Chapter –IV.

The Mohāntas of the nineteenth century : An Overview.
In fact, the evolution of the twin institutions at this place of pilgrimage, from the initial phase to the end of 18th century, owed more to the illustrious as compared to less illustrious Giri Mobântas. Despite the differences in their efficiency, the Giri Mobântas in general displayed a primary concern over the years for the retention of their hold over the Math as well as the temple. So, along with their endeavours towards trade, they also encouraged an adherence to the Guru-Sîṣya Paramâparâ. Although a series of Giri Mobântas succeeded to the helm of affairs in the 18th century, no accurate chronological order can be substantiated on account of the lack of corroborative information. Therefore, no definitive compartmentalisation of the tenures of the Giri Mobântas in the 18th century seems possible in this context.

However, Raghuchandra Giri, the favourite disciple of Mohanchandra Giri, was elevated to the office of the Mobânta at the Târakeswar Math after the demise of his Guru (preceptor) by virtue of a Niyampatra (ordinance) dated 2nd Âświn 1249 B.S. (i.e. 1843 A.D.). This Niyampatra, prepared at the behest of Mohanchandra Giri, enabled the twenty-third Mobânta to take over the Târakeswar Guddee along with the nif (self) and debutter (in the name of the deity) properties which were also bequeathed to him by his preceptor. This, indeed, seems to have created an impression in the minds of successive Mobântas that the public in general should have no interest in the administration of the Târakeswar Math.

Raghuchandra Giri's tenure witnessed the inclusion of Lât Râmchandrapur associated with Lât Naipâra within the temple-zamindâri. He was referred to have been paying land revenue and road cess to the Ilâbeli Câchâri of the Râjbâti of Burdwan. This Mobânta was very instrumental in convincing the

1. Title Suit No. 28/1922. Suit Under Sec. 92. C.P.C. Para.-17A.

2. The list of properties submitted by the defendant in the Court of the District Judge, Hooghly. Title Suit No 28/1922. D.Sinhâroy and others Vs. Satishchandra Giri.
Government of the desirability of making free the property of the temple from tax, and treating it as a religious endowment, under the laws of the British Government. In fact, the Giri Mobanta in general took delight in taking the twin institutions to be private religious endowments over the years. The proposition that the shrine was a public religious and charitable endowment, had emphatically been denied by the last Giri Mobanta of the Tārakeswar Math. But his denial that the gifts of movable as well as immovable properties were made for the entertainment of pilgrims, guests and ascetics did not merit any attention as is evident from the verdict of the District Judge. It upholds that "the nij (self) properties have in the past contributed towards the charitable and religious objects and that without such contribution they could never have existed in the past...".

Immediately after Raghuchandra Giri's accession to the office of the Mobanta at the Tārakeswar Math, the sacred complex along with the surrounding region was flooded by the Dāmodar. "From the records of the Bengal Government (from 1852) relating to the Dāmodar floods and embankments, it appears that the inundations of the Dāmodar could not be controlled because of the lack of detailed knowledge about uncertain monsoon conditions depositing widely varying quantities of water in the upper catchment areas of the Dāmodar."
Raghuchandra Giri promptly rose to the occasion by taking recourse to the philanthropic activities. He used to help the flood-affected as well as the famine-stricken people living in and around the sacred complex from his own coffers. The so-called Śiva-Gangā or Dudhpukur adjacent to the shrine of Lord Tāraknāth was dug by the order of this Mōhānta, for the benefit of the pilgrims as well as the residents of the sacred complex\(^8\). Initially, the cult of Dudhpukur achieved considerable dimension with its so-called power of fulfilling the desires of the devotees who took a dip in it\(^9\).

The main road within the temple town extending between the compound of the sacred complex and Sāhāpur, a nearby village, was also constructed during his tenure. Moreover, the repair work of the twenty-one mile long Baidyātī-Tārakeswar Road known as the District Board Road in the Sreerampur subdivision, was also undertaken during this period\(^10\).

This phase of the evolution of the monastery and the temple at Tārakeswar witnessed earnest endeavours on the part of the Giri Mōbāntas to categorise the properties acquired over the years using distinct terms- *nij* (self) and *debutter* (in the name of the deity). However, the tradition of playing the role of *tālukdār* that had begun during the tenure of Mohanchandra Giri, remained as it was when his disciple Raghuchandra Giri took over. Their proneness to consider the same as a private religious endowment thenceforth seems to have taken shape against this background.

Over and above, this period under consideration witnessed no interruption in the measures adopted traditionally for the upliftment of the image of this place.

