

SRAVAN IN TARAKESHWAR

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(English Version)

Millions all over India brave the lashing rains of the month of Sravan to reach the holy Ganga or the nearest river they can find. They fill up two pitchers with water and then carry them over long distances, just to pour it all on Siva's head at selected places, like Tarakeshwar in Bengal. Rituals like these, that are unfortunately being misused by rowdies, may rather appear strange but it is through them that Hinduism ensures that its flock renews its physical and emotional links with the mighty Ganga. It is not just a river but is a metaphor for an all-embracing religion. Incidentally, all the three major pilgrimages in West Bengal, namely, Sagar, Kalighat and Tarakeshwar are linked to this Ganga. Of them, the temple of Taraknath is fairly recent and through its story, we can get to know a lot about the religious history of the Bengalis.

In the 1950s, Benoy Ghose mentioned repeatedly that Tarakeshwar's Siva-Puja was distinctly north-Indian and in, in fact, the Kolkata High Court had also said the same in 1934. It declared that "the Dashnami maths in Bengal were founded by Brahmans who came from the north-west provinces and not by local Bengali Brahmans". To understand why was this cult was imported, we need to recall a bit about the Mangal Kavyas of the 16th and 17th centuries. These balladic poems had managed to bring the autochthonous people and their worship into Hinduism. Though the upper echelons of Shastric Brahmanism would have nothing to do with the masses, the vast majority of which had swung decisively towards Sufi Islam, the poor rural Purohits had to devise a response. After all, their very livelihoods were threatened and it is this class of Brahmans who produced the the Mangal Kavyas to valorise the deities of the folk. In the process, they ensured that the subaltern gods and goddesses invariably defeated the mighty Puranic devatas. Thus, the hideous one eyed snake goddess of the indigenous people, Manasa, proved to be more powerful than the Siva that Chand Saudagar worshiped and Dharmaraj of the western tract was so strong that his devotee Lausen could defeat Icchai Ghosh, even when Durga took his side.

In the 16th century, Chaitanya had also campaigned vigorously to open up Hinduism to all social strata and his alter ego, Nityananda, carried this forward after his death. But this Bengal Vaishnavism was devoted to one Puranic god, Krishna, so what about Siva and Durga, the pan-India deities of the Puranas which had succeeded the out-of-style Vedic ones like Brahma, Indra and Varun ? To understand how they were re-established in Bengal, we have to move two centuries forward, to the 18th, when momentous political and economic events overtook Bengal. Aurangzeb has died in the seventh year of the century after which chaos followed, in which Murshid

Quli Khan set up his Nawabi, and exactly seven years before the century ended, Cornwallis introduced a new class of Bengali zamindars through his Permanent Settlement. Murshid Quli and the Bengal Nawabs favoured educated Hindus, and so many a landlord like the zamindars of Natore thrived. This is when many North Indian business families migrated to Bengal such as the Jains of Azimgang-Jiaganj and the Jagatseths-Ominchands of Murshidabad. North Indian soldiers of fortune like Vishnudas and his brother, Bharamalla of Ayodhya and the Punjabi Khatriks like the Bardhaman rajas could also settle in rather well during this period. The two brothers from Ayodhya brought the martial north Indian Dashnami sadhus to set up Taraknath's temple in 1729. And some years later, the Bardhaman rajas installed 108 Siva-lingas in their famous temples at Nabab-hat. There are more such examples. As for the Devi, her worship was introduced with great fervour by the local Bengali zamindars, like Kansa Narayan of Taherpur during Shah Jahan's time, but it picked up momentum only after the Battle of Plassey favoured Hindu interlocutors like Nabakrishna Deb and Raja Krishna Chandra of Krishnanagar.

