

“ Baba Taraknath ” : A Case of Continuity and Development in the Folk Tradition of West Bengal, India

By

E. A. MORINIS

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.

INTRODUCTION

The folk culture of West Bengal remains a rich and popular cultural tradition.¹ Tales and legends composed generations ago are still lively aspects of the general stock of culture of contemporary urbanite and villager alike. The themes and motifs of these compositions can be traced in modern Bengali plays, prose and poetry. Yet, while the indigenous folk tradition has maintained itself and retained popularity through all the major socio-cultural transformations that have affected Bengal over the centuries, the tradition has not stagnated, and modernizations have taken place.

Bengali folk culture has retained popularity and vitality because the age-old themes of the tradition are given expression in modern forms and through media of communication which reach the general populace. The contemporary versions of folk tales are woven into the patterns of tradition while still reflecting the uniqueness of the living cultural environment of those to whom the tradition speaks. The tradition thus achieves resonance with both the historical and contemporary cultural reality of the storyteller and audience, as continuity is combined with innovation to create a folk tradition that is distinctly Bengali, but which also reflects the changing patterns of the regional culture.

The Hindu tradition in West Bengal has always been popularized at the village and street level. There is evidence for the existence

of folk narratives and rustic versions of the Puranic and courtly literature back through the medieval period (1500–1800), to the time of the ancient origins of Bengali literature itself, in the tenth century (Dimock 1963: 5 ff.). Traditionally, the stories, poems, recitations, plays and songs which embodied the folk themes of Hindu Bengal were carried to the villages by wandering bards, the renowned singing Bāuls, traveling theatre companies (*jātrā*), and by other artists who specialized in performing the oral traditions of the region. These sorts of performances are still to be observed in rural West Bengal today. *Jātrā* companies continue to tour the state, setting up their huge tents in villages and towns, drawing and enthralling packed houses with their extravagant costumes, melodramatic plots and simple, well-worn and beloved themes. The *jātrā* companies still perform traditional theatre, but have also added contemporary dramas to their repertoires. They now tour the villages of the state by large open truck and bus. The Bāuls remain numerous and popular, wandering between villages and towns, hair characteristically tied in a side-knot, dressed in colorful patched clothing, plucking the one-stringed *ektar*. They sing of Kṛṣṇa, of devotion, of love, and also of the tensions and uncertainties of modern living. Today, the likeliest place to encounter a Bāul is on a train, as he climbs aboard at one station, sings, takes a collection, and detrains at the next. Poetry, recitation and stories, both traditional and modern, continue to filter into the village culture. The traditional traveling performers, who today use microphones and electric or gas-pressure lighting to stage their performances, now vie for influence with the written word. In form and in content, the folk culture of Bengal maintains continuity of tradition, while also addressing the changing needs, concerns and culture of the Bengali people. That the tradition has balanced continuity with modernization accounts in large measure for its ongoing and unbroken popularity.

One very significant modernization of the Bengali folk tradition has been the emergence of a regional folk cinema. Movies produced in Bengal for local audiences have become extremely popular, and every small town in the state has a modern, well-furnished and often air-conditioned movie house. The sudden rise in popularity of the movie industry and its great success have meant that the movie theatre is often the largest and is usually the most modern building in town. Traveling cinema shows are taken to the larger villages, where they play for one day, drawing crowds from the surrounding area, then pack up their tent and screen and move on. Tickets for movies are cheap, within the range of affordability of all but the poorest people, and an afternoon or evening at the movies has become a popular pastime in

West Bengal.

The development of a popular cinema has been an innovation in West Bengal. What of the continuity of the folk tradition? The Bengali film industry, moreso than its larger and more commercial Hindi-language cousin, is remarkable for its devotion to traditional religious themes. During the time of my field stay in West Bengal (1977-78), films with titles such as “Joy Ma Tara,” “Baba Taraknath,” “Sri Chaitanya-Deb” and “Joy Santoshi Ma,” all glorifying popular regional saints and deities, were released and were box-office successes in the state. The screenplays of these films are an intricate blend of traditional themes and modern problems and settings, in a modern medium. One such film, entitled “Baba Taraknath,” directed by Ardhendu Chatterjee, which was by far the most successful of this sort of religious film in recent years, well illustrates the interplay of the processes of tradition and change in contemporary Bengali folk culture.