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of pilgrimage. This definitely resulted in a steady increase in the inflow of pilgrims since the days of Mohanchandra Giri. This inflow assumed phenomenal proportions with the construction of a main road within the sacred complex as well as the repair of the District Board Road during the tenure of Raghuchandra Giri. In short, this Mobânta was witness to the all-round development of the sacred complex in spite of its susceptibility to the ravages of the Dâmrodar.

II.
In fact the last two Mobântas of the Giri order of the Dashnami Sannyâsîs at the Târakeswar Math left permanent marks on the history of this place of pilgrimage. These two Mobântas were Mâdhabchandra Giri and his disciple Satishchandra Giri who became the Mobântas successively following the established process. Although Mâdhabchandra Giri's succession can not be dated accurately, owing to the lack of evidence, it can be held that he had presumably assumed office with the blessing of his preceptor Raghuchandra Giri sometime in the late sixtieth or early seventieth decade of the 19th century. Prafulla Chakrabarty in his 'Social Profile of Târakeswar' holds that the tenure of Mâdhabchandra Giri began in 186711. However, this date remains uncorroborated. Notwithstanding this difficulty, it is known that he remained the Mobânta for about twenty-five years. During this period, he was witness to a number of improvements in the socio-economic and cultural perspectives of the sacred complex.

Reference has already been made to the gradual accumulation of properties at the behest of the Giri Mobântas of the Târakeswar Math over the years, which they divided accordingly into two categories- nij (self ) and debutter (in the name of the deity). Mâdhabchandra Giri, indeed, was no exception in his determined continuation of these policies.

As a matter of fact, Madhabchandra Giri claimed credit for accumulating vast properties in and around the sacred complex amounting to 500 bigbās of lands along with rent-free debutter lands, amounting to 2355 bigbās during this period. Besides, läkherāj lands amounting to over 248 bigbās in various parts of the district of Hooghly, along with rent-free and jamāi lands in the districts of Hooghly, 24 Parganas and Calcutta were acquired at his behest. Apart from these properties; hard cash, ornaments as well as the other valuables made of gold and silver were procured. However, the references to the rent-free and jamāi lands as well as the valuables remain unsubstantiated.

Despite his inclination to categorise some properties as nij(self) properties, Madhabchandra Giri failed to produce documentary evidences in support of his claim. Moreover, the Suit No. 2 of 1878 initiated during his tenure resulted in the judgement that the properties acquired thus far within the purview of the Tārakeswar Math were definitely debutter in character.

While quantifying the landed properties acquired at the behest of Madhabchandra Giri, the last Giri Mohanta, however, admitted that the rent-free lands amounting to 2355 bigbās along with the Tārakeswar Bāzār and Natun Bāzār adjacent to the Math were debutter properties. Besides, the mouzā Bishnubāṭi in the district of Hooghly which was, in fact, the mokārāri tenure of about 214 bigbās of lands; was also characterised as debutter property. These lands were assigned to the name of the deity of Gokulchānd of Burdwan during the tenure of Madhabchandra Giri. That the ornaments, gold and silver articles were included as debutter properties of Lord Tāraknāth since the days of Madhabchandra Giri was acknowledged clearly by the last Giri Mohanta of the Tārakeswar Math.

It is incidentally noteworthy that the gift of a house in Hārkāttā Lane, Calcutta, by one Tārini Bāi, presumably a prostitute, in the name of Lord Tāraknāth was also added to the list of *debutter* properties accumulated during the tenure of Mādhābchandra Gīrī. As this property was considered unprofitable, the *Mobānta* sold it and bought instead rent-free lands measuring over 24 bighās at Bishnubāti in the district of Hooghly with a view to strengthening the *debutter* estate\(^\text{14}\). In fact, the prostitutes of Calcutta often donated movable and immovable properties for religious causes. A few of such donations are recorded by Ramākānta Chakrabarty in his ‘*Bange Vaisnava Dharma*’\(^\text{15}\)

By then, a close contact had been established with Northern India by virtue of the role of the incumbent *Mobānta* in the development of the link with Benāras. Mādhābchandra Gīrī initiated two idols of Lord Śiva and Lord Lakṣmī-Nṛṣīṁha respectively at Benāras. The properties that he acquired in the *mouzā* of Nachipur along with the *putni tāluk* of Lāt Belgāchiā in the district of Hooghly were made *debutter* with reference to aforesaid idols\(^\text{16}\).

