrite has its antecedent in the *Śrī Śrī Chandi* where the king named Surath and his companion Baishya initiate the worship of the Goddess by inflicting wounds on their bodies for her propitiation.  

That this ritual is in no way peculiar to the pilgrims at Tārakeswar, is proved from the instance of similar ritual performed by the devotees of Abdul Sakur (Fakir Baba) at Taravā in Sonepur, Orissā for the fulfilment of wishes.

Another noteworthy ritual performed by a few regular pilgrims is generally known as *phul-kārāni*. With prior permission from the temple administration, the pilgrim is required to sit immediately before the presiding deity with rapt attention and in deep contemplation for sometime along with the priest concerned. The priest makes the ritual vow or *sankalpa* on behalf of the pilgrim and ultimately places a few *bilwa*-leaves arranged in a special way on the *Lingam*.

Thereafter, a fully bloomed favourite flower of the Lord is placed over the *bilwa*-leaves. If the flower rolls down onto the stretched palms of the devotee on its own within specified time, it is taken for granted that his or her earnest desire

13. *Nirāhārau yatāhārau tanmanaskau samāhitou /
   Dadatustau valiṇcaiva nijāṭrāśṛṣgukṣitam //

'Surathavaisyayorvarpradānum'. 13/11.
(They began to worship the Goddess with rapt attention through sacrifices soaked with blood from wounds on their bodies while remaining in fast or controlled diet.)

Śrī Śtārāmdās Oṅkārnāth(ed.)- Śrī Śrī Chandi.

will shortly be fulfilled owing to the divine grace of Lord Tāraknāth.

It seems that pilgrims, generally faced with and frustrated by insurmountable economic, physical as well as mental problems, adhere to this sort of ritual observance to ease their troubles. In fact, the flow of pilgrims over the years and the susceptibility of a few of them to seek miraculous solutions for their diverse socio-economic problems keep this ritual observance alive.

However, all the aforesaid ritual observances are performed almost daily by mid-day, with special emphasis on Monday, the favourite day of Lord Śiva and also on auspicious dates during the lean seasons, in accordance with the Hindu almanac.

IV

In fact, oracles and miracles have swayed a large number of people around the world from time immemorial. There were a few temples in ancient Greece famous for their mysterious as well as oracular powers. References to such oracular temples in the Iliad, lead us to the conclusion that the west does not lag behind the east in this matter.

However, such a popular oracular temple in Eastern India is that of Lord Tāraknāth. The dbarna ritual is performed in this place of pilgrimage by a section of pilgrims over the years with reference to this so-called oracular power of the Lingam. The dbarnāyātrīs (pilgrims desirous of performing this ritual) from all castes resort to dbarna particularly for the curing of their diseases, and lie prostrate before the Lingam, vowing to die of starvation if no remedies are suggested to them. A few of them are believed to have visualised the Lord while into a trance, and consequently recovered from incurable diseases by virtue

of divine grace. No doubt that reason always takes the back seat in relation to belief in this context. However, the tradition of adhering to this rigorous ritual with an objective in mind, is in vogue till date  

Initially, a dharnāyātri is required to contact a priest who makes the necessary arrangements for him, resulting in his lying obstinately for days in the Nātyamandira (court-hall) in front of the temple of Lord Tāraknāth till he receives the pratyādesha (direction to overcome crisis) of the Lord. The dharnā ritual is in no way exclusively associated with Tārakeswar as it is also performed in other temples around India, including Deoghar in Bihār where Lord Baidyanāth, a manifestation of Lord Śiva, is the presiding deity  

But, it must be conceded that no other temple has attained such distinction in this context in Eastern India as that of the temple of Lord Tāraknāth. However, the pilgrim desirous of performing this ritual takes shelter in the rest house or rest house - cum- residence of the priest. There the process begins with the cooking of sun-dried rice in an earthen vessel, along with specified vegetables after a holy dip in the Dudhpukur (sacred tank) at noon, and the partaking of the habisyānna (boiled sun-dried rice) mixed up with ghee (clarified butter).

The next morning, the concerned dharnāyātri takes again a dip in the sacred tank and wears only a loin cloth. Such a pilgrim gets his or her name registered in the Guddee of the Tārakeswar estate within the sacred complex, and is then escorted to the temple where the priest directs the taking of the ritual vow or sankalpa, with incidental prayers for panacea through divine benediction. Thereafter, the dharnāyātri sips cbaraṇāmrita (water sanctified through the worship of Lord Śiva) and is led towards the Nātyamandira where he or she lies fasting on a new blanket stretched on the marble floor for a number of days with


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the hope of prtyādesha (divine direction) from the Lord. While bearing this ordeal, the dharnāyātri is required to take a dip in the sacred tank every day whenever necessary without massaging oil on the body and to adhere to other restrictions. It is to be noted that the priest concerned always keeps an eye on his client while he or she is in such an ordeal, and prays regularly for his client through worship to the Lord. While fasting, a dharnāyātri spends time observing daily rituals from dawn until the late hours of the night, remaining absorbed in the thought of the Lord and listening to the narration of mythological stories from the Purāṇas (kathakata) generally arranged in the afternoon within the Nātyamandira at the behest of the Tārakeswar Math. Besides, arrangements for the chaṇḍīgān (song sung in honour of the Goddess Chaṇḍī) have also been made in the afternoons on the dates and tithis of Pūrṇimā (full moon) and Amābaṣyā (new moon) at the same premises. No doubt, these programmes help in the manifestation of divinity already present in the devotees.

Despite these, a few among the dharnāyātrīs are believed to be endowed with divine grace within a few days, while in some cases the ritual bears no fruit. The priest, in fact, uses his discretion regarding the continuity of the ritual on the part of those from the second category. Irrespective of success and failure in the observance of this ritual, a dharnāyātri usually completes his ordeal of dbarnā by offering worship to the presiding deity as directed by the priest. Thereafter, he or she breaks fast by taking the charanāmrita of the Lord.