The Dashnami sect that came in was entrusted not only Tarakeshwar, but a full network of other Siva temples in the region. This explains why Tarakeshwar's Bhole Baba "paar karega" is in Hindi. Incidentally, the Dashnamis played a rather controversial role in Bengal in the later decades of the 18th century and led the dreaded Fakir-Sannyasi raids that caused quite an uproar, just when the British were legitimising their control over the province. These Sadhus were Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's inspiration for his 'Anandamath' works, where armed Hindu monks sang their Vande Mataram song: "glory to the Mother". But it is not only the imported Dashnamis who rejuvenated Saivism in Bengal, which was, incidentally, much later than other parts of India. The Naths inspired by Gorokshanath, whose temple chief has now become Uttar Pradesh's chief minister, also campaigned for Saivism here. This is evident from the folk songs of eastern Bengal, like Gopichrander gaan, that narrates the trials and tribulations of Matsyendra-nath, the true propagator of the mighty pan-Indian Siva. But, ironically, once Siva settled here his body and soul became totally Bengali as he is not revered as the mighty king of Kailash, but a fun-loving poor Bengali peasant. He wears a tattered loin cloth and makes merry with his ganas until an exasperated Parvati comes and chases him all over, to send him back to the fields.

This peasant Siva is evident not only in the Sivayan poems, but is found in Dharma Thakur's liturgical text, the Sunya Puran in the Atho Chaash section. That reminds us: this Puranic deity had to indigenise a lot in Bengal by absorbing much of the worship of local gods like Dharma-Thakur. I agree with several scholars like Ralph Nicholas that Dharma-raj's swondrous charak-gajan, the hook swinging ritual, and the stark rites of self-flagellation were subsumed by Siva. Rituals that are a must during Siva's festival in Baisakh, such as walking over blazing coals, inserting large hooks and needles into the body, rolling over clothed in dry thorny creepers and jumping from high on to big open swords are still practiced more severely by the die-hard worshippers of Dharmaraj, who have not yet moved over to Siva. This point is that

even the imported Siva of Tarakeshwar is now totally Bengali and this is clear from the fact that the biggest gajan, the very indigenous summer festival of the local Siva, takes place at this site. Ashok Mitra's comprehensive volumes on Bengal's festivals mention that the Sravan trek to Tarakeshwar was originally a test of stamina and that even in the late 1950s, most of those who went to Taraknath were Marwaris. The hit film of 1977, Jai Baba Taraknath must have played a big role in popularising the Sravan pilgrimage to this temple among the locals. But, as in the rest of India, a new restless class has appeared, that gets into this water ritual purely for the fun and for the temporary sense of power it confers.

Tarakeshwar was in the news recently when Mamata Banerjee appointed a Muslim minister to oversee the infrastructure for pilgrims, but then, it has gone through these over-publicity phases in the past as well. During the 1870s, for instance, all of Bengal was in excitement over a criminal case involving an outraged husband, Nobin Chandra who had murdered his young wife, Elokeshi for having a torrid affair with the Mahanta of Tarakeshwar. It was so overwhelming that huge crowds starting thronging the court room calling for special protection and all newspapers carried the story in lurid colours, over weeks and months. In fact, the popular art of Kalighat pats received an unexpected boost during this period and the painters produced numerous visuals of each scene in this murky affair. Nobin was released soon due to the public outcry but the wicked Mahanta was sent to jail. So popular was this Elokeshi affair, that pilgrims visiting Tarakeshwar could even buy souvenirs with her name on them for the next several decades.

This was not all. In 1924, another Mahanta also became so infamous because of his voluptuousness and his open extortions that the people of Tarakeshwar and pilgrims rose in revolt. Two Akali leaders from Punjab, Swami Vishwanda and Swami Satchitananda started a long protest at the temple and the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee had to intervene. It sent its President and Secretary, CR Das and Subhas Chandra Bose, to Tarakeshwar on the 8th of April to enquire and assuage local feelings. But CR Das's compromise formula came in for criticism, so he had to visit Tarakeshwar once again in May and declare that the Congress formally supported the satyagraha. Hell broke out soon when Gurkha guards employed by the Mahanta suddenly attacked many satyagrahis and slashed them with their khukris. The matter became quite serious and even Mahatma Gandhi expressed his concern. But peace was not in sight, even though the colonial administration became quite tough and started arresting the protestors. Finally on 22 August, the situation deteriorated so much that police had to open fire, injuring several satyagrahis. The movement finally ended when the Mahanta, Satish Chandra Giri, was removed and a Receiver stepped in. But the Brahman Sabha went on attacking poor CR Das.

Thus, we see that in less than 300 years, Baba Taraknath has gone through a roller coaster of events and has seen a lot of excitement. He has, however, remained quite cool and unflapped. One reason could be because of the rivers of water that have been poured over his head.