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Factors Influencing the Sannyasi-Fakir Rebellions in Bengal (1760 –1800): A Reassessment
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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE *SANNYASI- FAKIR* REBELLIONS IN BENGAL (1760 –1800): A Reassessment

*Amrita Sengupta*¹

Abstract

This article attempts to analyse the events of the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions occurring in Bengal during 1760 – 1800. It has highlighted the backdrop of the rebellions and the contours with a focus on the factors influencing these rebellions. The role played by geographic locations, rough and unknown terrain and whimsical climate in these rebellions will be discussed in details in this article. The paper highlights that these factors prolonged the skirmishes between the rebels and the Company state. It was only due to the assistance of the *harkaras* (runners/spies) that the administrators were able to pursue and neutralise the rebels.

Keywords—Company state, *Dasnamis*, *Fakirs*, *Harakaras*, *Madariyas*, Rebellions, *Sannyasis*.

Methodology

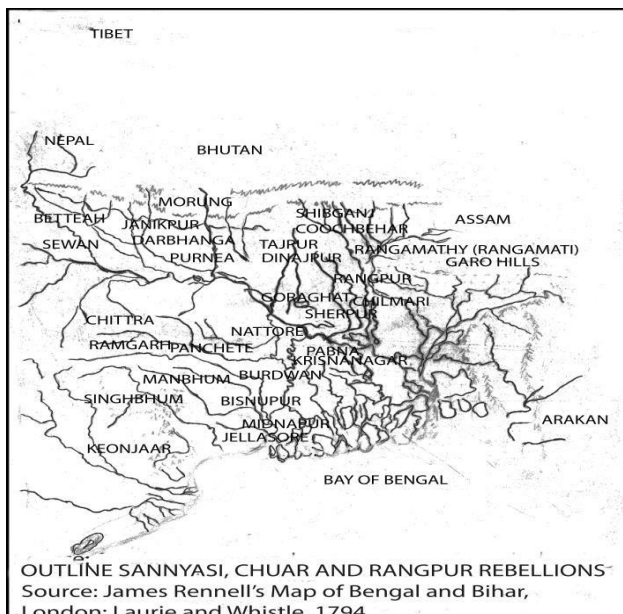
The paper has sifted through a vast array of primary sources, including governmental records, archival documents from West Bengal State Archives (Kolkata) and National Archives of India (New Delhi), etc, as well as the necessary secondary and literary sources on the subject including books, articles, poems, ballads, and theses etc.

Introduction

The *Sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions commenced in the mid-1760s. It took the Company state almost four decades to quell the 'disturbances' they caused and the 'violence' they perpetrated on the countryside of Bengal. The most affected regions included Purnea, Malda, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Rangpur, CoochBehar, and Murshidabad in undivided Bengal. *Sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions have left a lasting impact on our

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imagination largely due to the leadership of Majnu Shah and Chirag Ali and the legends such as Devi Chaudhurani and Bhawani Pathak that emerged from that era. However, it is very important to seek answers to questions such as who were these rebels? How did they manage to 'ravage' the countryside? And most importantly, how did they evade the forces of the Company state for over four decades?



Existing Historiography on Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellions

Colonial administrators, as well as scholars, have commented on the *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, and their activities in India. Earliest scholars of the *sannyasi-fakir* rebellion, such as G.R.Gleig², M.E. Jones³, and later G.W. Forrest⁴ and L.J. Trotter⁵ all believed that the activities of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were acts of brigandage. Penderel Moon⁶ too subscribed to this view. There are some official reports and references to them in Mohsin Fani's⁷, Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's⁸, William Crooke's⁹, and Jean Baptiste Tavernier's writings¹⁰, but their works are incomplete

² G.R.Gleig, MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF RIGHT HON. WARREN HASTINGS, FIRST GOVERNOR GENERAL OF BENGAL 199– 481 (1841).

³ M.E. Jones, WARREN HASTINGS IN BENGAL (1772-74) 1 – 325 (1918).

⁴ G.W. Forrest, SELECTIONS FROM THE DISPATCHES, LETTERS, THE OTHER STATE PAPERS PRESERVED IN THE FOREIGN DEPARTMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA (1772-1785) 5 (1890).

⁵ L.J. Trotter, WARREN HASTINGS: A BIOGRAPHY 100-106 (1925).

⁶ Penderel Moon, WARREN HASTINGS AND BRITISH INDIA 70-308 (1947).

⁷ Mohsin Fani, DABISTAN, THE SCHOOL OF MANNERS 223-224 (1973).

⁸ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, GEOGRAPHICAL STATISTICAL DESCRIPTION OF DISTRICT OF DINAJEPORE 12-25 (1833).

⁹ William Crooke, THE TRIBES AND CASTES OF THE NORTH-WESTERN PROVINCES AND

and do not throw much light on the subject. Mohsin Fani and Jean Baptiste Tavernier wrote in the Mughal times and should be read in that context. Amongst the Indian writers, novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay had chosen the famine of 1770 and the *sannyasi* rebellion as the backdrop for two of his most well-known works, *Devi Chaudhurani* and *Anandamath*¹¹.

Written as a serialised story from 1880-1882 (BS 1287-89), *Anandamath* depicts the story of Satyananda, a *sannyasi* rebel leader and a married couple Mahendra and Kalyani.

Their three lives intersected at one point. In the book, the *sannyasis* resisted the combined forces of the British and the Muslims near Purnea, Tirhut and Dinajpur in 1772. At the end of the story, a mysterious physician is seen to be advising the *sannyasi* leader Satyananda to temporarily suspend their activities as the former believed Hinduism had become 'speculative' and 'impractical' and they, the Hindus, needed the British to help them 'reconcile with the facts of science' in order to fight the oppression of the Muslims. Also, the *sannyasis* are seen as erecting a monument for the motherland and mother Kali. The depiction of India as a motherland was criticized as it was widely believed motherland was a European concept. The book was regarded anti-Muslim. It was banned by the British government until independence due to its nationalist elements.

Among the Indian historians, Maulavi Abdul Wali¹² wrote an article on them in the early twentieth century. Brajendra lal Bandyopadhyay's views closely mirrored the colonial viewpoint.¹³ Jamini Mohan Ghosh was also an administrator under British rule.¹⁴ Ghosh agreed with T.D. Broughton's view on the subject of *sannyasis* and *fakirs*. His book viewed religious mendicants such as *sannyasis* and *fakirs* as rogues. A.C. Chandra's book *The Sannyasi Rebellion* is informative. He opined that the *sannyasi* rebellion was a collective political expression of protest against the

OU DH 397-402 (1896).