The estate-*zamīndāri* was by then considerable because of the accumulation of *debutter* and the so-called *nīj* properties, which the incumbent *Mobānta* claimed to have inherited from his predecessors. In fact, Lāt Krishnapur, Lāt Naipārā, Lāt Jainābād, Lāt Gooreā and Lāt Nārāyanpur were claimed to have been inherited as his *nīj* properties along with the two *mouzās*- Bārāṁbā and Vātā- in the district of Hooghly. Besides, the aforesaid *lākherāj* lands were

\(^{14}\) Ibid. – Para.-32.  
\(^{15}\) Ramākānta Chakrabarty – *Bange Vaisnava Dharma*. Cal.1996. PP.-139-140.  
\(^{16}\) Title Suit No. 28/1922. Suit Under Sec. 92. C.P.C. Para.-22 and 32.
also incorporated within the range of his *nij* (self) properties. Satishchandra Giri, his favourite disciple, candidly admitted that from the income of those existing *nij* properties as well as from the *pranāmīs* and donations given to him personally by his disciples and also from the profits of moneylending business, the incumbent *Mobānta* acquired other *nij* properties during this period.\(^\text{17}\)

However, Mādhabchandra Giri was very conscious of the *zamindāri* held by the Tārakeswar Math. The promptness with which he initiated *se-pattani* settlement of the erstwhile *mokārāri* lease of properties after its lapse, with one Tīrthabāśī Sinhāroy of Haripāl in the Hooghly district deserves mention. While in the other context, a *mokārāri* lease of property had been taken in *mouza* Bhātā at his behest from one Rākhālādās Lāhā, a resident of Ālā in the district of Hooghly with same end in view.\(^\text{18}\)

Irrespective of the nature of properties acquired by the Tārakeswar Math during the tenure of the incumbent *Mobānta*, the fact remains that huge properties had been added to the estate-*zamindāri* in this period under review. This, in fact, resulted in a major transformation of the sacred complex with the *Mobānta* playing the role of a *zamindār*.

Whether the local merchants and traders had to pay tax to the *Mobānta* for their trade, cannot be ascertained. But it can be assumed that the local merchants and traders were, as tenants, permitted by the *Mobānta* to carry on business following an agreement to pay the amount of land tax imposed on them by the *Mobānta*. Usually, the *Mobānta* as a *zamindār* enjoyed the right to impose any amount of land tax on his tenants by virtue of the *Chāndinā Sattva*- a Tenancy

\(^{17}\) Ibid. - Para.-33.

\(^{18}\) The list of properties submitted by Satishchandra Giri in the Court of the Dist. Judge, Hooghly. Title Suit. 28/1922.
Act- by which a tenant was entitled to only use the land, but had no right to build permanent structures on it. Moreover, he was bound to surrender the land concerned when he was asked to do so19. Therefore, the local merchants and traders under the jurisdiction of the Tārakeswar Math certainly had to pay land tax at par with the other tenants.

In fact, this kind of treatment of the tenants in accordance with the existent patterns followed by the zamindārs, on the part of the Mobāntas, had definitely begun during the tenure of Mādhabchandra Giri who had by then created a large zamindāri under the supervision of the Tārakeswar Math. It is very interesting to note that the Indian Association organised at the behest of Surendranāth Bandopādhīyā and Ānandamohan Basu in 1876 had taken up a programme for organising the tenants against their atrocious zamindārs particularly in the district of Hooghly when Mādhabchandra Giri was at the helm of affairs at Tārakeswar. The Indian Association organised innumerable meetings at different places in the district to build up public opinion in this regard. A meeting had incidentally been arranged at Tārakeswar at which both Surendranāth and Ānandamohan addressed the audience with a view to inspiring them to stand firm against the atrocious zamindārs20. The treatment meted out to the tenants as zamindārs gave birth to grievances in the long run and led to the Satyāgraha movement during the tenure of Satishchandra Giri. In fact, the demand for wiping out the age-old problem of illegal and enforced payments ultimately sounded the death knell so far as the hegemony of the Giri order at the Tārakeswar Math was concerned21.


That the Mohantas of the Tārakeswar Math were in the habit of subjecting traders, shopkeepers, residents as well as pilgrims to illegal exactions through their agents came into focus immediately prior to the Satyagraha movement which was launched against the last Giri Mohanta of the Tārakeswar Math22. Moreover, there was also the ījāriūlar demanding toll, by order of the Mohanta, from the people bringing vegetables and fruits by oxen to the market for sale23. Although the illegal exactions as well as toll were enthusiastically put into effect during the tenure of Satishchandra Giri, the trend was certainly set during the regime of his predecessor, from whom he had inherited the temple-zamindāri along with its vices.