In fact, fasting to please a god or goddess has been emphasised from time immemorial for the followers of all religions. Fasting has been referred to as an important act in the Anushāsan Parba of the Mahābhārata(166/1) for the expiation of sin as well as the purification of the mind. The Lent festival of the Christians requires a devout Christian to observe a fast on the weekdays during
a period of forty days before Easter as penitence. Even a devout Muslim also takes recourse to rojā or fasting during the entire month of Ramazān in order to attain the purification of body and mind. Hence, fasting has always assumed an important role in the context of ritual observances for the followers of almost all the significant religions in this world.

However, the registers preserved in the temple office since the late forties show an increase in the number of dbarna pilgrims from 3088 in 1945-46 to 3192 in 1950-51. But thereafter, a decrease is noticeable since there were only 2559 such pilgrims performing this ritual in 1960-61. This increased again in the late sixties. It seems striking that while dbarna pilgrims coming mostly from the rural areas of the districts of Calcutta, Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan, Midnapur, Nadia and 24 Parganas in West Bengal increased, the number of their Bāṅgladēshī counterparts decreased. This was perhaps a secondary effect of the partition of India. Despite these perceptible developments, this ritual of dbarna remains popular among a considerable number of people.

V

The ritual observances performed at Tārakeswar involve both folk as well as sanskritised elements. Though these ritual observances initially lead to the fulfilment of artha and kāma, associated with earthly considerations, the ultimate goal remains mokṣa or the desire for overcoming the cycle of birth

20. Ashok Mitra (ed.)- Paschim Banger Pūjā Pārban O Melā. 'Prasangiki'.

Also,


and death\textsuperscript{22}. The citations from the \textit{Gītā} refer to this\textsuperscript{23}.

Hence, the reason for the congregation of pilgrims at Tārakeswar round the year seems to be the belief that the cult of Lord \textit{Sīva} relieves the devotees not only from mundane sufferings but also generates the hope of salvation. Even those who endeavour to achieve material as well as psychological sustenance from the visit to the sacred complex follow the tenets of theology.

Despite the vivid description of these ritual observances with both folk and sanskritised elements, the last \textit{Giri Mohānta} seems to have been silent about the folk rites, except those performed exclusively during the \textit{Gājan} festival\textsuperscript{24}. Moreover, the pilgrims on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar from the surrounding regions since the revelation of Lord Tāraknāth or even at the latter stages found no reference in his compilation. In spite of this omission, the fact remains that these ritual observances which are still performed, are similar to those in other \textit{Śivakṣetras} with \textit{purānic} importance.

In fact, the rituals performed by the \textit{Mobāntas} as principal \textit{Sebāyets} as well as by the \textit{Sebāyet} priests for generations, within the temple of Lord Tāraknāth conform to the sanskritised prescription for such rituals. But the last \textit{Giri Mohānta} was most probably against giving due importance to the role of the

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\text{\textsuperscript{22} L.P. Vidyārthi, B.N. Saraswāti and M. Jhā- \textit{The Sacred Complex of Kāshi, a Microcosm of Indian Civilization}. P.-53.}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\text{\textsuperscript{23} ‘Caturvidhā bhajante mām janāh sukṛtinorjuna/}

\text{"Ārto jijñāsuraṁarthārthī jñānī ca bharataṁsabha\"}/

\text{"The Gītā" – (7/16).}
\end{flushleft}

Oh Arjuna! I am usually worshipped by the ārtas (those stricken by inordinate mundane problems), \textit{jījñāsus} (those desirous of gaining eternal knowledge), \textit{arthbārbhīs} (those goaded by the lure of wealth) and the \textit{jñānīs} (those already overwhelmed by the joy of eternal knowledge or mokṣa).

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\text{\textsuperscript{24} Satishchandra Giri – \textit{Tārakeswar Śivatattva}. PP.-81-87.}
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Sebāyet priests with reference to ritual observances within the shrine. Neither the aforesaid compilation nor the Title Suit No. 28. of 1922 Under Sec.92, C.P.C., in which the last Giri Mohānta defends himself as the Mālik Sebāyet, bear reference to the Sebāyet priests as essential for rituals within the temple. However, it has been so despite their presence around the sacred complex for generations almost ever since the revelation of the cult of Lord Śiva.

It is interesting to note that none of the successors of the Sebāyet priests was able to show the letter of appointment as proof for strengthening the official standpoint in relation to the organisation of services within the temple since the beginning of the Giri regime. Hence, they were definitely at the mercy of the Giri Mohāntas. This state of affairs ceased after the termination of the Giri ascendancy.

The priestcraft that developed during the Giri regime was in contrast to its counterpart in the purānic places of pilgrimage all over India as it was devoid of professionalism. This is proved from the apathy to the tradition of maintaining systematic record of the families of clients of the Sebāyet priests for future reference. This indifference still survives. In the absence of professionalism over the years, the acceptance of priestcraft as the last source of livelihood by the descendants of the Sebāyet families has become the order of the day. Besides, the change in the outlook of society on the priestcraft over the years also gives rise to adverse reaction, as is obvious at present.

VI

The character of the pilgrim component, as well as its inclination to ritual observances as has been referred to earlier, go through perceptible transformation particularly during the period of fairs and festivals held at Tārakeswar.