“BABA TARAKNATH”

The film begins with the story of Mahamaya, a childless woman who goes to the Bengali pilgrimage center of Tarakeswar to undertake *dharnā* for relief of her barrenness. *Dharnā* is a ritual practised at Tarakeswar by a category of pilgrims who hope to win an extremely urgent or miraculous intercession from the shrine deity, Baba Taraknath, by means of austerities. These pilgrims lie prostrate on the temple floor before the shrine, and maintain a fast until the deity appears to them in a dream and instructs them on what steps they should take to overcome their great difficulty. Mahamaya's fast is rewarded by a vision of Śiva, of whom Taraknath is one manifestation, and her wish for a child is granted. She soon gives birth to her only daughter, whom she names Sudha (“pure”).

Sudha grows older, and right from her early childhood she is religiously-minded and devoted. While other children run and play games, Sudha fashions clay images of Śiva as her play-things. In the film, she sings to and offers worship to the representations of Śiva she makes. Amar, son of the local landowner, who is school-educated and modern, laughs at Sudha and her rustic faith in the divine. But soon the two become friends, a romance is born, and they are eventually married. Amar becomes a scientist, doing research on venomous snakes. Sudha remains a true devotee of Baba Taraknath.

The family priest visits the young couple one day and casts their horoscopes. Amar's future is grim. He is destined to die of snakebite, the guru says. Sudha is devastated by the blow of this prediction. Amar, thoroughly secular, laughs heartily, and tells Sudha that this is

nonsense. He refuses to honor her wishes to quit his research. His work on snakes is scientific, astrology is superstitious, he says. His research is just too important to give up because of some Brahman's prediction. Sudha, dutiful wife, yields to her husband, but her fear is not diminished. In song, she calls on Taraknath:

If I am truly a chaste woman,
Then my husband will be saved from all dangers.²

Unfortunately, but true to the guru's word, there is an accident in snake handling, Amar is bitten, and the prediction of his death is fulfilled. Sudha and the audience are swept up in deep sorrow for the handsome, strong, good-natured Amar (every Bengali woman's dream husband, played in the film by the Bengali matinee idol Biswajit). The preparations for the cremation are begun, but Sudha still holds out one hope for her husband: Baba Taraknath. Leaving home, she hurries to the sacred River Ganges, where she fills two clay pots with water, hangs one on either end of a bamboo carrying pole, and joins a group of pilgrims trekking barefoot the thirty-five miles from the river to the shrine at Tarakeswar. She sings:

Let it be proved which is more powerful,
The astrological predictions of the guru,
Or my chastity and faith.

The film builds to its climax. Sudha marches determinedly towards Tarakeswar. The chorus of pilgrims joins in song:

Lift the carrying pole onto your shoulder, Sati,³
Go to Tarakeswar, chanting 'Victory to Taraknath,'
She wants to know from Baba what her destiny holds.

Baba, help us cross over,
Holder of the trident, give us strength.⁴

Sati walks with Baba's name on her lips,
Her mind is pure, her body is free of all desires,
She has only her devotion, which she offers to Baba,
The only aim of her life is her husband's welfare.

Baba, help us cross over,
Holder of the trident, give us strength.

Sati marches on, through sun, rain and storm.
Her mind is strong, she bows to no obstacles,
She has only her devotion, which she offers to Baba.

And so on. Finally, she reaches Tarakeswar. Her faith tested and proved, she confronts the stone image and demands to know if it is alive to her prayers:

Lord, answer me!
 Will you shake Heaven and Earth with your powers?
 Answer me!
 Won't you open your three eyes?
 Answer me! Answer me! Answer me!