III

Like his predecessors, Mādhabchandra Giri had taken keen interest in the development of this place of pilgrimage alongside his endeavour to increase the size of the estate-zamindāri. He was perhaps the first of the Giri Mohantas of the Tārakeswar Math who worked for the spread of education along traditional as well as modern lines.

The Tārakeswar Chatuspāthī, an institution for learning Sanskrit, had been established in the vicinity of the Tārakeswar Math, under his supervision for imparting knowledge of Sanskrit literature to the residential students with provision for free board and lodging24. This practice is still in vogue. O'Malley wrote in the 'Bengal District Gazetteers' about a number of recognised tols which imparted advanced education in Sanskrit. He had incidentally referred to

22. Amrita Bāzār Patrikā – 6.5.24, 6(3).
several *tols* in the district of Hooghly which were private and were “mostly found in old places such as Tribeni (including Bānsberiā), Bhadreswar, Baidyabāti, Uttarpārā, Tārakeswar, Khānākul, Kristanagar etc.” The word *tol* is, in fact, a word of non-Sanskrit origin, and is in use only in Bengal where *tols* are also called *chanpādi* or, *chaubādi* from Sanskrit *chatuspāthi*, a place for teaching the four *Vedas*.

Incidentally, the Sanskrit College at Calcutta had received generous contribution from him for the promotion of learning in Sanskrit. Mādhhabchandra Giri’s munificence also transcended the regional barrier with his endeavour to set up a Sanskrit School in Benāras to impart education to the residential students there, along traditional line. Besides, his generous contribution to the fund for repairing the old structure of Tārakeswar High School speaks highly of his interest in imparting education on modern line.

Meanwhile, the growing fame of this place of pilgrimage in Eastern India led to the steady increase in the inflow of pilgrims which correspondingly resulted in the increase in the number of residence-cum-rest houses for pilgrims in and around the sacred complex. Taking the cue from Samudranāth Giri, the eighteenth Mahaanta, this incumbent Mahaanta masterminded the digging up of two big tanks- *Kumkumi* and *Sankardighi*-within the distance of a stone’s throw of the Tārakeswar Math. Besides, a few temples had been built up in and around Tārakeswar with direct financial help from this Mahaanta of which the *Kāli* temple of Bhanjipur, an adjacent village, deserves special mention in this context.


As a matter of fact, a few wealthy pilgrims had taken part in the maintenance and development of the temple as well as other establishments associated with the sacred complex during the tenure of Madhabchandra Giri. Notable among them were Chitamani De of Howrah and Gangadhar Sen who took part in the rejuvenation of the sacred complex at the behest of this Mohanta of the Tarakeswar Math. The former took the initiative for the remodelling of the Nātyamandira or the marble hall and financed the laying of the floor of the temple with costly tiles in 1891. He also spent money generously for the repair of several roads. He is said to have done it “in gratitude for having been miraculously cured of disease in answer to prayer offered at the shrine”28. The latter was involved in the reconstruction of the staircases of Dudhpukur or Siddhapukur in 189329. The Magistrate and Collector of Hooghly, George Toynbee, had referred to the existence of “a very celebrated medical temple” on the road from Haripal to Tarakeswar, in his study of the administration of the Hooghly District30. He seems to have referred to the temple of Lord Tāraknāth which, by then, had become famous for miraculous cures.

The tenure of Madhabchandra Giri also witnessed the arrival of Saradā Debi, the consort of Śrī Rāmakrishna, at this place of pilgrimage along with her mother and brother to offer prayers to Lord Tāraknāth, in March 1881 (1287 B.S.)31. Tarakeswar was revisited by her in the month of August, 1886 with the intention of performing the dharnā ritual for the cure of Śrī Rāmakrishna. A memorial has been erected on the Tarakeswar railway station platform only recently in honour of this memorable visit.


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It is noteworthy that a few fairs and festivals like Śivarātrī and Gājan began to take place on a massive scale in the month of Pbaṅgun (Feb.-March) and Chaitra (March-Apr.) under the supervision of this Mohānta which ultimately led to an all-round development of this pilgrim town. Although these fairs and festivals had begun immediately after the revelation of the cult of Śiva, under the guidance of Rāo Bhārāmalla along with the participation of Mukunda Ghosh and his associates, these indeed got a fillip during the tenure of this twenty-fourth Giri Mohānta. The participants in these festivals were mostly rural folk, who belonged to the villages of the districts of Midnāpur, Howrah, 24 Parganās, Hooghly as well as of Jessore and Khulnā in Bāṅglādesh. This coincided with the creation of a railway link between Tārakeswar and the surrounding region following an extension of railway network during this period.