25. Interview with Monomohoan Chakrabarty, ex- Secretary(1978-83) of the Purohit Mandalī (Association of the Priests) at Tārakeswar on 9.6.97.
The Bengali new year's day or Poilā Baisākha dawns at this place of pilgrimage usually with the departure of the saffron brigade of Lord Tārakanāth whose congregation has kept up the vibrant tradition of the community festival i.e., Gājan. But at the same time it marks the beginning of the Baisākhi melā that continues for the entire month of Baisākha (Apr.–May) as it "is looked upon as a favourable time for good deeds and for the performance of religious duties. While it lasts, a large number of people, mostly women, come from various parts of the province to pour water over the Lingam of Śiva". Unlike the regular pilgrims, the trek to Tārakeswar for the seasonal pilgrims begins from the Nimāitiṛtha Ghāt at Baidyabāti in the district of Hooghly. It is so named as Śrī Chaitanya (Nimai) is said “to have stopped and bathed here in the Bhāgirathī on his way to Orissa”. According to prevalent custom, “devotees intending to pour holy waters of the Bhāgirathī on the Tārakanāth Linga at Tārakeswar fill their pitchers after a ceremonial bath here and walk all the way to Tārakeswar, 37 K.M. (23 Miles) north-west of Baidyabāti, carrying the vessels suspended from the ends of a bamboo pole......". However, the inflow of seasonal as well as regular pilgrims increases specially on the holy titbis like Aṅgay Trītiyā, Baisākhi Pūrṇimā and Samkrānti or the last date of the month of Baisākha.

No doubt, the pilgrimage to Tārakeswar for regular pilgrims is naturally less strenuous and less time-consuming in comparison with their seasonal counterparts. The seasonal pilgrims, on this occasion, comprise mostly the younger people who are physically able to endure the strain of a pilgrimage to Tārakeswar on foot not just once in their lives, but also in some cases, a number of times in succession.

Despite this difference, both the regular and seasonal pilgrims are at one with their commitment to solicit help from the priests during this fair, for the offering

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of oblations to Lord Śiva. To that extent, the pilgrims in general follow the directions enshrined in the scriptures.\textsuperscript{28}

It is, indeed, interesting to note that neither W.W. Hunter’s ‘A Statistical Account of Bengal’ nor the Tārakeswar Śivatattva edited by Satishchandra Giri refer to this festival which takes place in the month of Baisākh. Only ‘Bengal District Gazetteers’ by L.S.S.O’ Malley and M.M. Chakrabarty bears a casual reference to the Baisākhi pilgrims who congregate along with businessmen at this place of pilgrimage on the Bengali new year’s day to offer oblations for the opening of new ledgers.

VII

There happens a steady decrease in the flow of pilgrims after the Baisākhi Samkrānti, which continues till the Gurupūrṇimā (the tithi meant for the worship of the preceptor). In fact, the Śrāvani melā begins on the Gurupūrṇimā which usually occurs in the month of Ashār of the Bengali calendar year, and continues thereafter till the Rakhipūrṇimā (the festival of tying embellished thread on the wrist) that generally takes place in the month of Śrāvan of the same year. In fact, “the month of Śrāvan (mid-July to mid-August) is auspicious for Śiva when Śrāvani utsab are held on each Monday”\textsuperscript{29}.

\textsuperscript{28} Yattīrtham yasya devasya tat tīrthasya dvijasya ca/

\underline{Vandanīyasya pūjasya teśam vākyena pūtatā/}

(Yoginī Tantra).

The presiding deity of a certain place of pilgrimage and the associated sacred specialists deserve due reverence from the pilgrims concerned with firm commitment to the directions of the said community.


\textsuperscript{29} A.K. Bānerje (ed.) – West Bengal District Gazetteers, Hooghly. PP.- 665 and 725.
Although the Srāvanī melā has assumed an immense proportion at present by virtue of the improved communication and the influence of mass media, the reference to this can be had neither in Hunter’s ‘A Statistical Account of Bengal’ nor in O’Malley’s Gazetteers. Even the Tārakeswar Śivatattva is silent on the initiation of the Srāvanī utsab, which seems to have surpassed all other fairs and festivals in splendour and variety these days. Besides, the processing of the Title Suit No. 28 of 1922 that resulted in the end of the Giri regime in 1937 also bears no reference to pilgrims who visit the shrine on this particular occasion. Despite this, Prafulla Chakrabarty credits the last Giri Mohānta of the Tārakeswar Math with the introduction of the Srāvanī melā at Tārakeswar 30.

In fact, the non-Bengalis mostly native to U.P. and Bihār, form the majority among the pilgrims during the Srāvanī utsab which is known also as Mārvāri melā. Besides them, non-Bengali Hindus from almost all over India throng here along with those from Calcutta and surrounding regions 31.

Presumably, the erstwhile connection between this place of pilgrimage and U.P. as well as Bihār during the tenures of the last two Giri Mohāntas, which has been referred to elsewhere, had something to do with the beginning of this festival. It is somewhat interesting to note that this festival takes place at the same time as that of Lord Baidyanāth in Deoghar. Incidentally, the Kāonriās of Deoghar in Bihār and those attending this festival here, bear a certain resemblance in the given context.


Also,

Prior to their trek from *Nimaitirtha Ghāt* in Hooghly or from Kālīghāt in Calcutta on barefeet, they wear new ochre-coloured loin clothes and use bamboo shafts for carrying the sacred water of the Ganges in earthen or brass or bronze vessels. The beginning of the pilgrimage is similar to that of their *Baisākhi* counterparts. The journey begins generally in the afternoon or in the evening so that they can reach the destination early in the morning of the next day. The starting points of the *Śrāvanī* pilgrims may be different but they are destined to reach and use the traditional main pilgrim-route, i.e. the Baidyabāti – Tārakeswar road.

The seasonal pilgrims on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar throughout the year come from all walks of life and the *Śrāvanī* pilgrims are no exception to that. But while on the road, as it happens elsewhere, the pilgrims adhere to equality and forget the differences among themselves, at least temporarily. Here lies, in fact, the basic strength of Hinduism, in the display of its traditional uniformity.

The seasonal pilgrims usually get no respite from sufferings even after coming close to the entrance of the temple as the same is used as the exit as well. Besides, the lack of adequate space within the temple only adds to their sufferings. The phenomenal increase in the flow of “pilgrims offering prayers to Lord Śīva” on auspicious dates and *titbis* of the season makes it impossible for all of them to enter the temple and perform ritual observances.