The audience is held suspended, the camera fixed on the stone image in the shrine. Slowly, from inside the hollow core of the *linga* (the phallic representation of Śiva), a snake emerges. It slithers down over the stone, down and across the floor of the temple to the spot where Amar's lifeless body has been laid. The snake, clearly a messenger from Taraknath, reaches Amar, draws close, and strikes. But still he lies there. Suddenly, an eyelid flutters. Sudha grabs her heart. The music thunders, the audience cheers and the film ends.

ŚIVA OF TARAKESWAR

The shrine town of Tarakeswar, located fifty-five miles west of Calcutta in the Hooghly District and connected to Calcutta by hourly train service, is the most celebrated and frequented place of pilgrimage in West Bengal today.⁵ An average of a thousand pilgrims come daily to pay homage to the shrine deity, commonly called Baba (“father” or “lord”) Taraknath (properly Bābā Tāraknātha). They come to offer their devotion, to request favors, complete vows, undergo initiations, perform life-cycle rituals, receive blessings and, especially, to pray for cures. The pan-Hindu deity Śiva is said to have manifested at the site of the present temple, which is believed to date from the eighteenth century, in the particular form known as Taraknath. In the last two centuries, the temple has been the most important Śaivite center in the state. It is also the site of an important and formerly much more influential *maṭha* (monastic institution), under a *daśanāmi sannyāsi*. This institution, which at one time had over twenty subsidiary *maṭha* located throughout south-western Bengal, may have contributed greatly to the spread of the reputation of Baba Taraknath across Bengal and beyond.

Every place of pilgrimage in West Bengal has its *sthāna-māhātmya* (lit. “original glory of the place”), the narrative that describes the founding of the temple, which is conventionally described as a human recognition of the locale's unoriginated sanctity, as well as the distinctive qualities of the shrine deity. These stories are folktales, often

existing in different versions, and often drawing on various sources of the Bengali religious tradition, including the Puraṇas, Epics and Tantras. The *sthāna-māhātmya* of the more renowned sacred places are generally known to most Hindus throughout the state, as part of the mythic history of the region. These tales are the bases for *jātrā*, Bāul songs, devotional poems, folk paintings, and the like, which further spread widely the glories of the various pilgrimage centers. In essence, the *māhātmya* expresses the key and distinguishing attributes of the particular temple and its deity, and these principal ideas about the sacred place are part of the general stock of cultural information familiar to the populace of West Bengal.

The *sthāna-māhātmya* of Tarakeswar is a tale of asceticism, mysticism and faith. Its historical truth is unknowable. It is a folktale of mythic intent.⁶

The place which is presently the town of Tarakeswar, with its busy market and railway service, was once a dense jungle. Two brothers, the sons of Kesava Hajari, of Jaunpur District in the present state of Uttar Pradesh, came and settled in Ramnagar, three miles from Tarakeswar. Bengal was under Muslim rule at the time, and the two brothers, the elder named Viṣṇu-dāsa and the younger Bharamalla, succeeded in impressing the ruling Nawab of Murshidabad with their physical prowess. The Nawab appointed the brothers as his tax-collectors and regents in the area.

Bharamalla became a wealthy man, owning a large cowshed and many cows. Among these was a cow named Kāpila ("tawny coloured"), who was Bharamalla's prize and pride, for she gave much milk. But one day, Kāpila ceased to give milk. When the cowherd investigated, he found that the cow entered the deep forest, where she released all of her milk over a beautiful black stone, the center of which had been hollowed out by rice-grinding.

The cowherd told Bharamalla what he had discovered. The regent was very impressed by the story and, thinking that the stone must be very holy, he ordered it dug up and moved to the Ramnagar temple. But the workmen who set about excavating the stone were unable to find its bottom. On the twelfth night of their work, Bharamalla's sleep was disturbed by a dream of Śiva, who said to him, "Do not try to find my limits. I am Taraknath. I am all-embracing. Arrange for my worship in the forest itself."