¹⁰ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, TRAVELS IN INDIA 66-67, 139-140 (1889).

¹¹ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, DEVI CHAUDHURANI, (1891).

¹² Moulavi Abdul Wali, NOTE ON THE FAQUIRES OF BALIYADIGHI 78-84 (1903).

¹³ Brajendralal Bandhyopadhyay, DAWN OF NEW INDIA 67-68 (1927).

¹⁴ Jamini Mohan Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR RAIDERS IN BENGAL (2010).

Company state's despotism by impoverished peasants, unemployed artisans, and disbanded soldiers, who were led by popular religious figures. He had further argued that though some of the attacks were on the peasant villages, most of the rebels must have had some form of popular support.¹⁵ Atis.K. Dasgupta, in his book¹⁶ and article¹⁷, argued that the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was a form of popular protest against colonial exploitation. According to Dasgupta, the Company state replaced the formerly armed retainers with a new militia operating under their direct control. It distressed the displaced soldiers and mercenaries. These ex-soldiers provided a support base to the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebels, who made a common cause with the peasants and the craftsmen. Suranjan Chatterjee, in his article, finds the revolt to be a popular peasant revolt. According to him 'the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were not dacoits'.¹⁸

Ananda Bhattacharyya's analysis is a shift from this popular peasant revolt model popularised by scholars such as Atis Dasgupta and Suranjan Chatterjee. Bhattacharyya viewed the religious mendicants primarily as miscreants who devastated the countryside of Bengal. According to him, it was not an anti-colonial peasant war.¹⁹ William Pinch similarly argued that there might have been some in-built class dimension in the *sannyasi-fakir* rebellion and occasional peasant participation, but it was not sufficient to argue that it was a subaltern or peasant war. He concluded that the *yogis* used to command respect by alluding to their superhuman qualities. 'They claimed they could discipline their bodies, which afforded them transformative powers. However, in Bengal, these perspectives began to hold less significance for the ordinary people, who had been curious to find answers from the more predictable religious world of Hindu and Muslim devotionalism. On the other hand, the British administrators had little interest in the yogis' extraordinary abilities. This likely marked the beginning of their decline

¹⁵ A.N. Chandra, THE SANNYASI REBELLION 176 (1977).

¹⁶ Atis Dasgupta, THE FAKIR AND SANNYASI UPRISING 1-40 (1992).

¹⁷ Atis Dasgupta, THE FAKIR AND SANNYASI REBELLION 44-55 (1982).

¹⁸ Suranjan Chatterjee, NEW REFLECTIONS ON THE SANNYASI, FAKIR, AND PEASANT WAR.

¹⁹ Ananda Bhattacharyya, SANNYASI-FAKIR UPRISING IN BENGAL IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 18TH CENTURY (1991).

within the Indian context. He added that the four decade long skirmish between them and the government's troops were not a conscious rebellion but more of a prolonged clash of cultures.²⁰ Matthew Clark observed that there was a possibility that the *sannyasis* who fought with the British troops in Bengal during the *sannyasi-fakir* rebellion were merely pretending to be *sannyasis*. They were involved in criminal activities. Their activities were indistinguishable from those of Pindar and the criminal assassins known as the *thugs*. However, he urged us not to have a one-dimensional view of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* who had also rebelled simultaneously.²¹ Ananda Bhattacharyya, in his later works, concluded that the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was an 'irreducible conflict of two kinds of regimes of power; pre- modern and modern'.²² Bhattacharyya added that the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was undoubtedly against the Company, but it was not anti-colonial. 'The insurgent *sannyasis* did not, however, fight the British alone. They fought the *zamindars* and peasants of Bengal, which continued for nearly half a century.'²³ He opined that, in general, their confrontation with the British had more to do with the early colonial attempt to establish the rule of law and the authority of courts in the interiors of newly established colonial domains rather than the British effort to put down agrarian discontent. He added that the *sannyasis* had enjoyed legal privileges under the British whenever it was possible for the administration to offer those, but especially around 1773, their movements and actions in the interior of the countryside provoked a stern official reaction. According to Bhattacharyya, the story of the sporadic but significant action and reaction was often highlighted as agrarian unrest in the society which has been mistakenly exaggerated into a peasant uprising in the historiography. On the contrary, he believed that the *sannyasi* rebels were a threat not only to the British but the peasantry as well. However, the fact is that the *sannyasis* were very much a 'transient and peripatetic political force' in Bengal, which has not been considered adequately. They were a 'socio-religious group of

²⁰ William Pinch, WARRIOR ASCETICS AND INDIAN EMPIRES 100-105 (2006).

²¹ Matthew Clark, THE DASANAMI SAMNYASIS, THE INTEGRATION OF ASCETIC LINEAGES INTO AN ORDER 256 (2006).

²² Ananda Bhattacharyya, RECONSIDERING THE SANNYASI REBELLION 81-100 (2012).

²³ Ananda Bhattacharyya, THE WANDERING FAKIRS OF BENGAL, HEROES OR VILLAINS? 1-23 (2016).

pre-colonial origin whose mode of survival and existence violently clashed with the newly introduced colonial regulations and laws that were entirely derived from contemporary European notions.²⁴

The author debunked the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* alliance theory and deemed them as 'Marxist and secularist myth'. According to him, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* fought each other. On occasions when they did join forces, they did so when the Sannyasis recruited the *fakirs* as additional mercenaries to swell their ranks against the British in armed clashes.²⁵ According to Sutapa Bhattacharyya and Sankar Kumar Biswas, it was an anti-colonial struggle against the English East India Company. The latter had interfered with their social rights, thus affecting them economically. The monks protested as a result. The authors have also demonstrated that the rebels had links with Haryana.²⁶

This study portrays the sannyasi and fakir rebellions as acts of banditry protesting the Company state. The author also compares these uprisings with the chuar and Rangpur rebellions of eighteenth-century Bengal.²⁷

In the article, she demonstrated that, unlike the other two rebellions, the sannyasi and fakir uprisings were overt forms, lacking the covert activities and everyday resistance found in the others. There is a gap in our understanding of these rebellions from an ecological perspective. This article aims to highlight the factors that influenced the sannyasi and fakir rebellions and how these factors prolonged the movement. It will also examine the elements that ultimately contributed to the victory of the Company troops over the elusive rebels.

The Religious Mendicants

²⁴ Bhattacharyya, Reconsidering the Sannyasi Rebellion 81-100.