Noticeably, the female participants of the Bengali *Śrāvanī* pilgrims are accustomed to performing ritual fast till the *bhogārati* (the ritual feeding ceremony of the Lord) is performed in the afternoon, on Mondays. Thereafter they have breakfast with fruits and cereals of specified kinds.

While going back from this place of pilgrimage, the Śrāvanī pilgrims in general collect prasād (consecrated food) and charanāmrita (water collected from the silver girdle of Lord Śiva).

This Śrāvanī festival held in association with the Śrāvanī pilgrims gives rise to social cohesion and cultural unity. These are achieved through mutual co-operation between the pilgrims and those residing along the pilgrim-route, as well as the residents of this sacred complex.

VIII
The only noteworthy festival at this place of pilgrimage in the month of Bhādra (Aug.-Sept.) is the Janmāstami, the anniversary of the birth of Lord Krishna. This festival, mostly a local affair, continues till midnight and the temple remains open until the worship is over. The whole process, however, requires the co-ordinated work of the Sebāyet priests as well as the caste Gopas responsible for the organisation of services within the sacred complex. This traditional festival had been held even during the regime of the last Giri Mohānta, as is proved from the news items published with reference to it in The Bengalee as well as in The Statesman.

Traditionally, the caste Gopas arrange for an embellished palanquin, to take the deity of Lakṣmi-Nārāyan from the temple within the monastery to that of Lord Tāraknāth, on the evening of this auspicious tithi. The Sebāyet priests on duty take possession of the deity with due reverence as soon as the palanquin reaches the temple of Lord Śiva in procession. After the celebration is over, the deity is carried back to the monastery with the same gaiety. As the festival continues till midnight, a few regular pilgrims as well as local people remain present until the conclusion of the festival.

33. The Bengalee – 24.8.24 ; 5(1).

Also,

The dawn of the next day becomes resonant with the cheerful voices of teenagers from the families of caste Gopas who participate in the frolic of Nandotsab, reminiscent of the boundless joy of King Nanda, King of the caste Gopas, after the birth of Lord Krishna. The dharnāyatraś are generally shifted elsewhere from the Nātyamandira beforehand to facilitate the frolic that accompanies the Nandotsab. This, in fact, exemplifies the eagerness of the Giri Mobāntas to achieve a compromise with the ikāyata (popular) culture.

IX

"The next month Āswin (Sept.-Oct.) is a highly auspicious month with the Hindus, as the Durgāpūjā takes place in it" 34. The Durgāpūjā is held accordingly within the temple of Lord Tāraknāth with great religious fervour. The painted image of the Goddess Durgā, the variform of the consort of Lord Śiva, is on the north-east inner wall of the temple and the special worship of the Goddess is traditionally arranged in accordance with the Hindu almanac.

Reference has already been made to the inclination of the Giri Mobāntas to perform the ŚaktiPūjā simultaneously, alongside an unwavering commitment to the presiding deity. Despite the reluctance of the the District Judge to admit the Giri Mobāntas as Tāntrik Sannyāśis in his order dated 6 Nov.,1929 with reference to T.S. No 28/1922, the fact remains that the last Giri Mobānta was somewhat correct in his assertion in this regard from an academic point of view.

In fact, perfect knowledge leads definitely to the revelation of the indivisible existence of Śiva and Śakti, which precipitates the ultimate realisation of the

power of Śakti as an imperative for emancipation from the cycle of birth and death\textsuperscript{35}. This realisation perhaps led them to initiate the Saktipūjā, with simultaneous emphasis on the Tāntrik as well as Vedic rituals, as a means to achieve the will-power to renounce the world\textsuperscript{36}. However, the overlapping of both types of ritual observances has incidentally been conceded

\textbf{35.}

\begin{align*}
&\text{Śivasaktimayanī tattvamī tattvajñānasya kāraṇam/} \\
&\text{Vahūnāmī janmanāmante śaktijñānanī prajāyate/} \\
&\text{Śaktijñānanī binā devī nirvāṇamī naiva jāyate/}
\end{align*}

\textbf{Niruttar Tantra}

(Perfect knowledge regarding the existence of Śiva and Śakti in unison results in the ultimate realisation of the power of Śakti as an imperative for emancipation from the cycle of birth and death.)


\textbf{36.}

\begin{align*}
&\text{Ya āsu hṛdayagranthini nirjīhṛṣuh parātmanah/} \\
&\text{Vidhinopaśareddevanī tantroktena ca keśavam/}
\end{align*}

\textbf{Śrīmadbhāgabat. Part. – XI. Chap.III. Sloka. – 47.}

(One should worship Lord Kesāba(Krishna) through Vedic as well as Tāntrik methods with the view of renouncing the world at the earliest.)

Also,

\begin{align*}
&\text{Vaidikastāntriko mīra iti me tribidho makhah/} \\
&\text{Trayāṇāṁśiptenaiva vidhinā māṁi samarcayet/}
\end{align*}

\textbf{Ibid. Part. –XI. Chap. XXVII. Sloka – 7.}

(One could achieve the cherished goal by virtue of worshipping the Lord through either the Vedic or the Tāntrik method or the admixture of the both.)
in the Śrīmadbhāgabatī. Hence, the proposition of the District Judge, drawing an exclusive dividing line between the Tāntrik and Vedic Sannyāsīs with reference to the rituals observed, seems incorrect.

However, the worship of the Goddess follows tradition, with the exception of animal sacrifice to the Goddess. The alternative to animal sacrifice must have been introduced after the installation of the Āshram order in 1937 at the Tārakeswar Math. The overt inclination of the Giri Mōbāntas to the Tāntrik rites perhaps drew strength from the citation in the Śrī Śrī Chandi.