Śiva had come to the forest because of the meditations of a renunciate named Maya Giri. The *sannyāsi*'s spiritual practices had been so powerful that Śiva answered his requests for a vision by manifesting as a stone *liṅga* at the place of his meditations. Discovery of

the stone brought the *sannyāsi* to Bharamalla’s attention as well. The powerful renunciate agreed with the plan to build a temple over the stone in the forest, and so it was done. He himself established the Tarakeswar *maṭha*, and was its first *mahanta* (abbot).

It was very soon after these events that the miraculous power of Taraknath was demonstrated. A man of the region was suffering from unbearably painful piles. His ability to withstand finally broken, he went to the forest determined to hang himself and end his misery. On his way to do the deed, he met a *sannyāsi* who suggested that he approach nearby Taraknath, and beg for a cure. The desperate man sought out the temple, prayed to be healed, and drank the sanctified run-off of water and milk oblations of the *līṅga* (the *caraṇāmṛta*, lit. “nectar of the holy feet”). The deity smiled favor on the man, and by his grace, the ailment disappeared.

From this time on, the temple, deity, *maṭha* and curative powers of Tarakeswar have been famous far and wide. Taraknath had revealed himself as a *kāmadā-līṅga*, a wish-fulfilling manifestation of Śiva.

The tales of Tarakeswar told in the *sthāna-māhātmya* are well-known in every part of Bengal. Tales of miraculous cures, boons granted and visions of the powerful deity, spread abroad by the constant and wide-flung stream of pilgrims visiting the shrine, have also carried the fame of Tarakeswar to every corner of the state. It is largely in reflection of this popular body of lore about the sacred shrine that the screenplay of the film “Baba Taraknath” was written. The action of the film bears no direct relation to the plot of the *sthāna-māhātmya*, but it is obvious that the central themes and motifs of the film draw on popular notions about the shrine and the capabilities of the deity, as encoded in the *māhātmya*. The popular tradition that holds Tarakeswar to be a place of miracles and Taraknath to be a powerful and active god, concerned and involved with the this-worldly needs of his devotees and obligated to reward true faith, is revamped and expressed in the idiom of contemporary urban Bengali society, through the modern medium of film. Here we see one instance of the bonding of the continuity of tradition with the innovations that modernize tradition, keeping pace with the changing patterns of culture.

CONTEMPORARY SCREENPLAY: ANCIENT EPIC

“Baba Taraknath” draws on existing folk ideas about Tarakeswar, especially concerning the miraculous healing power of the shrine deity, but the *sthāna-māhātmya* is not the only source that the film-makers have utilized for these ideas. While restoration of life to the dead and the reversal of the effects of snakebite fall within the traditional capa-

bilities of Taraknath, he is better known as a curer of piles (as in the *sthāna-māhātmya*) and currently especially for the alleviation of chronic digestive problems. Death from snakebite and the revival of a corpse are undoubtedly more dramatic than the curing of ascites or incontinence, and hence are better cinematic material for a plot, but dramatic impact was not the sole reason the film-makers employed these motifs as key elements of the film's plot. Most Bengalis, urban and rural, literate and illiterate, would immediately link death from snakebite and the divinely-caused resurrection with another important and well-known legend of Bengal: the popular classic Bengali folktale of Behulā and Lakhindar. The film neatly fuses elements of the medieval story with the contemporary setting and fame of Tarakeswar.

The story of Behulā and Lakhindar occupies a major part of the *Manasā-Maṅgal*, a poem composed by Ketakā-dāsa in the early seventeenth century. The poem, and certainly elements of the poem, are likely even older than this, having been part of an ancient oral poetic tradition in Bengal which pre-existed any written versions of the stories. The *maṅgal* ("eulogy") poems tell stories woven around the popular gods and goddesses of Bengal, in this case Manasā, the goddess of snakes. The *maṅgal* poems have traditionally been village poetry, and Dimock (1963: 206) says of this one, "The Ketakā-dāsa Manasā-Maṅgal . . . is one of the favorite poems of its kind in West Bengal, where it is still held in high esteem and recited frequently in the villages."

