Chapter -II.

Tārakeswar in retrospect.
Tārakeswar, the renowned pilgrim town of Eastern India is situated in the district of Hooghly\(^1\). Initially, this greatest centre of the Saiva sect in West Bengal was within the district of Burdwan prior to 1795 A.D. Under the regulation XXXVI of 1795, the district of Burdwan was divided into two parts, each under a separate officer. The present Hooghly district was one of the six constituent units of the Burdwan division\(^2\). Previously, the district of Hooghly was divided into two subdivisions-Hooghly Sadar and Sreerāmpur. Tārakeswar fell within the Sreerāmpur subdivision as “an important village in ṭhāna Haripāl situated in 22°53' north and 88°2' east”\(^3\). Again on 2 October, 1954; Chāndernagore subdivision was created with five Police Stations of which Tārakeswar was an important one\(^4\). However, Tārakeswar had been classified as a town in the Census of 1961, for its pronounced urban characteristics\(^5\). This erstwhile rural trade centre came to be regarded “as a non-municipal town for the purpose of the 1961 Census.”\(^6\) Tārakeswar became a municipal town in 1975 which gave it a considerable advantage in the present context.

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In fact, the topographic features of the region, in which Tārakeswar was situated, remained unfavourable to its civic evolutionary process prior to and also long after the revelation of the cult of Lord Tāraknāth. It was, in fact, “a flat alluvial plain intersected by a number of sluggish rivers and streams……. Another topographic feature of this region consisted of the relatively high riparian strips and the extensive depressions in between them” 7. The Dwārakeswar-Dāmodar inter riverine plain, in which this place of pilgrimage was situated, became liable to floods during the rainy season. Except where protected by an embankment, this region was susceptible to constant floods. The crops being liable to sudden and unpredictable submersion, cultivation in this area was precarious. Besides, the Mudeswari played havoc with this region because of its constantly shifting banks which were neither embanked nor covered with perennial plants “to prevent soil erosion and consequent increase in the load of the streams” 8. This baneful geographical condition was, therefore, the principal cause for this region being a backward segment of the district.

The Dāmodar surpassed all other rivers in this region with its power to play havoc with the inhabitants of the surrounding region. The record of the Dāmodar dates back to October 1787 when the “river of sorrow”, having burst its banks, swept away “bāts, temples, ganjes and golāhs” 9. As a result, “no upland crops such as jute, āus rice or vegetables could safely be grown and roads could not be properly kept up”. The same was repeated with vengeance in 182310. The Dāmodar rose again in high flood in 1885-'86 as well as in 1903

7. Ibid. – P.- 663.
8. Ibid. - P.-11.
causing immense sufferings to the inhabitants of both banks. In 1903, the flood waters reached the well-known Tārakeswar temple and for a time fears were entertained about its safety\textsuperscript{11}. The fury with which the Dāmodar seasonally flooded this place of pilgrimage even long after the establishment of the monastery at Tārakeswar had also been noted in the Tārakeswar Śivatattva\textsuperscript{12}. The above mentioned references are ample to establish the notoriety of the Dāmodar, as a cause behind the retarded process of civic evolution of the region surrounding Tārakeswar, for more than a century.

The incessant floods of the Dāmodar must have an adverse impact on the landed properties of the region surrounding Tārakeswar prior to and also long after the initiation of the cult of Lord Tāraknāth. The flood waters of the Dāmodar had long been a source of terror to the zamindārs and cultivators of land on its banks, and of trouble and expense to the Government\textsuperscript{13}. This must have reduced the income of the proprietors of landed estates and consequently their worth. Meanwhile, the resumption laws involving difficulties of identification and of procedures also diminished popular confidence in landed property, not excluding rent-free tenures\textsuperscript{14}. Given this background, it can be assumed that the sketch of the region surrounding this place of pilgrimage might not have been a different one at least prior to and also long after the initiation of the cult of Śiva. Besides, the inaccessibility of this region surrounding Tārakeswar around the same time should have also had an adverse impact on landed properties, thus reducing their market values during this period.