The whole process of worship ends with the Dhaujāpūja on the morning of Bijoyā Dashami symbolising the impact of primitive community worship on that of the gods and goddesses mentioned in the Brāhminical literature. This ritual again remains a proof of compromise with the ālokāyata (popular) culture on

37. Evansī kriyāyogapathaiḥ pumān Vaidika – Tāntrikaiḥ/ Arccannubhayataḥ siddhim matto vindatābhīṣitām/ 

Ibid. Part – XI. Chap.XXVII. Sloka – 49.

(One could be endowed with the blessing of the Lord in this mortal world as well as in the heaven by virtue of worshipping through the Vedic and Tāntrik methods.)

38. Jānata ajanata vāpi valipūjāṁ tathā kṛtām/ Praticchśyāmahanī prītyā vanihomani tathā kṛtām/ Šarat kāle mahāpūjā kriyate yā ca varsīki/ Tasyāṁ mamaitannāhätmyani śrūtvā bhaktisamanvitaḥ/ 

Śrī Śrī Chandi. Chap.XII. Sloka- XI- XII.

(I remain ever satisfied with him and endow him with my blessing for the fulfilment of his worldly desires if he arranges bali (animal sacrifice) and homa (ritual fire) for worshipping me accordingly or not in the autumn on annual basis along with citation from Śrī Śrī Chandi.)

the part of the upholders of Brāhminical religion. However, the planting of the pole adorned with the Dhaujā on the periphery of the sacred complex reminds one the lost splendour of the temple - zamindāri which had evolved during the Giri regime.

Usually, the regular pilgrims are not allowed to enter the temple of Lord Tāraknāth until the worship of the Goddess is over on these auspicious tithis in association with those engaged in the organisation of services in the temple.

The fervour of the pūjā that begins in this place of pilgrimage with the Durgāpūjā, continues till the night of Diwālī, which is usually dedicated to the worship of the Goddess Kālī. Reference has already been made to the initiation of the cult of the Goddess Kālī by the second Giri Mobānta and the consequent endeavour of the twenty-second incumbent to erect a temple for the Goddess within the sacred complex. These, in fact, speak much for the inclination of the Giri Sannyāsīs at the Tārakeswar Math to Saktipūjā through the Tāntrik rites. Besides, the assertion of the last Giri Mobānta in this context, cited earlier, proves it.

Traditionally, a Sebāyet priest is bestowed upon the responsibility of making arrangements for the regular as well as special worship on annual basis, in association with other priests within the temple of the Goddess. The special worship arranged on the night of Diwālī in the month of Kārtik (Oct.-Nov.) of the Bengali calendar year adheres to the Tāntrik rites but with some modifications as are evident in the context of the Durgāpūjā at present. In fact, Saktipūjā in general and Kālīpūjā in particular seem inconceivable without the Tāntrik rites.

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40. Interview with the Sebāyet priest of the Goddess Kālī on 7.11.98.
This sort of development over the years has definitely created an ambience against which the sectarian affiliation of a considerable number of Sebāyet priests to Sākta sect is revealed despite their dependence on Lord Tāraknāth for sustenance.

It is, however, interesting to note that neither the regular nor the seasonal pilgrims are allowed to enter the temple of the Goddess as they do in case of the presiding deity. They instead, are required to offer oblations only through Sebāyet priests, in keeping with tradition.

XI

Reference has already been made to W. W. Hunter’s observation with regard to two large religious gatherings at Tārakeswar, of which Śivarātri, held on the fourteenth tīthi after full moon in the month of Phālgun (Feb.-Mar.), necessitates elucidation. Besides, O’ Malley’s Gazetteers also bears reference to a large melā (congregation) held at Tārakeswar in connection with Śivarātri festival. But it seems curious that on no occasion the last Giri Mohānta referred to such an important festival held traditionally in this place of pilgrimage. This seems more obvious in the event of the publication of news regarding this festival in the Ānanda Bāzār Patrikā and the Amrita Bāzār Patrikā on the eve of the Satyāgraha movement, 1924 when he was in power at the Tārakeswar Math.

In fact, “the ceremonies enjoined on this occasion are considered by the followers of Śiva to be the most sacred of all their observances” 43. “It is primarily a woman’s festival and most of the connected rituals are observed by


42. Ānanda Bāzār Patrikā – 20.2.24.
Also, Amrita Bāzār Patrikā – 28.2.24.

devotees of the fair sex. Unmarried women fast and perform rites on this occasion to be blessed with tolerant husbands like Śiva. Married women observe the same rituals with an identical prayer and for having children.”  

The three essential observances of the Śivarātri are fasting by day and night, holding a vigil at night and “worshipping Śiva as the marvellous and interminable Lingam……..”  

These ritual observances result in “expiating all sins and securing the attainment of all desires during life, and union with Śiva, or final emancipation, after death…….. According to the Ishāna Sanhitā, it was on this day that Śiva first manifested himself as a marvellous and interminable Linga….. to typify the exaltation of Śiva worship over that of Vishnu and Brahma, an event which no doubt at one time took place”.

The offerings during the whole ceremony generally include fruits and flowers of specified kinds, bilwa-leaves, incense-sticks and candles. While holding a vigil at night the devotee concerned is required to ritually bathe the Lord with milk in the first watch, in the second with curds, in the third with ghee and in the fourth with honey along with the customary prostration in the end of each watch in accordance with the directions of the Sebāyet priest who leads in the rituals as well as prayers to Lord Tāraknāth.


Also,


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The *Anādilingam* remains accessible to the pilgrims irrespective of castes throughout the night. As it happens round the year, casteism does not matter much for the regular as well as seasonal pilgrims on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar. That “the worship of Lord Śīva at the time of Śivarātri, is permitted to all castes, even to *chandāls* and to women”, had been acknowledged by H.H. Wilson in his ‘Essays on the Religion of the Hindus’.