²⁵ Ananda Bhattacharyya, THE PERIPATETIC SANNYASIS: A CHALLENGE TO PEASANT STABILITY AND COLONIAL RULE? 41-66 (2014).

²⁶ Sutapa Bhattacharyya & Sankar Kumar Biswas, *Social Ideas and Background of Militant Peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against the Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond*, II JHSR 1, 1 – 10 (2012).

²⁷ Amrita Sengupta, *Sannyasi Fakir Rebellion, 1770-1800: A Study in Overt Form of Rebellion*, III NSOU-OPENJournal 2 (2020).

Warren Hastings labeled the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* as 'gypsies of Hindusthan' wandering from place to place. He considered them as plunderers and freebooters. He remarked, 'they are formed into regular communities, and their families subsist by the spoils...most of them were members of great robber caste- bound together by hereditary ties, by the use of a secret language and secret signs, and like the thugs, by the common observance of religious rites, they looked like travelers or pilgrims.'²⁸

However, in reality, the *sannyasis* of the eighteenth century descended from the ten branches of *Adwaita* school, which Shankaracharya and his disciples had started in the ninth century. These ten sects of monastic orders were known as the *Dasnami* orders.²⁹ According to Matthew Clark, these ten Dasnami groups were divided into four monasteries, located in Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, Badrinath and Sringeri.³⁰ It is believed that Shankaracharya placed his major disciples as heads of four great *maths* (monasteries).³¹ Clark noted that ethnographic accounts illustrate the *Dasnami gossains* - a section of *sannyasis* who according to them were treated as mendicants as well as priests, bankers, traders, farmers and mercenaries. Therefore, they had a complex relationship with their social environment. These men were named after the group of monks, Giri, Puri, Bharati, Ban, Aranya, Parbat, Sagar, Tirtha, Ashrama, Saraswati. Of the ten names, the Tirthas, Ashramas, Saraswatis, Bharatis, were called *dandis* and the rest were called *gossains*. These *gossains*, in particular, set aside celibacy to involve themselves in both religious and professional activities.

According to Clark, the *gossain* is also the name for heads of *Vaisnavabairagis*, Ramanandi order and the followers of Vallabhacharya.³² The *dandis* came from a higher caste and knew Sanskrit. Many of the *dandis* carried either a small *linga* or a *Salagrama*. They were ammonites, found in the bed of the Kali Gandaki river in eastern Nepal, which was one of the most important emblems of Visnu and had a

²⁸ Jones, WARREN HASTINGS 178 – 179.

²⁹ J.N.Farquhar, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SANNYASIS OF THE VEDANTA, III JRAS 57, 482-483 (1925).

³⁰ Clark, THE DASANAMI 2.

³¹ Farquhar, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SANNYASIS OF THE VEDANTA 482 – 83.

³² *Supra* note 29.

symbolic significance. They also carried a staff, embellished with saffron.³³ The *dandis* were previously householders and their gurus initiated them in a ceremony. The names such as Swarup, Prakash, Ananda, Caitanya (Chaitanya) signified their vows of celibacy.³⁴ There was a second stage of initiation, known as *viraja havan*.³⁵ It is also clear from Bhabananda Goswami, a character from the book *Anandamath* and a *sannyasi* rebel, that the *sannyasis* used to take vows of celibacy. This could allude to *Nagas'* vows of celibacy. Mahendra also refers to a character by the term *gossain*.³⁶

Another group of renouncers, known as the *Paramhansa* group, went to the extent of discarding their staff and engaging itself in the most difficult forms of asceticism.³⁷ Furthermore, Clark added that these *sannyasis* established their own codes and also determined punishments for adultery and other misdemeanors in their own way. Shankaracharya played a prominent role in these *Dasnami* sects and their philosophy can be traced back to him.³⁸

However, Clark acknowledged that there were variations in their appearances, status, and initiation process and that they belonged to different lineages as well.³⁹ There is some ambiguity regarding who could become a *sannyasi*. While some firmly believed that only the *Brahmans* (upper-caste priests) had the right to this status, others believed that all three upper castes were eligible. Clark opined that only the twice- born, i.e. the non-*sudras* (lower-castes), could become *sannyasis*.

However, once a person renounced his material world, his caste background lost a bit of its former significance.⁴⁰ According to Farquhar, the *sannyasis* were usually non-violent and were prohibited from using violence by their vows of *ahimsa*.⁴¹

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p.89.

³⁶ Chattopadhyay, ANANDAMATH.

³⁷ Clark, THE DASANAMI 102.

³⁸ Ibid, p.2.

³⁹ Ibid, p.39.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.9.

⁴¹ Farquhar, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SANNYASIS OF THE VEDANTA 482-483.

In a subsequent article, Clark explored the way the religious identity of the *Dasnamis* emerged. He suggested that *Dasnamis* probably did not emerge from the *Adwaita* school of Shankaracharya as it had originated before that. He demonstrated that their identity developed through several stages and took its current form in the sixteenth century. In the first stage, Shankara was portrayed by his hagiographers as a *Shaiva* (a devotee of the Hindu God Lord Shiva) rather than a *Vaishnav* (a Devotee of Lord Vishnu).

In the second stage, several lineages of the monks became integrated with other lineages of the *Adwaita* monastic tradition. In the third stage, these lineages came to be associated with a scheme of ten names, one of which was Sannyasi. A defining characteristic of a *sannyas* was receiving initiation from a guru, which unified ten lineages within this framework. This scheme, in turn, integrated the four disciples of Shankara to four *mathas* in the four corners of India, as mentioned in Sanskrit texts such as *Mathamnaya*, *Mathamnayastotra*, *Mathamnayasetu*. This was the final stage. According to Clark, despite the belief that numerous prominent 'Vedatins', connected to the *Adwaita* emerged from the ten names of *sannyasis*, those genuinely influenced by Shankara's philosophy do not identify with the radical, militant Nagas—a sect founded by Shankara.. The *Nagas* embraced the monastic tradition to acquire a true religious identity and avoid persecution by the rulers. Clark underscored how Sufism ran parallel with *sannyasi* tradition in India. By the sixteenth century, the Dasnami *sannyasi* identity had solidified, but Clark argued that despite representing the Sanskritic traditions, it was more synergetic than it was previously assumed. A vast array of beliefs traditions and terms influenced each other.⁴²

It is believed that in the sixteenth century when the Muslim *fakirs* took part in wars and killed *sannyasis*, the government chose to remain neutral. As a result, no one got punished. The *sannyasis* could not retaliate because of their vows of non-violence. Eventually, the government had to step in and protect them.⁴³ However, J.N.Sarkar believed that the *Dasnami* sects had originated long before Akbar's reign.

