

Impact of Socio-Economic Changes on a Religious Complex : A Case Study at Tarakeswar

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Tarakeswar is a growing town in a rural setting of West Bengal. Since the establishment of the temple of Lord Taraknath in early eighteenth century by an immigrant Kshatriya king and a *Dashanami* monastery later by a Saiva monk belonging to the Giri order, it has passed through several developmental phases. The emergence of the deity, however, is associated with a folk legend having some historical basis which describes the interaction of many uncanny events with host of factors, e.g., dream, supernaturalism, plants, animals and humans, like in most legends from medieval Bengal. The main motive behind the establishment of the Siva temple by the non-Bengalee king, Bishnudas, was possibly because he wanted to maintain his status and dignity among the peasants and artisans who constituted the majority in this area as also to subscribe to or exploit the religious sentiments of the local people. For he might have felt that there were the famous religious centres of the Saktas in Kalighat and Tarapith, and of the Vaishnavites in Nabadwip located nearby but no Saiva centre of similar importance around, although the area was inhabited by the low caste Saivites mostly. In order to fill up the vacuum the king possibly brought the image, which is made of reddish black stone available generally in northern India and not in the alluvial plains of Bengal and established it here.

Eventually Tarakeswar grew into a famous place of Hindu pilgrimage in Eastern India and people from various regions of West Bengal and surrounding areas began to visit this place throughout the year for paying obeisance to Lord Taraknath. The flow of pilgrims, however, varied greatly depending on the nature of ritual and festive occasions. Since the last few decades there has been a continuous increase in the number of pilgrims averaging three to four thousand persons a day. This increasing trend of visits has largely been due to the natural increase in population, improved transport facilities, influence of mass-media like film and folk-dramas produced to glorify the miracles of the cult, radio and newspapers and the propagation of the gospel of Lord Taraknath by the sacred specialists and the local residents. As a result, during the *Sravani* (July-August), *Sivaratri* (March), *Chaitrasankranti* (April) festivals some two to three lakhs of people are reported to congregate here. But this is a trend observed also by Hunter (1876) and Bentley (1929) even a century ago.

Besides being a religious seat, Tarakeswar has become an important centre for commerce and a nodal point for linking the three adjacent districts of Burdwan, Midnapur and Bankura with Calcutta. Thus it seems to have a two-fold importance: (a) holy aspect centered on the temple of Taraknath and other sacred spots in the precincts to which the pilgrims are solemnly enjoined to pay their worship, and (b) a profane aspect confined to the commercial area of Chaulpatti, Manoharpatti and the bus stand complex which the people of surrounding region use for exporting rice and vegetables, and importing seeds, manures etc., and for easy communication.

The religious complex of Taraknath finds its expression through three principal components : the sacred geography, the sacred performances and the sacred specialists, conforming thus to the basic pattern of many Puranic places of pilgrimage (Vidathi 1961). For example, the existence of a well-demarcated boundary isolating the sacred from the secular zone, large number of sacred centres of different sectarian relevances which are scattered either singly or in clusters or segments with varying degrees of importance : local, regional or national, point to the similar structural alignment as to other notable places of Hindu pilgrimage. The sacred performances include a large variety of rituals like *darshan* (auspicious view of the deity), *snan* (holy bath), *mundan* (tonsure), *puja* (worship) and so on. The practice of offering of the holy water of the Ganges over Lord Taraknath after carrying it from a long distance with yolk-poles reminds one of the similar practice in Deoghar (Bihar) or Aiyappan temple in Andhra Pradesh. But the most popular rituals here appear to be the *dharna* and the *danis*. As for the other dimension of a sacred complex i.e., sacred specialists, we may note that excepting the *mohant*, the other groups of specialists, by and large, do not follow a distinct way of life, a point which has been illustrated elsewhere (Chakrabarti 1976). The priests resemble, in respect of their cultural and social behaviour, more closely to the general population of the town.