Bhattacharyya (1977: 231-244) describes a *jātrā* and also a puppet drama of the Behulā-Lakhindar story which he observed in villages of the 24-Parganas District of West Bengal. He also mentions the tradition of painting the episodes of this story on scrolls, in the Bengali *patua* style. One such scroll, painted in the Midnapore District, was shown to me by its painter in Calcutta. He slowly unrolled the scroll, a frame at a time, while he sang the story of Behulā-Lakhindar depicted on the long canvas. I later saw similar but older scrolls of the same type in the Gurusaday Dutta museum, in south Calcutta. Incorporation of such a well-known and popular story into the screenplay of "Baba Taraknath" taps a deep well of culture and sentiment in the regional folk tradition.

The story of Behulā and Lakhindar dwells on the punishments meted out by the snake goddess Manasā to those who do not honor her, and the rewards given to those who do (cf. Smith 1980). Lakhindar is the son of Cāndo, a merchant who carries on an endless bitter feud with Manasā. Cāndo refuses to bow down to the snake-goddess, calling her Cengamuṛi—"repulsive as a dirty shroud" (Dimock 1963: 209). For this and his general disrespect of her, Manasā relentlessly

pursues Cāndo, causing his life to be soured by endless suffering. She kills the first six sons born to his wife, and makes disaster of his business affairs. Lakhindar is his seventh son, born while his father wandered abroad after Manasā had caused his ships to be wrecked in a storm. Bidhātā, the god of fate, dictates Lakhindar’s future: on his wedding night, he will die of snakebite, a further punishment of Cāndo from his enemy.

Soon after Lakhindar’s birth, Behulā is born to Amalā, wife of Sāya the merchant:

On a most auspicious day the goddess Usā, fallen to earth because of a curse, was born from the womb of Amalā. She grew, a beautiful girl with a face like the moon and the grace of the *Khañjana* bird, well versed and trained in music. Her lips were the color of coral flowers, her teeth were pointed, her body had the luster of the lightning flash, her forehead was high: a lovely girl. She was born a devotee of Manasā. In her parents’ house Behulā grew and danced and sang, and Amalā was charmed by her talent and her grace. From her childhood the girl was skilled in dance and song—but a husband dead and brought again to life was written on her forehead. (Dimock 1963: 226–27)

When Behulā and Lakhindar are grown, the two are matched in marriage. Fearful for Lakhindar’s cursed fate, Cāndo enlists the help of Viswakarmā, engineer of the gods, to build an iron house so tight that not even an ant can enter. Manasā is not to be outdone, however, and so she threatens Viswakarmā, and intimidates him into cutting a small hole in the corner of the house. Through this hole Manasā sends a snake, which reluctantly bites Lakhindar, killing him on his wedding night. The prediction is fulfilled.

Faithful Behulā requests that the body not be burned. Instead, she takes it with her onto a raft, and floats down the Ganguri River, all the while calling on Manasā to revive her husband. She journeys for six months, praying that the rotting corpse of her husband will be restored to life by the grace of the goddess. Eventually, she floats to the city of the gods, where her piety and long-suffering faith are rewarded. Manasā restores Lakhindar to life, and he and Behulā return to Cāndo’s house. Seeing his son alive again, even the old father gives up his feud, and bows at the feet of the goddess.