These ritual observances, in the belief of the devotees, elevate them to such an extent that they find themselves close to the Lord and enjoy the benefits of this as illustrated by the following legend given in the second part of the *Śivapurāṇa*. Being benighted in the woods, once a fowler took shelter on the branches of a *bilwa*-tree (wood-apple) in a state of perpetual vigil owing to the dread of prowling and ferocious animals. He was completely unaware of the incidental importance of that auspicious night as it was Śivarātri. However, he was forced to remain awake through the night which was devoted to fasting and penitence. Incidentally, a few *bilwa*-leaves soaked in blood oozing from the wounds of his body were cast down on a deserted *Lingam* under that tree. Lord Śīva was very pleased with the fowler and rewarded him for his involuntary observance of rites of the Śivarātri. The fowler was graced with the boon of securing the attainment of all his desires during his life, along with final emancipation after death. This legend, indeed, symbolises the accessibility of even the lower caste people to the worship of Lord Śīva. The congregation of a large number of lower caste people, coming mostly from rural Bengal to this place of pilgrimage corroborates the aforesaid proposition. In fact, the three main conceptions of this divinity-Śīva, the creator, Śīva, the Yogi and Rudra, the destroyer-in the *Brāhminical Purāṇas* are meaningful only in a very extended sense in the context of Śīva worship in Bengal.

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“Although the religious ceremony in connection with the Sīvarātri only lasts one night, a considerable melā or fair, which is held near the shrine on the occasion, continues for three days” and as many as “twenty-thousand people annually visit Tārakeswar shrine on the occasion of the Sīvarātri.” Hunter’s observation, made as early as 1876, with reference to the inflow of pilgrims during this festival differs considerably from the estimate given in the Yugāntar after almost eighty-six years. It estimates the volume of the same from different parts of West Bengal at more than one lākh, thus pointing to the steady increase in the number over the years.

Besides the regular pilgrims, a common sight on this occasion ‘is the endless stream’ of seasonal ones. They behave like their other seasonal counterparts and usually reach this pilgrim town on barefeet from Baidyabāti with the water of the Ganges collected in small pitchers. A considerable number of non-Bengali pilgrims are also found among the regular as well as seasonal pilgrims. But their number gradually decreases during the afternoon with the consequent increase in the number of Bengali pilgrims thronging at this place of pilgrimage.

The flow of homeward-bound pilgrims begins generally at the end of the Sivachaturdashi tithi. While going back, they collect prasād (consecrated food) and charanāmrita (water collected from the silver girdle) of Lord Tāraknāth.


51. Basumāti – 27 Phālgun, 1365 B.S.
The *Dol* ceremony of *Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ* which takes place in *Phālgun* (Feb.-March) is also an important festival of Tārakeswar\(^52\). The *Dol utsab* (festival of colour) is a local celebration held on *Dol Pūrṇimā* (full moon), immediately after the *Śivarātri* and prior to the initiation of the *Gājan* festival on the first date of *Chaitra*, the last month in the Bengali calendar year. This spring-festival has been celebrated at this place of pilgrimage from time immemorial\(^53\).

As it happens on the occasion of *Janmāstamī*, this festival also centres on Lord *Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ* who is placed during this festival on a *Dolmancha* (pedestal used for this festival) in the lawn adjacent to the monastery. The process begins with the *Chānchbar utsab* (festival in relation to the burning of an effigy of a demon) held in the evening of the day before *Dol utsab*, within the Sāhāpur garden-house, in keeping with the tradition developed from the *Giri* regime. Initially, the caste *Gopas*, as they do during the *Janmāstamī* festival, carry the idol of Lord *Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ* from the temple at the Tārakeswar *Math* to that of the presiding deity of the sacred complex. Hence, the ritual of exchanging *ābir* (coloured powder) between *Hari* (Lord Vishnu) and *Hara* (Lord Śiva) takes place in the presence of the *Sebāyet* priests and others associated with the religious organisation of the temple complex.

After the completion of this ritual, the idol of Lord *Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇ* is taken back to the Sāhāpur garden-house where a special worship of the deity again takes place. Thereafter, the house temporarily set up for the *Chānchbar utsab* is set on fire to the delight of a large number of onlookers, most of whom are locals.


At the dawn of the next day, the festival of colour begins immediately after the idol is customarily placed in the cradle erected on the Dolmancha. Irrespective of castes, the participants indulge in this festival and the whole of this pilgrim town gets a coat of bright colour on this holy occasion.  

Hence, the admixture of different trends in Hinduism has been the appreciable feature of this place of pilgrimage since the Giri regime. This was possible because of the cosmopolitan outlook of the Giri Mōhāntas, who patronised the Janmāstami as well as the Holi festivals despite their inclination to the Śāktipūjā in this place of pilgrimage.

XIII

The last important festival held at the end of the Bengali calendar year in this place of pilgrimage is the Gājan festival. Presumably, the word Gājan derives from the din created by the village people in a congregation. This festival is another vital proof of the assimilation of Brāhminical rituals with popular religious rites or lokāchāras that has been an important feature at Tārakeswar ever since the revelation of the cult of Anādaprintlnam.

Interestingly enough, the worship of Dharmaṭhākur and the worship of Lord Śīva have found a common context in the lokāyata (popular) form of Śāivism. Hence, the Gājan festival, arranged in honour of Dharmaṭhākur, was popular among the non-Āryān community. In fact, the worship of Lord Śīva had become popular particularly in rural Bengal from time immemorial especially due to the interest shown by participants from the lower stratum of society. However, the

lokadharma or popular religion had gradually transformed the Dharmabhūkur into a village deity with the consequent evolution of the Gājan in the Rāhr region. This Gājan festival gradually made way for the devotees of Lord Śīva with the incidental transformation of the cult of Lord Śīva into a village deity, adored mostly by the lower-caste people in the rural areas by virtue of the endeavours of the priestly community\(^57\). Often, the similarity of the rituals connected with the Gājan festival of Dharma and that of Lord Śīva is emphasised to show the essential unity of the two godheads, as a result of which this festival is held to have become “one of the most popular of all religious ceremonies in West Bengal”\(^58\).

