Chapter IX.

The economic interaction.
The evolution of this place of pilgrimage shows that the cult of Lord Tāraknāth remains all through the sheet anchor of the economy of this place of pilgrimage. In fact, a considerable number of residents of this place of pilgrimage eke out their livelihood by virtue of the steady inflow of pilgrims throughout the year. This nature of dependence definitely varies with reference to specific caste-groups.

The involvement of the priestly community seems more direct in the socio-economic context because of its exclusive nature of occupation in relation to ritual observances. Therefore, the dependence of Sebāyet priests on the temple and its presiding deity remains traditionally extra-ordinary despite the lack of recognition of their status by the Giri Mohāntas. Hence, their existence as a compact community today seems definitely due to the termination of the Giri regime.

The Sebāyet priests, most of whom are Radī Brahmins, have lived at Tārakeswar for generations with initial permission from the Giri Mohāntas to settle around the sacred complex within the network of estate-zamīndāri. Hence, they began to settle in the vicinity of the temple, alongside members of other castes. Even those who live in the adjacent villages, are averse to form their own neighbourhood. In this regard, they differ from their counterparts in other purānic places of pilgrimage like Purī in Orissā or Gaya in Bihār. Therefore, the social existence of the Sebāyet priests at Tārakeswar somehow or other allows easy interaction between themselves and other local people, as well as the pilgrims on the other.

However, most of these families of Sebāyet priests or the sacred specialists are not entirely dependent on priesthood as they possess properties in the places of

1. Interview with the ex-Secretary, Purohit Maṇḍalī on 7.10.99.
their origin as well as, in some cases, in the places adjacent to this pilgrim centre. Despite this, the *kulabritti* (the allowance in lieu of service to the presiding deity), *dakṣinā* (the remuneration given by the pilgrims for being of help to them in the worship of the deity) as well as the rent paid by the pilgrims for staying in the rest houses-cum-residences of the priests concerned, contribute also to their livelihood\(^2\). The strengthening of their position in the socio-economic hierarchy around the sacred complex is definitely due to their comparable inclination to gain literacy.

Despite the relative economic ease resulting from *kulabritti*, widespread dissatisfaction prevails as this profession fails generally to provide for long-term financial security. This had resulted earlier from the traditional mode of payment signifying voluntary gifts from the pilgrims in general. This tradition has, subsequently, undergone much change. This in its turn affects the *yajmāni* (clientele) relationship between the priests and pilgrims, thereby complicating economic interaction\(^3\).

Another noticeable development in the context of socio-economic interaction between the *Sebāyets* and the pilgrims following the termination of the *Giri* regime, is the intrusion of the *Pāṇḍās* or *Dālāls* (brokers) into the areas, formerly the reserve of the *Sebāyet* priests. Hence, the acceptance of this *kulabritti* has continued mainly due to sheer economic compulsion. This has become more important by virtue of the assumption of a community character by the *Pāṇḍās* or *Dālāls*, since the nineteen fifties\(^4\).

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2. Ibid.

3. Interview with the Secretary, Purohit Maṇḍalī on 25.12.99.

4. Ibid.
Besides the priests, there are also persons who depend almost completely on the cult of Lord Śiva as well as the pilgrims for their sustenance. Of them the barbers, the potters, the florists, the water-carriers, the milkmen are important.

There are both Bengali as well as non-Bengali barbers engaged in the kāmānsālā (tonsuring centre) run by the temple office. They are mostly Nāpits by caste. The Bengalis are proud of having lived around the sacred complex for generations while the non-Bengalis are generally native to the districts of Bāliā and Ārrāh of Bihār from where they claim to have come during the tenure of Madhabchandra Giri.

Usually, they work under the supervision of a head barber, who takes annual lease of the site from the Tārakeswar estate. Their meagre income is somehow complemented with the perquisites they get in lieu of their involvement in certain rituals organised by the temple authority.

Like the barbers, the potters also belong to two groups- Bengalis and non-Bengalis, members of the Kumbbakār and Kumbār castes. Both the Bengali and non-Bengali potters claim to be old residents of this pilgrim centre. The only difference is that the non-Bengalis claim to have come here from the same places as the non-Bengali barbers, during the tenure of the last Giri Mohānā of the Tārakeswar Math.

In fact, the maximum demand for their pottery comes from the dealers of articles used in rituals, florists and from those involved directly or indirectly with the organisation of temple services.

Of the florists, there are a few employed by the estate to supply flowers daily to
the temple while the rest of them are self-employed, offering flowers for the worship of the Lord. They are usually from various caste groups. Unlike those employed by the Tārakeswar estate, the self-employed florists are allowed to carry on their sales only after the payment of a monthly rent to the estate. Of them, the non-Bengalis are mostly from Orissa and have been at Tārakeswar for generations.

Traditionally, the water-carriers eke out their livelihood by supplying the sacred water of the Ganges to the temple of the Lord. They belong to the caste of Karan, and they too have been here for generations as appointees of the estate.

Besides them, there are also milkmen belonging to the caste of Gopas who, like others, depend greatly on the deity as well as the pilgrims for subsistence. Their close and almost legendary association with Tārakeswar has been related elsewhere.

Thus this place of pilgrimage provides opportunities for sustenance to a considerable number of professional castes who cater to the needs of the pilgrims. This they do alongside their respective roles in the organisation of services in the temple of the Lord for which they receive perquisites accordingly.