The makers of the film “ Baba Taraknath ” appear to have taken the snakebite, the restoration of life and the moral about faith rewarded directly from this tale. By using so familiar a legend, the film-makers highlight the message and increase the popularity of their film. The

audience can easily identify the essential point of the plot and action, and finds a doubly powerful story in the blending of the well-known glory of Tarakeswar with the equally well-known and respected eulogy of Manasā. The film-makers take no chances in making sure that the audience understands the identification of Sudha and Behulā, however. In the last song of the film, "Aj Tomar Porikha, Bhagawan" ("Today is your test, Lord"), Sudha beseeches Taraknath to restore Amar to life. She confronts the stone *līṅga* of the temple: "Are you a stone or a living god?" Then she reminds Taraknath: "Have you forgotten that you bestowed a boon on Behulā?"

It would seem that the film-makers are also implicitly identifying Manasā and Taraknath, by linking Sudha to Behulā and by incorporating the story of the *Manasā-Maṅgal* into a tale of the Śiva of Tarakeswar. This identification of the two deities is not entirely a case of poetic license. Śiva is conventionally associated with the cobra, and the usual depiction of Taraknath, seen in folk paintings and pilgrimage souvenirs, is as a black stone with a hooded cobra rising up behind. He is sometimes shown wearing serpents over his body, as ornaments. There are no major shrines to Manasā in contemporary Bengal. A regional goddess, she is in decline in the face of the ascendancy of the pan-Hindu deities such as Śiva. The film preserves her popular legend, but in exploiting it, modernizes it to reflect the changing status of the members of the Bengali pantheon. Substituting Śiva for Manasā is a real change from the original story of the *Manasā-Maṅgal*, in which Cāndo is depicted as a Śaivite who suffers at Manasā's hands for his faith in Śiva. The film maintains the continuity of tradition in its ethical, moral and behavioural injunctions, but is innovative in attributing the traditional role of one deity to another.

POPULAR MOVIE: POPULAR CULTURE

"Baba Taraknath" is a contemporary folktale, based on the folk traditions of the popular shrine and the centuries-old themes of the epic *Manasā-Maṅgal*. Like all successful films, it has also had its impact on contemporary ideas and behaviour. In several ways, the film itself has affected the folk culture it draws on and depicts.

Trying to capitalize on the great popularity and success of the film, *jātrā* companies have begun to stage their own live versions of the story of Baba Taraknath. The plot of the *jātrā*, the songs, and the dialogue are essentially identical to the film version, although the style of presentation, the costumes and the mood of the live presentation which I observed were characteristically *jātrā*-esque, with heightened drama and exaggerated action. The popular film has thus contributed

a new work to the repertoires of the traditional regional folk theatre. At the same time, traditional religious themes of Bengali folk Hinduism are being refreshed and reintroduced into the popular culture through its traditional theatre, under the inspiration of the modern film.

Another noteworthy effect of the film has been on the pilgrimage of Tarakeswar itself. The shrine priests say that traffic to the temple doubled or tripled following the release of the film, and has not abated since. Also, an error in the dress of pilgrims in the film has since come to be accepted by the pilgrims as the correct style of dress for *jol-jātri*, or pilgrims who walk from the Ganges River to the shrine carrying water (*jol*) to be offered to the deity, as Sudha did in the film. In “Baba Taraknath,” the male *jol-jātri* are shown dressed in clean white shorts and white undershirts. While prior to the release of “Baba Taraknath” there were no customary rules for pilgrims’ dress, except that clothes had to be new or at least clean, white shorts and undershirts have now become the standard dress for *jol-jātri*. The popularity which the film achieved, and the molding power of the film medium, have combined to leave an imprint on the regional folk tradition itself.

If the film has had the power to alter pilgrimage practices, then it follows that in the instances where it faithfully represented the practices of pilgrims to Tarakeswar the existing ritual tradition has been bolstered and reinforced. Although such an effect is difficult to measure, it is reasonable to expect that by accurately depicting *dharnā*, water-pilgrimage, ritual behaviour, attitudes, terminology and so on, the film has popularized the cultural tradition already practiced at the shrine at Tarakeswar.