\textsuperscript{12} Satishchandra Giri – Tārakeswar Śivatattva. P.-120.


\textsuperscript{14} G. Toynbee- A Sketch of the Administration of the Hooghly District,(1795-1845). PP.- 63-64.
The mortal diseases were the aftermath of the seasonal floods in this region encompassing Tārakeswar. In the nine years following the Census of 1872, the population decreased owing mainly to the terrible epidemic of malarial fever, known as Burdwān fever 15. It appears from the Census Report of 1901 that as far back as in 1872 Tārakeswar was a populous village along with Haripāl and Singur. As the drainage system in general was defective, “the flood waters remained stagnant in depressions choked with weeds, which foster the propagation of fever-bearing mosquitoes” 16. With the excavation of the Eden Canal and the construction of the Sheorāphuli-Tārakeswar Branch of the Eastern Railway, both in 1885, agriculture and trade got a boost. This resulted in the corresponding growth in population in these areas. The Census Report of 1931 makes it clear that Tārakeswar, however, registered a little growth despite these developments 17. These socio-geographic features of the region in which Tārakeswar was situated remained, possibly, a vital reason for this place being underpopulated prior to or even long after the initiation of the cult of Śiva.

II

The topographic features of the region, in which Tārakeswar was situated, presumably had an adverse impact on the lifestyles of the inhabitants prior to or at least immediately after the revelation of the cult of Lord Tāraknāth. In fact, the original inhabitants of this place did belong to the peasant community and were, therefore, from the lower stratum of society. This, indeed, becomes clear


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from the familiarity of the site of the revelation of the cult to the men and women belonging to the peasant community long before its initiation. In fact these people, known as Rārhs, were the original inhabitants of the Rārb region of Bengal.

The Kaibarttas congregated chiefly in the southern part of this district, where Tārakeswar was situated. L. S. S. O'Malley noted that next to the Bāgdis, the Kaibarttas were the most numerous caste in Hooghly. It was found in the first Census of 1872, that the numerical strength of the caste Kaibarttas and caste Bāgdis was considerable in comparison with even those of the Kāyasthas and Titls. The Brāhmins, Sadgopas and Gopas were placed in between these two extremes. However, the Kaibarttas traditionally were fishermen. But the dissidents among them, had in course of time, abandoned their traditional occupation to take to agriculture. The caste Bāgdis were, indeed, from the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy.

However, there was also the preponderance of the Gopa community in and around the place where the revelation of the cult occurred. This becomes amply clear from the fact of association of the cowherds in general as well as of one Mukuda Ghosh in particular belonging to the Gopa community with the revelation of the cult. Besides, the special status accorded to Mukunda

Ghosh, in relation to the service to the deity, implied much for the importance of this community in and around this place. The pastoral Gopas appear to have an important role in spreading the cult of Lord Śiva\textsuperscript{24}. Incidentally, Kabikankan Mukunda in his \textit{Chandaśmanigal} indicates that the Gopas engaged in cultivation enjoyed better social position than the pastoral section of the caste\textsuperscript{25}.