IV
One of the memorable events during the tenure of Mādhabchandra Giri was the extension of the railway line, from Sheorāphuli to Tārakeswar, which in its turn helped Tārakeswar grow rapidly in popularity. In fact, “the East India Railway line from Howrah to Hooghly was opened for passenger traffic on the 15th August, 1845 .... Among the subsequent additions to the line, the following may be mentioned :- the opening of a branch line to Tārakeswar, a noted place of pilgrimage. The line was constructed by private enterprise and handed over to the East India Railway to work on the 1st January, 1885”.

Moreover, the initiative for opening up the Bengal Provincial Railway was also undertaken during this period although the programme came into effect during the tenure of the last Giri Mohānta of the Tārakeswar Math.

The project for the construction of this railway was first mooted in 1885 by Annadāprasad Sinhā, a resident of Sitiplässey in the district of Hooghly, who was incidentally an important officer in charge of Indian Midland Railway project at Bhopāl. He was helped in his endeavour to form the Bengal Provincial Railway Company Limited by Amritalāl Roy, the editor of the Hope—a weekly in English. The Head Office of this company was opened at Tārakeswar. The proposer of the scheme for the opening of this railway line was Annada Prasad Roy, a young engineer from Roorkee Thomson Civil Engineering College and the agent was Amritalāl Roy. They urged the respectable and wealthy Bengalis to buy the shares of this light feeder railway line and to apply for the same to A. L. Roy—the editor of the Hope at 65, Akhil Mistri Lane, Calcutta. A few reputed personalities of the then Bengal led by Rājā Peāry Mohan Mukherjee, the zamindār of Uttarpārā in the district of Hoogly, came forward to purchase shares in order to facilitate the creation of this company. Rājā Peāry Mohan alone bought six hundred shares to help the completion of this project.

This scheme for opening up the Provincial Railway line was applauded in the issue of the Indian Daily News on 28 May, 1889. It supported “the project for

36. The Statesman — April, 29 ; 1884.(editorial).


forming a native company to construct light feeder lines of Railway in Bengal, connecting prosperous districts with the main arterial lines".... Ultimately, "the Bengal Provincial Railway Line, on the 2 feet 6 inches gauge, was built by a company formed through the exertions of Mr. A. L. Roy. The first section from Tārakeswar to Basuā (12.5 miles) was opened to traffic on 7 November, 1894, the second section from Basuā to Magrā (18.12 miles) on 8 March, 1895, and the third section from Magrā to Tribeni (2.15 miles) in 1904" 39. The news of the opening ceremony of the Bengal Provincial Railway Line from Tārakeswar to Magrā on 2nd April, 1895, was published in the Indian Messenger on 7 April, 1895. The opening ceremony was presided over by Sir Charles Elliot, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. It reported that "before a large and respectable gathering, the Lieutenant Governor formally declared open the Tārakeswar-Magrā line of the Bengal Provincial Railway Company, the first railway in India which has been entirely financed and constructed by the sole agency of the natives of this country...."

"The Railway was constructed by Bābu Annadā Prasād Roy, a 'passed' student of the Roorkee Thomson Civil Engineering College, and a young engineer of exceptionally high abilities who with Mr. Amritalāl Roy of 'Hope' projected and planned the line". Although it was the first undertaking of its kind solely conducted under native management, it failed to pay the expected dividend 40. Despite the earnest endeavours of this enterprising Joint Stock Company to connect Tārakeswar with the arterial railway system of India, it failed to keep itself alive after 1956. Even the urgent efforts of Hirendranāth Roy, who was for long the General Manager of the Bengal Provincial Railway went in vain 41.


The direct result of this extension of the railway network connecting Tārakeswar with the surrounding region was the gradual increase in the inflow of pilgrims as well as the steady development of this pilgrim town. Mādhahchandra Giri, the *Mohaṇaṭa* of the *Tārakeswar Math* during this period was, indeed, the eyewitness to this process of the rapid transformation of a hamlet into a vibrant pilgrim centre.