⁴² Matthew Clark, RELIGIOUS SECTS, SYNCRETISM, AND CLAIMS OF ANTIQUITY, THE DASHANAMI- SANNYASIS AND SOUTH ASIAN SUFIS 61-92 (2017).

⁴³ Farquhar, THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SANNYASIS OF THE VEDANTA 482 –83.

The Dasnamis had two distinct sub-sects—theological (*shastradhari*) and fighters (*ashthradhari*). However, their activities often overlapped. For instance, the 'Naga Sannyasis' were skilled fighters. They were known for their penance and difficult postures, as well as their participation in military drills.⁴⁴ William Pinch observed that there is an 'ethical claim' to the oral tradition that the *sannyasis* and *yogis*⁴⁵ were initially non-violent, and they turned violent in response to Muslim aggression. He agreed with Sarkar that these men were armed long before the Mughals came into the picture. Moreover, these *Dasnami* groups used to fight with each other. Even emperor Akbar had to intervene in one such instance.⁴⁶

A *Naga's* specific status depended on his *akhara* (sort of gymnasium) and was not dependent upon the particular order of the *Dasnamis*.⁴⁷ According to Clark, the *Nagas* hailed from a low caste,⁴⁸ travelled nude, covered in ashes⁴⁹, and organised themselves in seven *akharas*.⁵⁰ The *Nagas* and other *sannyasis* of the *akhara* can trace their lineage back to the *mahants* of the *davas*. According to Clark, “*davas*” means 'claim' and originates from voting procedures within the *akharas*, where *marhis* within a *davas* have equal voting rights in the process of electing officials and *mahants* within the *akharas*.⁵¹ Each one of them belonged to a *marhi* and represented the 'real' lineages of gurus and disciples.

The *davas*, on the other hand, functioned as the units of administration at Kumbha Melas (fairs).⁵² Clark mentioned that these *akharas* used to have 'Sri Panc' (the formal name of the *akharas*) consisting of the *Nagas* and four to eight *mahants*. The representatives were usually elected from different groups of *marhis*. They initiated the *Nagas* for Kumbha Mela and settled disputes. And unlike the *Nagas*, Paramhansa sect of Dasnamis was not affiliated with the *akharas*.⁵³

⁴⁴ Jadunath Sarkar, A HISTORY OF DASNAMI NAGA SANYASIS 90 (1984).

⁴⁵ Yogis— monks.

⁴⁶ Pinch, WARRIOR ASCETICS 34 – 37.

⁴⁷ G.S Ghurye, INDIAN SADHUS 103 (1994).

⁴⁸ Clark, THE DASNAMI 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.35.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.6.

⁵² Ibid, p.9.

⁵³ Ibid., p.42.

Clark mentioned the existence of female *sannyasinis* as well, though it appears that the Nagas had the least number of female monks.⁵⁴ According to J.N.Sarkar, the *sannyasis* deposited their earnings with the common fund of the *maths* from which the *gurus* and *mahants* would advance money to the *chelas* (disciples) to carry on trade and other economic activities.⁵⁵ The *akharas* were the warehouses of arms and weapons and produced fighters to combat enemies. The Atal and Avahan *akharas* produced various 'legends' during the later Mughal period.⁵⁶ In Bengal, Mymensingh served as a significant stronghold for the *sannyasis*. Ramanath Lahiri, *ijaradar* of Mymensingh, employed Gokul Giri and Dhirpurna Giri for the protection of his *zamindari*.⁵⁷ There appears to be some ambiguity regarding the status of wandering and travelling *sannyasis* within the *akharas*. Sarkar opined that even the majority of the wandering *sannyasis* belonged to the *akharas*.⁵⁸ However, according to Matthew Clark, there was also a group of travelling *sannyasis* who were not a part of the *akharas* and were called the *jamat*.⁵⁹ According to Pinch, these *chelas*, who were slaves of their warrior-ascetics *gurus*, were unlike the slaves of America. These *chelas* had both autonomy and agency, and their status as slaves did not prevent them from advancing in their military career.⁶⁰

The *sannyasis* were Shaivites, devotees of Shiva as well as worshippers of the goddess Bhawani. They typically wore either orange coloured clothes or the loincloths (*kaupina*). The *Dasnami sannyasis*, with an exception of the *Nagas*, were allowed to marry and live as *gossains*. They carried items such as *kamandalu*, *danda*, trident, iron tongs and ochre-coloured flags known as *Bhairo Prakash* and *Surya Prakash*. The *sannyasis* wandered from one pilgrimage site to another across various regions of Northern, Central and Eastern India. Their annual pilgrimage

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp.33 – 34.

⁵⁵ Sarkar, A HISTORY OF DASNAMI 90.

⁵⁶ Arthur Steele, THE LAW AND CUSTOM OF THE HINDU CASTES (1986).

⁵⁷ D.H.A. Kolff, SANNYASI TRADER-SOLDIERS, VIII IESHR 34, 35 – 43 (1971).

⁵⁸ Sarkar, A HISTORY OF DASNAMI 90.

⁵⁹ Clark, THE DASANAMIS 73– 74.

⁶⁰ William R. Pinch, *The Slave Guru: The Masters, Commanders and Disciplines, in Early Modern South Asia*, in Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (eds.), THE GURU IN SOUTH ASIA: THE NEW INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE 65–79 (New York: Routledge, 2012).

cycle started at Kumbha Mela, followed by a fair at Janakpur in Nepal, and then to Bengal to finally take a holy bath at Sagar Island. From there, they would either return to upper India via Bihar or southwest to Puri to pay their homage to the Jagannath *Dham*.