Besides these original inhabitants, all those who were associated with the revelation as well as the manifestation of the cult were outsiders to this place of pilgrimage. It has already been noted that the rise of the Rājā of Rāmnagar and the first Mobānta of the Giri order at the Tārakeswar Math coincided with the revelation of the cult. Besides, the Brāhmīns who came in due course after the revelation of the cult and were given various organisational responsibilities with regard to the worship of the deity, were similarly outsiders to this religious complex. This process began with the arrangements for the worship being made the responsibility of one Chaturbhuj Gānguly, a Brāhmin from Singti-Sibpur\textsuperscript{26}. This development, in the regional perspective of the pilgrim town, also substantiates the proposition that the lower- caste people were possibly the original inhabitants of this region. Most of these original inhabitants were usually dependent on agriculture although it failed to keep them above the basic subsistence level as was evident from the varied topographical nature of this region. But those who were alien to this region were not, in fact, averse to the idea of coming to terms with the original inhabitants. Their interaction with the original inhabitants belonging to the peasant as well as the Gopa communities prior to and even after the revelation of the cult makes this proposition stronger. However, the caste composition of this place of pilgrimage remained unchanged prior to and also long after the revelation of the cult.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} H.R. Sānyāl- Social Mobility in Bengal. P.- 46
\item \textsuperscript{25} Kabikankan Mukunda – \textit{Chandaśmanigal}. P.- 80.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Nibāran Chandra Smrititirtha- \textit{Brihat Tārakeswar Māhātmya}. P.-38.
\end{itemize}
The association of these local inhabitants in the process of the revelation of the cult and the participation of the Gopa community in particular in the organisation of service at the behest of the Rāja of Rāmnagar obviously stood for their religious inclination. It is well-known that the influence of Śaitivism was deep-rooted in the Rābh region of Bengal. This tradition continues to exist. The Mangalakāvyas of medieval Bengal refer to the popularity of Lord Śiva among the people of rural Bengal, especially among the lower castes. The conventional narratives of the Mangalakāvyas constitute the bulk of the literary products during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is significant that such Kāvyas were composed in large numbers and those earned great popularity all over Bengal. In fact, the popularity of Lord Śiva among the Śūdras, members of the lowest caste, in rural Bengal reinforces the theory that Rudra of the Vedas was gradually transformed over the years to become a god popularly worshipped among the non-Āryāns. The popular myths regarding Lord Śiva have taken shape as a result of the influence of non-Āryān culture. This was possible simply because of the absorption of the culture of outsiders and the resultant cultural transformation of the castes of the lower rungs. This was, in fact, a continuous process in Hindu society. Moreover, the worship of Lord Śiva in association with his status as the god of agriculture speaks much for the assimilation of the Āryān and non-Āryān cultures in rural Bengal.

With this transformation in the theological stature, Lord Śiva also lost his purānic identity in rural Bengal. Even the Śivāyana of Rāmeswar Bhattāchārya

places Lord Siva in this agricultural perspective. This elucidation makes it clear that, although the Saivaistic cult was very popular in the Rārh region, the presence of its followers as a sect was not conspicuous. This was, indeed, true of the lower-caste people who inhabited this place of pilgrimage within the entity of the Rārh region. Although they were not organised as a sect, they were never averse to come to terms with this Mahānta culture along with the superimposed monastery system.

III

This pilgrim town, indeed, has achieved its radiant modern face with its traditional soul placed within the cult of Lord Tāraknāth. The revelation of the cult of Lord Siva at Tārakeswar was followed by the steady process of initiation of the monastery system at the behest of the Dashnāmi Sannyāsīs of the Giri order. The Saivas in Bengal were never familiar with the organisation of the monastery system which, however, was conspicuously present in the culture of the Saivas of Northern India prior to the advent of these non-Bengali Dashnāmi Sannyāsīs. In addition to this outstanding development in the religious history of Tārakeswar, this place of pilgrimage has assumed an ever increasing stature over the years in popular Bengali culture. “It is worthy of note that almost all the Dashnāmi Maths in Bengal were founded by Brāhmins who came from the North-West provinces and not by Brāhmins domiciled in Bengal, and the persons who are now connected with these Maths either as Mohunts or Chelās are fresh arrivals from the North-West.” They were no doubt the upholders of the Brāhmīncal culture. But they were very wise from the initial phase in

32. Judgement of the Calcutta High Court in F. A. No. 1 of 1930; 6 July 1934 and 24 August 1934.
not antagonising the intrusion of age-old *lokāyata* (popular) rituals in to the general religious functions although they had the ability to do that if they so wished. In fact, this attitude of forebearance in the upholders of the *Brāhminical* religion towards popular rituals possibly began to change after the compilation of the *Bishnupurāṇa, Matsyapurāṇa* and the *Agnipurāṇa*. However, the popular religious practices have stood the test of time in rural Bengal despite the overwhelming existence of the *Brāhminical* religious context³³.