The result of this rapid transformation was visible particularly in the growth of vibrant business centres in and around the sacred complex during this period. In fact, business centres like *cbāulpatti* dealing mostly in rice, jute and vegetables, *monobāripatti* dealing in pictures, items necessary for daily rituals in the households and toys of various types for children, as well as *kāparpatti* dealing in woven fabrics came into being during this phase of evolution of this pilgrim town.\(^{42}\)

Hence, an all-round transformation of this pilgrim centre in the second half of the 19th century owed definitely to this extension of the railway line, the process of which had begun in 1884.

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Despite the all-round development of this place of pilgrimage, the diminishing power of the *Giri Mohaṇantas* eventually became conspicuous during the regime of Mādhabchandra Giri. In fact, the rot had already set in the institution over the years owing to the lack of enlightenment among a few *Dasbnāmi Sannyāsīs* who had purposely facilitated the demoralisation of the whole system.\(^{43}\) A few *Mohaṇantas* of the *Giri* order at the *Tārakeswar Math* became callous and perverted particularly during the later phase, because of their excessive

\(^{42}\) Prafulla Chakrabarty – *Social Profile of Tārakeswar*. P.- 20.

indulgence in mundane affairs. Naturally, grievances began to arise with reference to the immoral character of the Mobântas, as manifested in their alleged role in the violation of the chastity of women and their autocratic behaviour in relation to their tenants around the sacred complex.

Madhabchandra Giri was never up to the mark in so far as moral character was concerned and, therefore, he was put in the dock to answer for his alleged immorality. He had to face severe criticism in and around this pilgrim town for his direct involvement in the infamous Elokeshi affair. The Elokeshi Case of 1873 had caused a great sensation throughout Bengal and led to a perceptible scepticism in the psyche of the Bengalis in general about the holiness associated with the Mobânta. He was accused of violating the chastity of Elokeshi, a housewife of the village Kumrul under Dhanîâkhâli Police Station in the district of Hooghly. This tiny village, not far from Târakeswar, became very prominent during this period simply because of this case.

The Târakeswar Adultery Case, in which the Mobânta of the Târakeswar Math stood charged, marked an important epoch in the annals of Hooghly. It would have been very strange, indeed, if it had not created the sensation which it did. The Mobânta of the Târakeswar Math usually commanded much respect as much for his immense wealth, as for his supposed superior sanctity. The reverence he received from the Hindu community at large, was almost without


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parallel. When it was reported that such a venerable monk had grossly misbehaved with a housewife of sixteen without caring for rigid rules of his holy order, it was only natural that there followed a terrible commotion in Hindu society. The facts regarding his deviation from the strict vow of celibacy soon became public.

The young housewife of the village Kumrul was the daughter of one Nilkamal Chakrabarty of the same village in the vicinity of the sacred complex. Elokeshī was the daughter of his first wife, and she was married to a high caste Brāhmin, named Nabinchandra Bandyopādhyāya. Nabinchandra was an employee in the Government Printing Office at Calcutta and generally resided there. As was usual, he paid only occasional visits to his wife in his father-in-law’s residence. Meanwhile, Nilkamal married again after the death of his first wife and his second wife was incidentally in touch with Mādhabchandra Giri, the Mohānta of the Tārakeswar Math. The Mohānta lost control over himself when he saw Elokeshī in her stepmother’s company. He attempted to seduce Elokeshī, using all possible means, with the help of her stepmother. As people are generally fond of discussing their neighbour’s shame, Nabinchandra, before long, heard slanderous reports of his wife’s misconduct. Under these circumstances, he came to Kumrul on a visit to his wife after having obtained leave from his office. Suspicion soon ripened into certainty. On the fatal night of 27 May, 1873, the much afflicted and enraged husband suddenly asked his wife point-blank about the real state of affairs. He was already in utter tension, and became highly exasperated by her repudiating the imputation. Nabinchandra found no other way to save his wife from the lust of the Mohānta, so he killed her.

The news of this brutal murder spread like wild fire everywhere in Bengal and caused an instant reaction against the Mohānta of the Tārakeswar Math. Nabinchandra surrendered himself to the police of his own accord. He was

brought before the Joint Magistrate of Sreerāmpur, who ordered him to bājat. While confined to bājat, Nabinchandra preferred a charge of adultery against the Mobānta under Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code. 