In 1773, Warren Hastings observed that 'various sects of them travel at fixed periods on religious pilgrimages to the Brahmaputra, Badrinath, and Ganga Sagar, besides those who in all dry months of the year pass through provinces on to Jaggernaut.'⁶¹ They used to celebrate the *Baruni* festival on the occasion of the 'Narayani Yoga' at Mahasthangarh in Bagura, and the Siva Ratri at Jalpesh in Jalpaiguri and Bhagalpur in Bihar. According to Ananda Bhattacharyya, the *sannyasis* also used to travel to Tibet, China and Siberia. The *melas* (fairs) were attended by the *gossains* and the Nagas of different *akharas* and *maths*. They maintained uniformity in their rituals and practices throughout India.⁶² The novel *Anandamath* also mentions the existence of *maths*. These were controlled by the *sannyasis*.⁶³

Persian sources such as *Tarikh-i-Ahmadshahi* and Marathi sources like *Prithwi Gir Gosavi Vatyacha Sampradaya* demonstrate that the *sannyasis* were quite active in parts of Northern India, Punjab and Gujarat since the Mughal period. They acted as traders as well as money lenders in those areas.⁶⁴ They were also called the vagrant race, traders and spies.⁶⁵ Bernard Cohn has also commented on trade relations and the role of *gossains*.⁶⁶ William Pinch argued that these armed *Shaiva* ascetics, often referred as guru-commanders, were strategically positioned to meet the demand for inexpensive, well-trained personnel in the evolving landscape of the eighteenth century. However, they did not consider themselves 'Hindus' in the

⁶¹National Archives of India (New Delhi), PRESIDENT MINUTE 21st JANUARY 1773 SECRET DEPARTMENT NO. 3 (as per NAI).

⁶²Bhattacharyya, *The Peripatetic Sannyasis* 41–66 (2014).

⁶³Chattopadhyay, *Anandamath* (1882).

⁶⁴H. A. Rose, Denzil Ibbetson, Sir, Edward Maclagan, LESSER KNOWN TRIBES OF N.W. INDIA AND PAKISTAN: BASED ON THE CENSUS REPORTS OF 1883 AND 1892 303–304 (Delhi: Amar Prakashan, 1991).

⁶⁵NAI, FOREIGN SECRET S-NO 23 VOL. IX (18th January–31st May 1773).

⁶⁶Bernard S. Cohn, *The Role of the Gossains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India*, 1:4 INDIAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY REVIEW 176–177 (April–June 1964).

modern and narrow sense of the term. He further added that the origins of Naga *akhara* could not be linked to the Hindu-Muslim civilizational conflict.

Instead 'Weapons and the art of violence were a part of *shaktijoga* repertoire which focused on harnessing supernatural forces both within and beyond the human body'. The history of the armed ascetics is, in some ways, intertwined with the broader history of religion in India. He urged us to differentiate between the ' how the British and Indian religious reformers understood armed ascetics and how armed ascetics viewed themselves'.⁶⁷

The oldest institution of the *Nagas* in Awadh was the Sidhigiri's Mathiya monastery. According to Ananda Bhattacharyya, many *sannyasis* from Surat and Northern India revolted against the government in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They were not people of Bengal. A few notable examples support this assertion, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table-1:1Sannyasis' Alliance with Regional Powers

Name	Alliance with the Regional powers	Profession
Himmat Bahadur, Anup Giri and Umrao Giri	Government of Awadh and Jhansi	Performed as a mercenary leaders and had at his command large armed followers.
Moti Giri	Maratha chieftain, M Sindhia	Trader and money-lender of Banaras
Puran Giri	Bornat Kanauj	The primary purpose was to open trade routes with the Himalayan kingdom.
Puran Puri	Recruited from Kanauj	A religious ascetic but had a link with Tibet, China and Soviet Russia.

⁶⁷Pinch, WARRIOR ASCETICS 1–6 (2006).

Sannyasi Mahajans of Mymensingh	Had large estates Mymensingh and other parts of Eastern Bengal	North Indian traders
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Source: Allahabad Regional Archives Collection, (hereafter referred to ARA) Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares dated 4th May 1788, 10th June 1789, 17th June 1789 and 19th May 1791 in Ananda Bhattacharyya, 'The Peripatetic Sannyasis: A Challenge to Peasant Stability and Colonial Rule?', draft article.⁶⁸

The Fakirs: The *Madariyas* were subdivided into *Diwangan* (*Madari fakirs* in a fit of divine madness), *Khademan* (caretaker of tombs), *Taliban* (seeker of truth), *Ashiqan* (lovers of religion).⁶⁹ The original *guru* of *Madariyas*, on the other hand, was Badi-u-din Shah–I Madar (1315-1436). He travelled from Arabia and Syria before settling in India, where he preached Islam. He travelled to Gujarat, Ajmer, Kanauj, Kalpi, Jaunpur, Lucknow, and Bengal. According to local legends, his origins can be traced back to Madaripur in Faridpur *zilla*, as well as Madaribari and Madarsha in Chittagong. He is said to have converted many Hindus and also their descendants celebrated the 'Madar er Bashtola' festival. In North India, there are famous accounts of Shah-i-Madar's preachings, though it is debatable whether he ever visited Bengal. However, his followers were active there. Among his followers, Shah Alakh was the most noteworthy and probably the sole representative of *Madariyas* in Bengal. In the sixteenth century, a poem anthology called *Sunyo Puran* was composed which includes a poem titled '*Niranjanerrushma*' featuring the phrase '*dum Madar*', a term used by the *Madariya fakirs* to denounce others in their chants. The *Madariyas* existed in Bengal in the sixteenth century and used this method of

⁶⁸“Dr Ananda Bhattacharyya kindly shared his private notes on the subject with me and allowed me to use some of them”

⁶⁹Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed., SANNYASI AND FAKIR REBELLION IN BENGAL, JAMINI MOHAN GHOSH REVISITED 11 (Delhi: Manohar, 2014).

chanting. Additionally, in the seventeenth century, there is a mention of Sultan Hussain Murihayah Bar Hinah. In 1658 he received a *sanad* from Shah Shuja, the son of Sultan Shah Jahan.⁷⁰

The *Madariya* or *Madarias* were most active in North and West India. In Bengal, we hear about their activities in northern and eastern provinces like Rajshahi, Dhaka, Faridpur, Pabna, Bagura, Chittagong, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, and CoochBehar. They had contacts with Nepal. They had *dargas* in these areas.⁷¹ It is perhaps pertinent to mention that a *pir* from Baghdad had established *adarga* during the time of Hussain Shah (1519-1532). The sultan had gifted him *lakhiraj* lands. Subsequently, many such lands were gifted to these religious mendicants by various other landed proprietors such as Rani Bhawani. These lands included *ayema*, *madad-i mash*, *debatteer*, *brahmattor*, *pirpal*, *mataran*, and *bhagattar*. These were religious grants made out of one's holdings, in Mymensingh, Bagura, Dhaka, Rangpur remained active.⁷² There were about fifty rent free holdings around Baoli, village Barabazar, Dampara, Pandua, *hat* Barabazar, Dhilpur, Tenguri, Rainaid.⁷³

The area between Rangpur and Dinajpur should be separately mentioned. It played a pivotal role in *Madariyas'* activities. Buchanan Hamilton and Martin mentioned a group of *Madariya fakirs* known as *Benawas*.⁷⁴ They did not have a family life and preferred to live the life of a vagabond. They were reliant on alms and land grants. The regional chieftains and the *zamindars* (landlords) used to provide these religious grants. These *fakirs* were celibate. They used to teach their *chelas* (protégés). Upon the demise of the *gurus* (teacher), the *chelas* usually took over the clan. Those who were unable to get any land would often resort to begging for alms. Sometimes, they used to extract rent from the lands granted to them. They used to divide some of these lands amongst their followers for cultivation. The head

⁷⁰Mohammad Inamul Haq, BANGE SUFIR PRABHAB 63–65 (Kolkata: Vivekananda Book Center, 2012).