The *Dashnāmī Sannyāsīs* of the *Giri* order never endeavoured to even minimally influence the local religious tradition and beliefs. On the whole, the *Giri Mobāntas* kept themselves satisfied with the establishment of the *Math* as their bastion at Tārakeswar in perpetuity as well as with the supervisory authority over the *debutter* property in the name of Lord Tāraknāth. They never took any interest in raising barriers against the forceful existence of *lokāyata* (popular) beliefs and rites. Thereafter, they took an earnest interest in popularising the monasteries at Tārakeswar and elsewhere to enhance their influence. They knew well that if they opposed the popular culture, it would jeopardise their long-term plans. Naturally, the worship of the cult of Lord Śɪvā along with his consort and the associated festivals as well as other important popular religious rites (*lokāchāras*) continue to exist alongside each other over the years at Tārakeswar under the supervision of the *Math*³⁴. The case was almost the same with other *Maths* established by the *Dashnāmī Sannyāsīs* elsewhere in Bengal. These *Maths* which were the elements of the *Tārakeswar Manḍalī* were organised mostly in the districts of Hooghly, Howrah, Midnapur and 24 Parganas. The *Mobāntas* of these *Maths* always belonged to one of the ten orders of the *Dashnāmī Sannyāsī*³⁵.

In course of time Tārakeswar developed into the confluence of various types of religious rites and festivals with local as well as classical traditions. These lokāyata or popular rites outside the orbit of classical religious performances give birth usually to die hard customs that transcend geographical boundaries. Therefore, the orientation of this pilgrim town has no direct link to the history of the evolution of the Mohānta culture as well as consequent evolution of the monastery system headed by the Mohāntas. Moreover, there was no direct link between the revelation of the cult and the organisation of lokāyata rituals of a variegated religious background.

The overwhelming influence of lokadharma or popular religion in the districts of Southern Rārh is also an interesting phenomenon. Tārakeswar which fell within the entity of Southern Rārh was no exception to this general trend. The practice of popular religion or lokadharma with reference to gods and goddesses like Śītalā, Śāthi revolves here round the cult of Lord Tāraknāth, the presiding deity of this place of pilgrimage. This vivacious trend is as strong today as it was, over a hundred years ago. Usually, the alien Giri Sannyāsīs never thought of taking on this popular and traditional Bengali religious culture. This resulted in the gradual assimilation of Brāhminical rituals with popular religious rites or lokāchāras. This, indeed, facilitated the development of the lokāyata form of Śaivism in which the worship of Lord Śiva as well as that of Dharmaṭbakur could be performed together.

An attempt to discover the possible influence of the Nāthpanthīs on the religious history of Tārakeswar prior to or after the advent of the Giri Sannyāsīs will in no way be out of context in the discussion. The suffix nāṭh appended to the deity's name suggests some connections with the Nāthpanthī Šaivites who once flourished in adjacent areas. Lord Siva, the supreme nātha (lord) and the source of nād, the primordial sound, became their principal divinity. The religious beliefs of the Nāthpanthīs were the assimilation of the earlier Šaivism which flourished at the place adjacent to Tārakeswar and the Tāntrik form of Buddhism prevalent during the Pāla-Sena period. The Nāthpanthī Yogīs felt the power of the Almighty God in themselves through meditation. They believed in the principle - 'what is in the macrocosm, is in the microcosm'. In fact, the Nāthpanthīs had an important role in the containment of the influence of Buddhism and this they did under the able leadership of Yogīguru Gorakshanāth. His zeal in this context was comparable to that of Shankarāchārya who had also done the same during the 8th century A.D.