Accordingly, a preliminary enquiry was held by Mr. William Fitzpatrick Meres, the Joint Magistrate of Hooghly. The Mobānta, who had disappeared after the murder of Elokeshī, did not appear in the court until 1 August. Meanwhile, a warrant for his arrest had been issued on 16 June, 1873. The role of Joykrishna Mukherjee, the zamindār of Uttarpara had been commendable in this context. He, indeed, earnestly endeavoured to bring Madhabchandra Giri, the lecherous Mobānta of the Tārakeswar Math to justice in 1873. The Mobānta escaped to the French territory of Chandernagore. Joykrishna, as the most influential zamindār of the district, helped the Government in proceeding against the fugitive Mobānta and getting him arrested. Mr. Meres, however, thought that a prima facie case had been made out already against the Mobānta and he, therefore, committed him to the sessions.

This commitment was quashed by the Sessions Judge of Hooghly Mr. H.T. Princep, on the technical ground of non-jurisdiction. He was of opinion that the preliminary enquiry should have been held by the Joint Magistrate of Sreerāmpur, within whose jurisdiction the offence was said to have been committed. But Nabinchandra was a very determined opponent. He, indeed, renewed his complaint upon which a second enquiry was held by the Magistrate empowered in this context. The ultimate result was a second commitment.

47. S. C. Dey — Hooghly Past and Present, PP.- 309- 318.

48. Friend of India — July 17, 1873.

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Hindoo Patriot — July 21, 1873.
This time the trial came before Mr. Charles Dickinson Field who was then officiating for Mr. Princep. The Judge was assisted in the trial by Shibchandra Mallick and Shambhuchandra Gargory, the two native Assessors of repute and residents of Chinsurā in the district of Hooghly. The trial commenced amidst considerable public interest. The crowd that used to assemble during the period was immense. There was a sea of human heads in and around the court room and the place looked, indeed, like a great mela.49 Ishānchandra Mitra, the able Government pleader, conducted the prosecution, while Mr. Jackson and Mr. G. H. Evans, the two well-known counsels of the Calcutta Bar, defended the prisoner. The main points for determination were, first, whether the accused Mohiinta had had intercourse with Elokeśi or not, and secondly, whether at the time of such intercourse, he knew or had reason to believe her to be the wife of another man. However, it had already been established beyond doubt that Elokeśi was the wedded wife of Nabinchandra Bandyopādhyāya.

Gopināth Sinharoy was the material witness in this case. He was the durvān (gatekeeper) of the Mobanta when the adultery was said to have been committed. His evidence disclosed certain circumstances which raised a strong presumption that the Mobanta had consciously committed the crime. The prisoner's counsel fought tooth and nail to demolish the testimony of Gopināth, but truth triumphed in the end. The Judge believed the witness. There were some other material witnesses but they had disappeared from the scene before the second enquiry began. Only Gopināth remained. Some attempts seem to have been made to buy him over, but he stood firm and unmoved. His evidence, in fact, turned the balance in favour of the prosecution. The Judge, after a very patient and careful consideration of the evidence and the attendant

circumstances, found the prisoner guilty on both counts. While Shibchandra Mallick concurred with the viewpoint of the Judge, the other Assessor Shambhuchandra Gargary differed on the ground that there was no direct evidence as to sexual intercourse between the two. He forgot that such evidence was hardly expected to be forthcoming in such a case.

The Judge, disregarding the opinion of the dissenting Assessor, convicted the accused under Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code and sentenced him to undergo three years' rigorous imprisonment and to pay a fine of Rs. 2,000/-. The maximum punishment, as provided in the Penal Code was five years' imprisonment with or without fine. This order which was generally satisfactory to the country, was passed on 20 November, 1873.

There was, of course, an appeal to the High Court but the Mobanta was refused bail in this case. He was made to put off his holy saffron dress and put on the ignoble dress of a convict. The jail is always a great leveller as it makes no distinction between a pariah and a priest.

The appeal of the Mobanta was heard by a Division Bench consisting of Mr. Justice Markby and Mr. Justice Birch on 15 December, 1873. His counsel, Messrs. Jackson and Evans fought hard to get him off, but their Lordships held that the conviction was good and valid. As regards the sentence, they observed in no uncertain terms that despite the severity inherent in the sentence, it ought not to be mitigated in view of the public position of the accused.

The observation of Mr. Justice Birch on this point was very proper and pertinent. His Lordship said that the offence of the accused was considerably aggravated by his position as head of a venerated shrine, by virtue of which he was regarded by his co-religionists as an impersonation of the deity whose shrine was in his charge. A man in his position had immense power and influence in this country.

If he “is faithless to his trust, and if under the cloak of religion, and regardless of the decided prohibition of such conduct in the writings which he holds sacred, he employs his opportunities to debauch married women, he merits condign punishment”⁵¹.