It happens so, simply because of the change over from the Vedic concept of Rudra to the purānic concept of Lord Śīva as the creator or the Yogī\(^59\). Besides, the depiction of Lord Śīva as a benign god in the medieval Śivāyanakāvyas “with power of endowing the earth with fertility” and “as a reluctant peasant” as well as “an inefficient head of a large household” in the Mangalakāvyas facilitates this change\(^60\). Some say that the Gājan festival held in honour of Lord Śīva has its antecedent in the religious ambience of Bengal prior to the Muslim conquest\(^61\).

However, the reference to the Gājan festival held traditionally at Tārakeswar can be had not only in W. W. Hunter’s ‘A Statistical Account of Bengal’ but also in L. S. S. O’ Malley’s ‘Bengal District Gazetteers’. Besides, the Tārakeswar Śivatattva

\(^57\) Benoy Ghosh- Paschim Banga Sanskriti. P.- 49.


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edited by the last Giri Mohânta also bears reference to this festival with special emphasis on the rituals to be performed by the ascetics of Lord Târaknâth₆². Moreover, specific reference to this festival has also been made in the Amrita Bâzâr Patrikâ in connection with the Satyâgraha movement against the last Giri Mohânta of the Târakeswar Math₆³.

This place of pilgrimage is visited “during the whole of month of Chaitra (March - Apr.) by a large number of persons from the surrounding neighbourhood within a circuit of 40 or 50 miles” and the devotees “generally belong to the lower castes, who come to perform some penance, or to lead an ascetic life for a time, in fulfilment of a vow made to Śiva in time of sickness or in danger, or in order to gain a reputation for piety”₆⁴. “Throughout the month of Chaitra many devotees embrace Sannyâsa to propitiate Târaknâth by putting on saffron-coloured clothes, fasting during the day and taking their meals only after sunset”₆⁵. Customarily, the priority for embracing Sannyâsa during this festival rests with the family of Mukunda Ghosh₆⁶. Hence, the Mûl Sannâyasî or principal ascetic is chosen from among the successors to Mukunda Ghosh in recognition of the importance of the caste Gopas in the revelation of Lord Târaknâth₆⁷.

Usually, the initiation into Sannyâsa materialises only when the priest concerned

₆³. Amrita Bâzâr Patrikâ - 16.4.24, 6(5).
₆⁷. S. K. Mitra - Hooghly Jelâr Itihâs O Bangasamaj. Vol.II. P.-1123. - 190 -
puts the uttarīya (hand-woven cotton threads tied together with a tuft of Kusha grass) around the neck of the devotee, while chanting a mantra (incantation): ātmagotram pariṣṭyaṁ śivagotre praviṣatu (enter into the clan of Lord Śiva, leaving the one of self). Austerity must be practised for the whole month. But in case of one's inability to go through the rigours of Sannyāsa for the entire month of Chaitra, the devotee concerned is allowed to opt for Sannyāsa only on days bearing odd numbers (3, 5, 7, 9, 15 and 17) in the auspicious month. Once initiated into Sannyāsa, a devotee is often found holding a stick made up of reeds.

L.S.S. O’ Malley’s assertion that “throughout the month of Chaitra, Surdas fast during the day-time, taking their meals only after sunset, as in the Ramazān fast of the Muhammadans” is not correct. In fact, the Brāhmins, the Kṣatriyas, the Baisbyas as well as the Śūdras are allowed initiation into Sannyāsa so long as they show due commitment to ritual observances.

However, the enormity of the congregation on the occasion of the Gajan festival makes a broad regional division of the visitors a necessity. “The fair on the first four days of the eleven over which it is held is primarily earmarked for pilgrims from the south, coming mostly from Midnapur, Howrah, Southern parts of 24 parganās and Árāmbāg subdivision and is called the Dakhne melā. The Pūrbe melā, generally attended by pilgrims from eastern districts like Murshidābād, Nadiā and North 24 parganās, starts on the fifth day while visitors from Howrah, Hoogly, Calcutta and Burdwan come after the ninth day. The eighth day is set

68. Satishchandra Giri - Tārakeswar Śivatattva. PP. - 85-86.


70. Satishchandra Giri - Tārakeswar Śivatattva. P. - 83.
apart for the pilgrims from Rāmnagar, a nearby village. Pilgrims from the districts of Jessore and Khulnā in Bāŋlādesh also visit Tārakeswar on this occasion.

Generally, a Gājan Sannyāśī partakes of habisiyānna prepared of three handfuls of sun-dried rice boiled with milk and molasses in the evening, thus devoting the day to fasting and penitence. This begins on the date of initiation into Sannyāsa and continues until twenty-seventh day of Chaitra, marked as Mahābabiśya-day (the concluding day for partaking of habisiyānna).

The day after Mahābabiśya is observed as the Phal-day (the day specified for offering fruits to the Lord). On this date, the Gājan Sannyāśīs along with the Mūl Sannyāśī achieve a state of frenzy, swinging swiftly the thorny twigs of the acacia tree and running all the way to Tārakeswar from Rāmnagar. Soon after they reach the sacred complex, there begins the rhythmic dance with the beating of drums by these Sannyāśīs, while they circulate the temple of the Lord. Then begins the ritual of Kāntājhānp (jumping into the bed of thorns). On this date, they usually eat fruits in the evening, only when the rituals are over.