The proximity between Tārakeswar and Mahānād, an ancient place administratively situated between Pāndua and Polbā, within the district of Hooghly as an important centre of the Nātha sect, gives rise to such speculation. Moreover, the existence of the not too famous but age-old temple of Lord Loknāth in the vicinity of this pilgrim town also strengthens the speculation of the influence of the Nāthpanthīs in and around Tārakeswar possibly prior to the advent of the Giri Sannyāsīs. There is no denying the fact that the influence of the Nāthpanthīs was immense across West Bengal, particularly in the districts of Hooghly and Howrah.


Another notable development in the religious perspective of this place of pilgrimage is the prevailing trend of adherence to popular Tantrik rites in and around the religious complex. In fact, the initiation of the cult of the Goddess Kālī, the variform of the consort of Lord Tāraknāth, at the behest of Kamalnath Giri, the second Mohānta of the Tārakeswar Math and the consequent erection of the temple of the Goddess as a result of the endeavours of Mohanchandra Giri, the twenty-second Mohānta in succession within the sacred complex, speak much for the creation of an ambience favourable to the sustenance of Tantrik culture\(^{40}\). There is no denying the fact that the presence of the cult of Śiva without his Śakti and vice versa is considered to have been quite unnatural\(^{41}\). Thereafter, the worship of the Goddess began to be performed under the direct supervision of the Giri Mohāntas. Whether the Giri Sannyāsīs were accustomed to Tantrik rites remains controversial. The Giri Mohāntas might have preferred Tantrik rites as the worship of the Goddess Kālī could not have properly been done without such preference. Moreover, the sacrifice of items alternative to animals as is in vogue at present on auspicious occasions within the sacred complex, must have been a follow up process of an earlier tradition.

Satishchandra Giri, the last Mohānta of the Giri order incidentally claimed in the Title Suit in the Court of the District Judge of Hooghly that “the defendant does not belong to Brahmacharya Āśram but belongs to the Giri sect of Daśnāmā Sannyāsīs and this defendant observes all such rites and ceremonies and performs all such duties as are enjoined by the Shāstras and long established custom of the Maṇḍali to be performed by that class of Sannyāsīs and to which as aforesaid the defendant belongs.”\(^{42}\). But the verdict of the District

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Judge of Hooghly must be taken note of in this context in which he stated that "the Dashnāmī Sannyāsīs are Vedic Sannyāsīs...and that the Mathdharī Sannyāsīs belonging to the school of Shankarachārya are Vedic not Tāntrik Sannyāsīs, that the Tārakeswar Math is governed by the Shankarachārya school of thought, that the Mobunt of the Tārakeswar Math... is a Mathdharī Dashnāmī Sannyāsī." 43

Whatever the case may be, the adherence to Tāntrik rites remains usual in and around the sacred complex even at present despite the general changes in the twin institutions—the Math and the temple. This becomes possible primarily owing to the adherence to Tāntrik rites on the part of a large number of sacred specialists directly attached to the responsibility of rendering service to the cult of Lord Tāraknāth. The Śākta Tāntriks of this pilgrim town with their inclination to highly esoteric Tāntrik practices, attach utmost importance to the female principle despite their indisputable commitment to the cult of Śiva.

Despite this socio-cultural and economic background prior to the revelation of the cult, this non- purāṇic place of pilgrimage always absorbed newer traits over the years. Moreover, Tārakeswar has also displayed its capacity to adjust and get attuned to new developments which sway society at large. This process had certainly begun with the erection of the temple of Lord Tāraknāth in the early eighteenth century by an immigrant Kshatriya king, and a Dashnāmī monastery later on by a Śāiva monk of the Giri order. Since then Tārakeswar has become an important Śāiva centre in Eastern India through several developmental phases. Despite the prevalent features of Tārakeswar with its heterogeneous

43. Judgement of Mr. Justice K. C. Nāg, District Judge of Hooghly, in the Title Suit No. 28/1922, dated 6 November 1929.
population in recent years, this place of pilgrimage also exhibits a rural character in the low-caste people who are dependent generally on agricultural occupations. Somehow, the influence of the deity upon the socio-cultural and economic life of the dwellers of this place of pilgrimage seems all-pervasive in spite of the general changes which threaten our society.