⁷¹Ananda Bhattacharyya, MADARI SILSILA 82 (Kolkata: Obobhas, 2010).

⁷² Id., 86 – 89.

⁷³Dasgupta, THE FAKIR AND SANNYASI 10–23 (1930).

⁷⁴Francis Hamilton-Buchanan, AN ACCOUNT OF THE DISTRICT OF PURNEA 192 (1809–10) (Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1928).

was called Shah. Some *fakirs* were supposedly crude, bellicose and violent. They got involved in depredations and banditry in the Company ruled areas. As a result, the relationship between the Company government and the *fakirs* became tumultuous.⁷⁵ In terms of organisation, the *Sufi fakirs*, and Dasnami *sannyasis* shared closeness, not only in outer appearance but also in their core philosophy. This commonality permeated their 'mutual relationship'.⁷⁶

The Economic Background and the Causes of Rebellion of the Religious

Mendicants: When the East India Company took control of Bengal, they became its administrators but could not shed off their identity as a mercantile enterprise. They placed great value on their commercial practices and military operations. This logically led them to prioritize the maximisation of land revenue. As they implemented their plans, they discovered vast tracts of cultivable lands that had been granted to various sects of people, who held *sanads* that allowed them to enjoy the lands rent free. Among these groups were the religious mendicants—specially the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs*. It is pertinent to mention that the religious mendicants used to receive *sanads* from the Governor of Bengal.

The *sanads* permitted *sannyasis* to travel freely while holding banners, flags, poles, staffs, bands, etc. and to confiscate any unclaimed heirless land in Bengal. They were also authorized to confiscate any rent-free tenures and were assured of receiving alms from the local populace, with no cessor contribution levied on them. As long as the Mughal authority was recognized in Bengal, the *sannyasis* could challenge any opposition to their *sanads* as these came directly from the Mughal emperor. Secondly, the *sanads* exempted the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs* from paying any contribution to political authority.⁷⁷ The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* used to enjoy rent-free land tenures as religious grants in the districts of Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Malda, and Rangpur. The *sannaysis* and *fakirs* used to acquire rent-free lands. None interfered with the *bairagis* and *sannyasis*, who lived off these charity lands and led

⁷⁵ NAI, FOREIGN SECRET S-NO 23 VOL. IX (18th January–31st May 1773).

⁷⁶ Sarkar, A HISTORY OF DASNAMI NAGA SANNYASIS 90 (2017 ed).

⁷⁷ Dasgupta, THE FAKIR AND SANNYASI 10–23 (1930).

a reclusive life.⁷⁸ The new Company state aimed to regularise the status of these rent-free lands. They discovered that *bazezameen* along with several other types of land such as *lakhiraj*, *paikan*, and *nankar*, were exempted from paying taxes. These lands were either totally revenue-free or had their revenues remitted.

These large tracts of land were held by *sanads* and *farmans* from the emperor himself.⁷⁹ According to Khondkar Fazli Rabi in *Hakikat-Mussalman-i-Bangala, madat-i-mash, aima, nazoomat fakiran, nazr-i-dargah, nazr-i-hazrat, piran, brahmattor, mehtam, debattor*,⁸⁰ and *sibattor*⁸¹ had been explicitly granted to Muslims and Hindu mendicants for religious purposes. The *Amini* Commission estimated that the lands in question amounted to Rs.43lakhs. If the revenues from Bihar were added, the total amount could go up to a crore.⁸² Under John Shore's direction in May 1782, a plan was devised to create a *baze zameen daftar*. However, the actual resumption started under Cornwallis in 1788. The *sannyasis* and the *fakirs* vehemently resented this. One of their primary sources of livelihood was at stake. The *sanads* granted to them were under threat, as the situation changed. Company government had started the process of resuming the rent-free estates of 1759 and 1764 near Sherpur and in Mymensingh.⁸³ This was only the beginning.

The Company state began to intrude into the *sannyasis'* and *fakirs'* religious identity, customs, rights, and privileges. But both commonly shared their annual pilgrimage to their respective sacred places, which included bathing festivals in Bengal. Notable events included the *mahasnan* (great bathing) on Karatoya River in Bogra, Chilmari (Rangpur), Singjani, and Byganbari (Mymensingh), Nangalbandh (Dhaka) on Brahmaputra and Agarduris (possibly Agradweep) and Sagar Island at the mouth of the Ganges. The *fakirs* who believed in *Sufi* ideology⁸⁴ made pilgrimages to the

⁷⁸ West Bengal State Archives (Kolkata), RAJA SHITAB ROY'S OBSERVATION, COMPTROLLING COMMITTEE OF REVENUE 1771 VOL. II (3rd August–30th August 1771).

⁷⁹ WBSA, COMMITTEE OF REVENUE 1782 VOL. XIV (2nd–30th May).

⁸⁰ *Debattor*– religious grants made to God.

⁸¹ *Shibattor* – religious grants made to Lord Shiva.