In turn, the film has become a new part of the legend of Tarakeswar. For example, in the shops near the temple which cater to the needs of pilgrims, alongside the pamphlets, folk paintings and miniature images that depict the familiar tale of Taraknath and his miraculous powers, today one finds booklets containing the story and songs of the film “Baba Taraknath,” as well as pin-up pictures of its stars. Pilgrims have always carried images of Taraknath and Śiva back to their homes along with the legends of the *sthāna-māhātmya*. Today, in addition to these, they carry back the lyrics of “Aj Tomar Porikha, Bhagawan,” and glamorous photos of Sudha and Amar. The film has become part of the folk cult of Tarakeswar, thoroughly modern and contemporary, but easily incorporated into the dynamic tradition. The cult, like the folk tradition of Bengal of which it is a part, has never been static, and has incorporated innovations and adaptations in every era of its development.

To further underline this point, it is quite certain that the main

form of pilgrimage shown in the film, the *jol-jātrā*, which is now considered to be a standard form of pilgrimage to the Tarakeswar shrine, has only recently been introduced to that center. Older priests of the temple maintain that a former abbot of the Tarakeswar monastery, Satisacandra Giri, who was abbot from about 1892 to 1925, instituted the practice of carrying Ganges water to be offered to Taraknath in deliberate duplication of another great Śaiva center in eastern India—the Vaidyanātha-dhāma in Bihar state—with which he considered his center to be in competition. This same abbot was responsible for instituting one of the main annual festivals now celebrated at Tarakeswar. The Imperial Gazetteer of 1908 and the District Gazetteer of 1912 both mention Tarakeswar, but both state that there are two main religious gatherings held annually at the temple. At present, a third, a month-long fair in the month of Śrāvaṇa, is also held and is considered a customary calendrical event at the shrine. This third festival was instituted by Satisacandra Giri. Recognizing that the Marwari community (of Rajasthani origin) in Bengal was growing in wealth and influence, the abbot called a meeting of the leaders of that community in order to find out what their customs were, in the hope of being able to win their patronage. The Marwaris traditionally observe Śrāvaṇa as a holy month, and so the annual fair was introduced at Tarakeswar. While there is no Bengali tradition of honoring that month, this relatively newly introduced practice has also been incorporated into the mainstream of the folk cultural tradition, and today both Marwaris and Bengalis flow to Tarakeswar for the Śrāvaṇa fair.

The screenplay of “Baba Taraknath,” and the success of the film, indicate the contemporary relevance and the persistence of the worldview, cosmology and metaphysics of traditional Bengali folk Hinduism. The film glorifies and popularizes the traditions of Bengali Śaivism, especially the miraculous power of the deity’s grace, and the rewards one can still expect from unremitting faith in the divine. Even the correct predictions of the sanctimonious *guru* are overridden by the faith of the heart. The setting is urban, the unbeliever a modern scientist, but the final power is the three-eyed, ithyphallic snake-god who is the undying glory of Tarakeswar. The widespread popularity of the film, and the extent of its penetration into the regional folk culture, touching the *jātrā*, affecting the flow of pilgrims and changing the pilgrimage patterns themselves, points to the persistence of the essence of the popular Bengali folk tradition, which remains meaningful and continues to strike responsive chords among the modern Bengali people who are its audience.

One final and further case of the modernization and reiteration of

the folk tradition relating to “Baba Taraknath” concerns an event that took place in Tarakeswar on 11 March, 1978. On that date, workmen suddenly appeared around the temple and set to work tearing up the old pavements of the streets and lanes leading to the shrine. Word quickly passed among the priests and shopkeepers of the quarter that Kedar Agarwal, producer of “Baba Taraknath,” had ordered the streets be repaved. He had recently been ill, the story went, and had had a dream in which a small, naked boy came to him and said: “If you want to keep all of the profits of the film to yourself, you will know no end of trouble.” Agarwal then undertook a traditional religious charitable act of restoring the temple, at a cost estimated by local people to be three *lakh* (hundred thousand) rupees.