III

Apart from those involved directly or indirectly with the organisation of temple services already mentioned, there are also the owners of the rest houses who, indeed, belong to a peripheral group as the beneficiaries of the temple economy. Incidentally, the houses of the Sebāyet priests are also the traditional rest houses for pilgrims on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar. But in recent years, there has occurred an escalation in the number of rest houses and dharmasālās, owned both by Bengali and the non-Bengali communities. This seems to have been a recent phenomenon, when placed against the prevalence of the Chandina Sattva during the Giri regime. Reference to it has already been made elsewhere.
In recent times, the rest house owners come from various castes and depend largely on rent. The rooms are generally hired out on a daily basis to the pilgrims congregating at Tārakeswar round the year.

The pilgrim component has also had an impact on the extension of business activities in and around the sacred complex. By the end of 1950, three shops for consecrated items necessary for worship of the Lord, run by caste Modaks, and two shops for milk and milk-made items, owned by the caste Gopas, as well as a few shops for selling pictures of Lord Tāraknāth by a few Baishnab families have come into existence. Besides these, two hotels run by caste Brāhmins from Orissā, two sweetmeat shops owned by a caste Modak and a caste Mābiṣya, two grocery shops run by caste Gandhabaniks, two garment shops owned by caste Tīlis, as well as a shop for brass and bronze articles run by a caste Tāmli, also cater to the needs of the pilgrims in particular and local people in general.

However, there has also occurred an escalation in the number of shops and hotels in and around the sacred complex in keeping with gradual increase in the number of pilgrims in recent years.

IV

Over and above, the secular aspect of the twin institutions is conspicuously revealed in the given economic sphere. It has already elsewhere been clarified that the economic evolution of the Tārakeswar Math owes much to the devotees of Lord Tāraknāth who, over the years, enriched the estate with donations as well as gifts of various kinds. Besides, the interest from the bank from fixed deposits, the leases of various sites within the estate and rents from establishments owned by the estate, give financial strength to the estate today.

5. Interview with the Secretary, Tīrthayaṭrī Nībās Mālik Sangha on 26.12.99.
6. Interview with the ex-Secretary, Purohit Māṇḍalī on 9.6.'97.
Despite these, the Tārakeswar estate remains short of becoming a profit-oriented enterprise as the income from various sources is spent mostly on daily worship, the maintenance of the twin institutions, arrangements for the benefit of the devotees and on salaries of the employees, among whom the Brāhmins are predominant. Therefore, the prosperity of the town somehow or other depends much on the visits of the pilgrims, which became very important ever since the extension of the railway line from Sheorāphuli to Tārakeswar in 1884 and its consequent electrification.

In fact, the steady development of the communication system since the establishment of railway line connecting this place of pilgrimage with the surrounding areas comprises a major contribution to the needs of the pilgrims. Besides the construction of the railway line, the construction of the metalled roads connecting distant towns, interior villages as well as neighbouring districts not only exposes the influence and extent of the manifold characteristics of Tārakeswar as a place of pilgrimage on thousands of pilgrims round the year but also emphasises its considerable importance as a commercial centre.

Of late, Tārakeswar has become a viable market for the sale of the agricultural products of the surrounding regions. The agricultural products include mainly raw jute, potatoes and other vegetables. In fact, the nodal position of


Tārakeswar in connecting the interior of the district contributes to its steady economic development. Noticeably, the craftsmen of the neighbouring villages produce certain articles with an eye to the pilgrims on Tārakeswar pilgrimage. Therefore, the benefits accruing from the inflow of pilgrims, in consequence of the development of the communication system, are reaped not by any particular caste or group but by all those whose livelihood depends on the cult of Lord Śiva at Tārakeswar.

People living not only in the neighbourhood but also far away from the pilgrim centre derive economic benefit by reason of the all-pervasive influence of the temple of Lord Tāraknāth on the region. No doubt, that the places from where the seasonal pilgrims begin their journey, or rest while on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar, attract those selling articles for rituals and items for light refreshment. Sheorāphuli derives maximum benefit as compared to all the other places, as the seasonal pilgrims from the neighbouring states as well as from Bānglādesh congregate here by train, boat and other conveyances to begin their journey from Nimāttīrthā Ghat. Besides, a large number of people residing along the Tārakeswar-Baidyabāti route gain from the inflow of seasonal pilgrims through the sales of aforesaid items.

There is no denying that the cult of Lord Tāraknāth has helped considerably in the development of a number of cottage industries like the manufacture of pottery, the yoke poles (bāṅks or kānors), the reticulated slings (sikās), incense sticks, hand-woven ritual threads, napkins, coarse clothes and so on in the neighbourhood. Naturally, different groups of people are involved in dealing in different products. These people of different age groups with diverse socio-economic background, are thus found engaged in cottage industries as well as in stalls temporarily erected beside the route through which the seasonal pilgrims are on pilgrimage to Tārakeswar. Incidentally the Śivarātri as well as Gājan festivals have special attraction for not only the petty businessmen dealing...
in vegetables, fruits, utensils, stationary goods and so on, but also for those from Gayā and Dumkā, with their products of various types made of stone\textsuperscript{10}.

Therefore, it can be asserted in clear terms that this sacred complex, along with the presiding deity not only soothes the weary souls, but also generates viable economic opportunities for a large number of people belonging to this temple town as well as to the surrounding regions.