Based on the Tārakeswar Adultery Case, there was staged a play titled, Ish! Mobānter Eki Kāj (Oh! what a mischievous deed of the Mobānta is this) at the Bengal Theatre on 6 September 1873⁵². It achieved immense popularity. The overwhelming success of this drama had in its turn encouraged also the Great National Theatre to stage another play, Āmi to Unmādinī (I have gone mad) with almost the same theme on 3 January, 1874. Rasarāj Amrītālāl Basu enthralled the audience by virtue of his role as the hapless father of Elokeshī. This was the most sensational play of the time, which drew crowds to the theatre⁵³.

Even ballads were composed at that time on the Mobānta-Elokeshī episode. These sometimes displayed vulgar taste of their anonymous composers. Besides, satirical compilations also began to be published which referred to the immoral Mobānta Mādhabchandra Giri. Of these, Mobānter Eki Daṣbā (What a distressed being the Mobānta is ) and Āba! Mobānter Ei Kāj (Oh! What a mischievous deed of the Mobānta is this), both published in 1873 by Jogendranāth Ghosh, seem noteworthy. Moreover, Mobānter Eki Kāj - Vol.I and II published consecutively in 1873 and '74 from Howrah were written by Lakṣmī Nārāyan Dās. Again, Mobānter Chakra Bhraman (Circular trip of the Mobānta, 1874) by Bholānāth Mukherjee as well as Mobānta Paksbe Bhuto Nandi (Bhuto Nandi on behalf of the Mobānta, 1874) by Harimohan Chatterjee characterize the Mobānta as a misfit.

Apart from these, over a dozen satires had been compiled as a reaction to this unhealthy development. These were, however, the reflections of perceptible changes in the psyche of the Bengalis, caused by the misdeeds of the *Mobānta*. The ripples created because of these developments gradually died down after the *Mobānta* breathed his last in 1893.

Poor Nabinchandra was not spared. He was tried for the murder of his wife. He was convicted also for the crime he had committed on the spur of the moment and was sentenced to transportation by order of the High Court. Efforts were made afterwards by the well-wishers of Nabinchandra to expedite his release. An appeal was made to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal praying for his intervention in this regard. In view of the peculiar character of his offence, he was released in 1877, on the occasion of the assumption by Queen Victoria of the title of Empress.

Meanwhile, Shyāmchandra Giri, the senior disciple of the convicted *Mobānta* took charge of the administration of the twin institutions at Tārakeswar as the pro tem *Mobānta*. The term of imprisonment, however, at last expired and Mādhabchandra Giri was released in the latter part of November, 1876. He returned and instantly demanded the restoration of the administration of the *Math* to himself. Shyāmchandra Giri was not at all desirous of obliging his


preceptor and refused to vacate the Guddee in his favour. He was supported at this crucial stage even by the Mukherjee -zamindārs of Uttarpārā in the district of Hooghly\(^{56}\). Despite these developments, Mādhabchandra Giri forcibly re-entered the temple premises and resumed possession of them and of the landed property.

Shyāmchandra Giri brought a Summary Suit for the recovery of possession under Section 15 of Act XIV of 1859 in the District Court of Hooghly. Mr. Justice G. P. Grant, the Judge, decreed the suit on 28 August, 1877. On 3 September, the defendant Mādhabchandra Giri, moved the High Court under Section 15 of the Charter Act. As a result a rule was granted, calling upon the other party to show cause as to why the order of the District Judge should not be set aside. This rule was heard by a Division Bench consisting of Mr. Justice R. C. Mitra and Mr. Justice W. Markby on 24 November, 1877. Their Lordships while finding fault with the Judge as to the way in which he had tried the suit, held that they could not interfere with his decision under their general powers of superintendence, and they, accordingly dismissed the application. Thus defeated, Mādhabchandra Giri brought a Civil Suit for declaration of the title and recovery of possession, and in this he was signally successful\(^{57}\). He was restored to the Guddee which he occupied up to the time of his death which took place in Calcutta in Phālgun (Feb.- March) 1299 B.S. (1893 A.D.).

In fact, the evolution of the Tārakeswar Math during the nineteenth century was dominated by at least three Giri Mobāntas of whom Mādhabchandra Giri was the best-known. The expansion, as well as consolidation of the estate-zamindāri along with the all round development of this sacred complex that happened during this period was commendable. Yet, this twenty-fourth Mobānta himself was very responsible for the ignominy that attached itself to the Tārakeswar Math, leading to its erosion in the long run.


\(^{57}\) S. C. Dey – Hooghly Past and Present. PP.-309- 318.