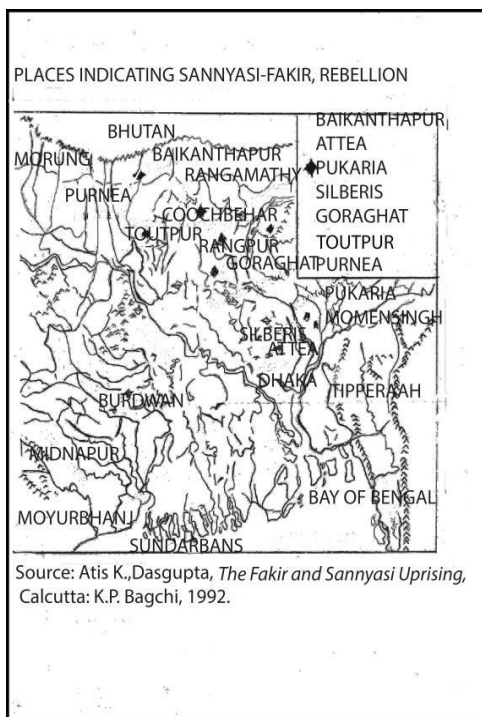
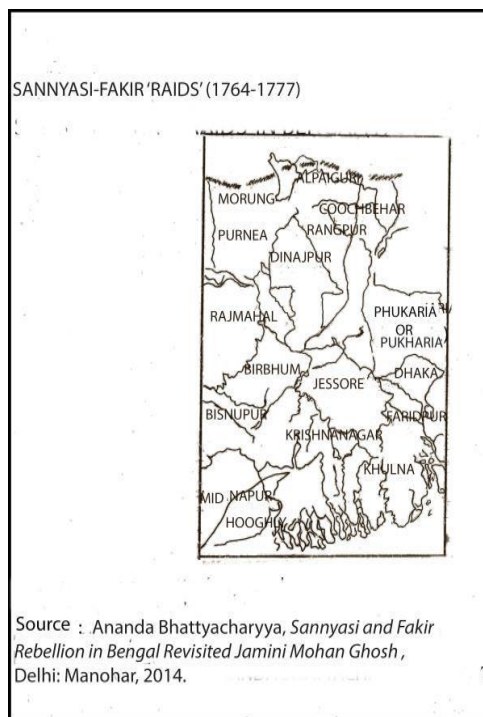
⁸² Dasgupta, THE FAKIR AND SANNYASI 10–23 (1930).

⁸³ Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR 159 (1930).

⁸⁴ J.A. Subhan, SUFISM, ITS SAINTS AND SHRINES (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House 1938).

dargahs, shrines, of *pirs*, in the districts of North Bengal, *dargahs* of Bogra- Shah Sultan at Mahasthan and Baba Aadam⁸⁵ at Aadamdighi, the celebrated Adina Mosque, Bari *dargah* of Saint Mukdan Shah Jalal at Pandua, Pir Badarud din *dargah* near Hemtabad and *dargah* of Mullah Alauddin near Damdama in Dinajpur.⁸⁶ The Mughal *sanad* (ordinance) of Prince Shah Shuja had permitted them to undertake such pilgrimages, accompanied by *jalus* (islamic procession), enjoy provisions from *ryots* (peasants), as well as *zamindars*. They were exempted from paying taxes on their contributions.⁸⁷The government wanted to regulate these pilgrimages and put an end to their practice of collecting alms and levying 'contributions. Very surprisingly the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* strongly detested this interference and resisted fiercely. This marked the beginning of the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions in history of Bengal.

Contours of the Rebellion



⁸⁵“He was a great Muslim saint or dervish.”

⁸⁶Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR 25-28 (1930).

⁸⁷Maulavi Abdul Wall, 'Note on the Faquirs of Baliya-Dighi in Dinajpur', in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 72, Part III, Nos. 1 & 2, 1903, pp. 61-65.

As per the accounts of the Company state, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* appeared in Burdwan and Krishnanagar in the early 1760s for 'plunder', which caught the attention of the Company. They immediately secured the two places to prevent the plundering.⁸⁸ At that time Ralph Lister was the head of the Company's *kuthi*. However, he was unable to manage it. In retaliation to this audacity, Capt. Grant commanded 29 sepoys to control the situation. This expedition resulted in the defeat of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*.⁸⁹ However, this minor setback did not prevent them from making fresh 'incursions'. Their next target was Rajshahi's East India Company's estate at Boyaliya. In March 1763, they looted the estate and took M. Bennett captive. He was later killed. They would later loot the treasury and the *kachari* of several rich people, *mahajans*, and English merchants of Rampur, and Boyaliya.⁹⁰ The Company once again felt threatened by these religious mendicants in 1763 when they appeared in Dhaka. Their stronghold in Dhaka allowed them to take control of the city and cause significant disruption to the Company's warehouse. This 'raid' was, however, quickly managed by the personnel in Calcutta. Consequently, the *fakirs* were captured who were then forced into coolie labour.⁹¹ Therefore, even as early as 1760, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were quite transparent about their targets, and intentions, and did not bother to conceal their identities. It is noteworthy that the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* targeted the company-owned *kuthis*, estates, and similar properties. Unfortunately, little evidence suggested that they molested the ordinary people during this period.

However, a band of 5000 *sannyasis* made a second attempt to take control over the Company's domains, but they were thwarted in their efforts once again by two sepoys, sent by the local *faujdar*. This skirmish took place in Saran district of

⁸⁸NAI, LONG'S SELECTIONS IN SECRET DEPT PROGS 1760 VOL. III SECRET DEPARTMENT 206 (21st and 25th February 1760)&Dr. Ranjit Kumar Samaddar, *Bangla Sahitya Sangskritite Sthanio Bidrohor Probbhab, Sannyasi theke Sipahi Bidroho Porjonto*, 1982 MAMUDI HOUSE CALCUTTA (1982).

⁸⁹NAI, LONG SELECTION IN SECRET DEPARTMENT 1763 SECRET DEPARTMENT 342 (5th December 1763).

⁹⁰Letter from the Collector of Laksharपुर to the President of the Council, quoted in J.M. Ghosh, *The Sannyasi Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, 37 (Year of Publication).

⁹¹NAI, HOME PUBLIC PROGS 1773 VOL. <Volume Number> HOME PUBLIC PROGS ,355 & 454 (25th July, Nos 322; 5th December).

Bihar resulting in the death of 80 rebellious *sannyasis*, while the rest fled.⁹² Despite this failure, the *sannyasis* continued to pose a 'threat' to the government. In 1770 rumours began to circulate that 10,000 of them had assembled at Banaras with a clear intention to pass through Bengal. However, either the rumours were false, or, they dispersed before the Company troops could arrive.⁹³ However, the Company officials felt obligated to send troops after them as any report of their assembly could be a matter of concern. The rebels had previously challenged the Company state and even taken over the warehouses, although they were unable to sustain it, the fact that they made numerous efforts and attempts cautioned the nascent Company state. Moreover, it is evident that the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* continued to appear in the 1770s. In the winter of 1772 – 73, they once again made an appearance and this time, however, the 'raid' took the form of a full-fledged rebellion. Consequently, the government appointed supervisors for the districts in 1769–1770 who kept asking for reinforcements. By that time, Rangpur had also become a hotspot for disturbances. However, the forces available were insufficient to adequately deal with these armed men. As a result, the government had to establish a regular network of intelligence informants and *harkaras* to provide information about these men.⁹⁴ They soon understood that they were at a disadvantaged position, particularly with regard to the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs*. An incident at Purnea would later prove how important the *harkaras* had become to the government.