Secular aspect of the religious complex is clearly manifested in its economic sphere. The religious estate earns from various sources, e.g., regular payment of annuities by the state government, gifts and donations from pilgrims, rent and tax from the houses and establishments, interest from the bank against fixed-deposits, lease-outs through auctioneering fishing-ponds, tonsuring centre, sites for stalls, etc. The investment of fund in the bank for interest, keeping buildings and other establishments for rent, and leasing out of various sources of income show the secular aspect of this religious institution.

The *mohant* was and still is supposed to look after the affairs of the temple. He being the principal *sevalyat* (priest) of Lord Taraknath (and the *tirtha guru* (supreme religious head), enjoys the right to offer worship to the deity first. He has some intimate relation with the deity which are both mythical and ritualistic.

There has, however, been a change in his power since 1940 because of the change in the administrative control of the temple-estate for a secular administration has been set up to look after the estate. The *mohant* is now advised by a committee consisting of members from both secular and religious organisations. He no longer patronises only the holy scriptures and confines himself to his residence but also attends to the literary, cultural and religious meetings, invites external agencies for the development of the town in general and encourages modern education. Though the *mohant* is no more in power and the people around the religious complex live freely yet the attitude of the people towards the religious head as *tirtha-guru* remains unaltered.

There has been a ritual attenuation and deterioration of ritual standard in the temple because of the frequent irregular services on behalf of the priests and deterioration of the quantity and quality of consecrated food. Quarrel among the priests, between priests and pilgrim guides, among the pilgrim guides and disputes between the estate employees and the *mohant* occur more freely and frequently now-a-days than during the

periods of the Giri *mohants*. The administration of the temple-estate and the supervision over the activities of the temple functionaries are in a state of disrepute that are causing a decline in the sanctity of this religious complex.

This decline in the traditional sanctity of Tarakeswar can not be attributed solely to the above factors. It is due to some other factors like economic and political as well. The rising cost of living and the inadequacy of pilgrim gifts to their growing families have compelled the temple priests to find other sources of income to supplement their meagre temple earnings. They have become less religious, more money-minded and business-like in their performances of religious services. The acceptance of priesthood by most of the existing priests has been mainly decided by sheer economic compulsion and not by choice or free will. With the passage of time whatever love they have for the profession has faded away as they find themselves struggling hard for a life of minimum comfort which almost invariably eludes them. Another section of sacred functionaries e.g., the pilgrim guides have turned virtually into professional agents of certain lodging-house owners who not only pick up pilgrims indiscriminately for them but also provide hospitality to the merry-making persons who come in disguise of pilgrims. Relaxation and enjoyment being the purpose of visit of this section of visitors, they indulge frequently in such activities that are not only secular but also detrimental for the sanctity of the sacred place (Chakrabarti 1974).

Surprisingly, the temple authority or those who ought to have some responsibility to look into the prevailing affairs of the religious centre remain aloof as far as possible of these a-religious activities. May be they want no clash with those who control the helm of these affairs.

There are some vested interested groups in the sacred centre whose prime concern seems only to create a situation which would enable them to gain popularity and power. This so-called vested interested section of the religious complex has, of late, been succeeded in mobilising the pilgrim guides and low paid employees against the *mohant* and the temple committee. These people are now making demand for their better working conditions, higher wages, bonus and similar other facilities that are usually claimed by the workers in organised secular sector. In order to receive wider public support they are distributing leaf lets, organising street corner meetings, gheros and even occasional strikes. Sometimes the leaders of the present ruling party are being invited to preside over these meetings and thus spreading the notion that they too belong to a section of exploited individuals.

But inspite of all what has been said above, it is a fact that more and more people are visiting Tarakeswar than before. People in the rural areas have not downgraded the religious head in their estimation as the supreme head of this religious centre as the literate urban people have done. They continue to believe in the cult of Taraknath, its uncanny power and divine grace. The changing socio-economic and political situations has had an effect on the changes at this religious complex no doubt, but the fact remains that Tarakeswar as a place of Hindu pilgrimage may continue to function as a refuge to the helpless like most other religious complexes in India. But the manner in which it soothes the weary souls may, however, change in tune with changing times.

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