I did not speak to Kedar Agarwal to verify the truth of this story. Whether true or not, the rumour was readily accepted by the local people, who seemed happy to see the great commercial success of the film about their deity being used to glorify the shrine and deity themselves. If “Baba Taraknath” was meant to celebrate Lord Taraknath, then there could not be personal commercial profit. Agarwal’s illness was the result of the deity’s real displeasure at this conflict, and new paving stones provided an acceptable means of resolving it. The popular mind that circulated and possibly invented the story of Kedar Agarwal’s dream was subjecting the makers of the folk-cinematic tale of “Baba Taraknath” to the real might and influence of the powerful living deity the film depicted.

The tale of Agarwal’s dream represents a new generation of folk-tale, in which the film is already part of the historic tradition of the shrine. The film has been woven into the developing, dynamic cultic belief system, as the tradition continues to reflect the passage of time, creating contemporary legends that immortalize the continuing grandeur of the shrine deity. The dynamic tradition builds on history, transforming it into mythic form, as it recreates and reiterates itself in the moving present.

It is also remarkable that the story of Agarwal’s dream was passed in a form which is conventional for tales of religious experience in Tarakeswar. Illness, followed by a strange vision in a dream and a prescription for a cure, is the accepted pattern of experience of the *dharnā* pilgrims, or at least the format in which they express their experience. The tradition is not taxed to incorporate this new and particular instance of glorification of Taraknath into the conventional patterns which it maintains.

Very concretely, the film-tale of Taraknath led to a renovation of the temple area itself. The commercial success of the film is trans-

lated, at least in part, into an enhanced shrine, which in turn magnifies the illustriousness and ultimately the reputation of the pilgrimage place on which the film was based. This reiteration of Taraknath's glory will not escape the notice of later generations of glorifiers in their future tales of the deity's greatness.

CONCLUSION

The film "Baba Taraknath" provides a good example of the complex interactions between traditions, media of expression, behaviours and innovations which bear on a folk tradition. The film is a modern story, set in urban Bengal, yet the core of the story—its themes, motifs and central message—is deeply rooted in the traditional folktale of the pilgrimage center and the ancient epic of Ketakā-dāsa. In turn, this modernization of tradition is incorporated into the flesh of the on-going tradition, to become the new tradition. So long as the contents and forms of tradition continue to resonate with the people to whom the artistic expressions address themselves, the elements of tradition are susceptible to restatement and reinterpretation in new modes. The popularity of the film "Baba Taraknath," as well as the other films of its genre in contemporary West Bengal, reflects and in turn reinforces the persistence of the folk Hindu tradition, its ethics and morality, through the many and continuing changes that have taken place in the culture of the region.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Professors Joseph O'Connell and Brenda Beck for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. This and later quotations from film-songs have been taken and translated from a booklet containing the lyrics of "Baba Taraknath," published in Calcutta by Bholanath Pustakalaya (n.d.).

3. Sati, the epical, archetypal and ever-faithful wife.

4. Triśuldhari, an epithet of Śiva.

5. Gaṅgā-sāgara-saṅgama, at the point of intersection of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal, is arguably more celebrated than Tarakeswar, being mentioned in the ancient texts (e.g. *Mahābhārata*, *Garuḍa*, *Kūrma* and *Matsya Purāṇas*, *Viṣṇusamhitā*; cf. Morinis 1980: 72), and drawing a huge crowd from all over India for its annual festival. But Bengalis seldom visit this remote spot except on that one day. To them, Kalighat, in Calcutta, Navadvip and Tarakeswar are the principal sacred shrines, representing the Śākta, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva traditions of Bengali Hinduism, respectively. Kalighat is a more heavily visited temple than Tarakeswar, but most of its temple-going traffic is from Calcutta itself, while those visiting Tarakeswar are from outside the town for the most part, and are hence pilgrims.

6. This story is a composite drawn from oral sources (several priests of the

temple), small pamphlets sold near the temple, and Roy (1870), translated by myself with the assistance of Ashok Chakraverty and Hena Basu.

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