The Gājan festival tends to a climax on the next day, with that of the Nil utsab (the marriage anniversary of Lord Śiva). The deity is dressed like a groom with a topar or conical sbolā-hat on the head. The Sannyāśīs assemble around the temple to light up earthen lamps and candles in the evening to celebrate the

73. Satishchandra Giri -Tārakeswar Sivatattva. PP.- 83- 84.
anniversary. The women in particular take part in this ritual, known as *Nīler bāti* with the incantation of *mantras* in the presence of the priests and break fast thereafter. Traditionally, a spectacular procession reaches the temple, with the *Mobanta* in the palanquin to preside over the ceremony which is celebrated with a firework display in the evening. A considerable number of *Gājan Sannyāsīs* leave Tārakeswar for home after this ceremony only to complete the remaining part of the ritual there.

The *Gājan* festival ends on the *Charak Samkrānti* or the last day of the Bengali calendar year. The *Charakpūjā* or the swinging festival “is celebrated with some pomp, more particularly at Tārakeswar” and “on this occasion men swing from high poles.” Usually, the *Gājan Sannyāsīs* undergo various forms of physical mortification sometimes by holding stalks in their mouth or “by walking upon live embers, throwing themselves down from a height, piercing their body and tongue with pincers, etc.” with the desire for “obtaining favours from Siva and as an expiation for their sins”. However, these practices along with the swinging festival, by means of hooks pierced through the fleshy muscles on both sides of the spine are now prohibited by order of the Government. These rituals have not been replaced even by alternatives today.

75. Satishchandra Giri - Tārakeswar Sivatattva. P.- 86.


Also, Satishchandra Giri – Tārakeswar Sivatattva. PP.- 83 –84.
In fact, the Charakpūjā, which is associated with the rituals performed in honour of Dharmathākur, has intruded into the ritual observances associated with the cult of Lord Śiva.\(^79\)

This festival enters the concluding phase with the casting off of the uttariya, the ritual threads, by the Gājan pilgrims. Prior to this, they take a dip in the Dudbpukur (sacred tank), and appear before the priests concerned, who re-initiate them into their own clans by renouncing that of Lord Śiva. This they do with the utterance of the incantation: 'śivagotram' paritvajya ātmagotre pravisātu' (enter into the clan of the self, leaving the one of Lord Śiva).

Usually, these seasonal pilgrims perform mundan, dandi and all the other rituals as are performed by the regular pilgrims. They find no constraint of time at all in this context as most of them stay at Tārakeswar for a couple of days as compared to their counterparts.

As these pilgrims are mostly from rural areas of Bengal and elsewhere, their socio-economic background is embedded largely in agriculture. A large number of them are found coming to Tārakeswar in groups, owing to the nature of their commitment. Hunter has estimated the number of Gājan pilgrims at ‘about fifteen thousand’\(^80\). This figure has risen very sharply with the inclusion of those not only from different parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh but also from Orrisā, Bihār and Assām\(^81\). A large number of them are also found throughout this month fetching the water of the Ganges as happens in the case of other

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seasonal pilgrims. But with their comparatively unsophisticated socio-economic background, they are less prone to recreation while on pilgrimage.

Therefore, the sanskritised ritual observances mingled with popular rites provide this festival with a distinctive character, while reinforcing traditional values. Besides, this community festival also paves the way for the enjoyment of the fruits of group solidarity, achieved through an awareness of universal brotherhood. This was so strong that the Giri Mohântas through ages dared not to take on it despite their commitment to the sanskritised ritual observances. This tradition continues even today at the behest of the Āshram Mohântas of the Tārakeswar Math.

XIV

The pilgrimage to Tārakeswar and its bearing on fairs and festivals over the years make it amply clear that this pilgrim centre accommodates people from all the castes on the common platform of Hinduism. In fact, caste considerations and occupations do not stand on the way to interaction between the priestly community and devotees of Lord Tāraknāth or between the pilgrims and the local people. This kind of interaction which prevails at Tārakeswar seems peculiar, given the background of an otherwise caste-ridden and stratified society.

Despite this outstanding development, estimates of the specific number of pilgrims belonging to various castes over the years, are very difficult to obtain from the families of the traditional Sebāyet priests. This is because, these families are not in the habit of maintaining the registers, bearing the names of their clients serially as are done today by their counterparts in other purānic places of pilgrimage.

A critical survey of the inflow of pilgrims over period of a few years, however, reveals that Tārakeswar as a place of pilgrimage has been visited and sometimes revisited by those belonging to certain specific castes. Of these, the Brāhmins,
the Kāyasthas, the Baidyas, the Māhisyas, the Sadgopas, the Tīlīs, the Gandhabaniks, the Gopas, the Modaks, the Kumbhakārs, the Tāntis, the Kānsāris, the Nāpīts, the Swarnabaniks, the Śunris, the Namasūrdas, the Baishyas, the Poundra-kshatriyas, the Dhopās are noticeable. Incidentally, the pilgrims belonging to high as well as mid-level castes contribute to the maximum number of regular pilgrims while the Baisākbī and Śrāvanī pilgrims come from all the castes. However, the low-caste pilgrims are found in greater number among those coming during the Šivarāṭri and Gājan festivals. These figures, which have been roughly consistent over the last few years, lead one to conclude that these trends have their source somewhere in the past.

The proximity to this place of pilgrimage and ritual commitment contribute possibly to the higher frequency of visits by those who are regular pilgrims from the aforesaid castes. Usually the majority of the pilgrims from high and middle castes are professionals or are involved in commercial activities, whereas those coming mostly during the Šivarāṭri and Gājan festivals are agriculturists.

It is interesting to note that all the pilgrims wish to achieve spiritual peace, irrespective of their socio-economic background. But those from the lower-caste groups desire panaceas from the presiding deity. Hence, they visit this place of pilgrimage more frequently than the others. However, the study of caste divisions so far as the.dbarnāyātrīs are concerned does not show any significant change during the period under review. Therefore, Tārakeswar remains and will remain, if time permits, an important place of pilgrimage attracting pilgrims from all walks of life.