In early 1770 –1771, the number of *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebels increased. However, they faced several defeats against the Company troops. Some of them were captured after their skirmish at Purnea. As mentioned earlier, their leader, Majnu Shah was a well- known figure, who had previously visited the area with his men, albeit not with such a large group. However, his previous expedition had been peaceful and no damages were reported. It appeared the *Madariyas* intended to visit

⁹²James Long, *Selections from Unpublished Records of Government for the Years 1748–1767 Inclusive*, 1869 GOV'T PRINTING CALCUTTA 256 (1869).

⁹³ NAI, LETTER TO GENERAL ROBERT BECKER, FOREIGN DEPARTMENT (SELECT) 1770 (30th November–29th December 1770).

⁹⁴Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR 44–45 (1930).

the Maba *dargah*. Capt. Sinclair had induced them to give up their arms.⁹⁵ However, the Company government was uncertain about their true intentions, but they chose to be cautious about them without provoking or molesting them in any way.⁹⁶

When the Company officials received intelligence from *harkaras* that the Madariya *fakirs* were on the move once again, the government was alarmed. These men were armed with matchlocks and had assembled at a location 12 *crosses* from Purnea. This development raised significant concerns for the authorities. It further prompted the Company officials to once again deploy sepoys to resist the Madariya *fakirs* and prevent any further ravages. This same method was recommended to other chiefs and collectors in different districts. The officials instructed Munro to proceed to Purnea with his men and collaborate with the local collector of Purnea as they needed intelligence reports to devise an effective strategy. According to the *harkara*, the Madariyas had reached Purnea via Betteah and Tirhut, by crossing the river Hooghly. Munro also instructed them to treat them as a 'public enemy.' He wanted to use 'every endeavour to bring them to action advantageously and drive them off the country.'⁹⁷ The previous expedition of the Madariya *fakirs* had been peaceful. They had not committed any damages then, and the Company state was satisfied to detain five of their men as hostages to ensure good behaviour. They had promised to release them upon their departure. However, this situation changed when the Madariyas reappeared in Purnea. Officers such as John Reed, James Lanree, and Graham began to suspect their intentions. Consequently, another military expedition was launched under the leadership of Colonel Knudson.⁹⁸ They did not stay in Purnea for long and soon appeared at a location 15 crosses from the main *zamindari* of Dinajpur.⁹⁹ Moreover, their gatherings for pilgrimages and trade further fueled the government's

⁹⁵ WBSA, LETTER TO RICHARD BECKER, CONTROLLING COMMITTEE OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. XIV (2nd–28th November).

⁹⁶WBSA, LETTER TO DUCAREL, LettertoCottrell,2nd–28thNovember1770PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. XIV (2nd–28th November).

⁹⁷ WBSA, LETTER TO LIEUTENANT MUNRO, COPYBOOK OF RESIDENT AT DARBAR MURSHIDABAD LETTERS ISSUED IN THE INTERVENING YEARS 1772–1774 VOL. I <Page No.> (28th September 1772–2nd March 1774).

⁹⁸Id.95.

⁹⁹WBSA,Letter to Richard Becker from Cottrell dated 22nd December 1771, PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. XIV (2nd–28th November).

suspicious. Commanding officers rose and Hudson joined forces to address the threat and protect the countryside, including Purnea.¹⁰⁰ However, the *Madariyas* kept moving, thus making it difficult for the government to identify their location and intentions. Eventually, they moved east ward, prompting the Company state to send troops after them to prevent destruction. Apprehensive of a pandemonium, they sent some additional reinforcements, which imply that the Company had prior knowledge of their whereabouts. This testifies the fact that their reliance on *harkara* intelligence was crucial.¹⁰¹ *Madariyas* quickly moved to Silberis then to Rajshahi rarely staying in one place for too long. The years 1770 –1772 witnessed repeated 'raids' by the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* accross various districts of Bengal including Rajshahi, CoochBehar, Dinajpur, Purnea, Silberis. The Company state's counteraction took the form of military expeditions. Dinajpur was particularly affected by these depredations.¹⁰²As a result of these depredations, the Company state even ordered the *chaukies* (military or police outposts) to compel all travellers to deposit their arms. This was done for the safety of the merchants.¹⁰³At the same time, the troops failed to deter the 'raiders' as they continued to appear in Bengal even in the late 1770s and 1780s.¹⁰⁴ Besides levying contributions, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* ravaged the countryside and occasionally abducted children, forcing *ryots* to serve as coolies and guides. The Provincial Council responded firmly, instructing commanding officers, collectors, and chiefs to make examples of those involved in such violence.¹⁰⁵ When the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and the Company troops met in an open skirmish, the troops were able to defeat them. However, they were unable to deter them from committing

¹⁰⁰WBSA,Letter to John Grose from Murshidabad dated 28th November 1770, 3rd – 31st December 1770, CONTROLLING COUNCIL OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. II (3rd–31st December).

¹⁰¹WBSA,Letter to William Harwood from Captain Hudson dated 28th November 1770, CONTROLLING COUNCIL OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. II (3rd–31st December).

¹⁰²WBSA,Letter from J. Elliot, dated 3rd July 1793, Dinajpore JUDICIAL CRIMINAL 1793 VOL. IV (12th July–2nd August).

¹⁰³NAI, Letter to Warren Hastings from Lushington, FOREIGN SECRET S-NO 23 VOL. IX (18th January–31st May 1773).

¹⁰⁴WBSA,Letter to G. Ducarel, dated 13th December 1771, CONTROLLING COMMITTEE OF REVENUE MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. II (3rd–31st December).

¹⁰⁵WBSA,Letter to Richard Barwell, 7th June – 25th August 1774, PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF REVENUE DACCA 1774 VOL. III (7th June–25th August).

more depredations because of the lack of a sufficient number of troops.¹⁰⁶ However, it is noteworthy that even though the rebel force grew to 1300, very few of them were arms. Sepoys were stationed at Poorsha, located between Fitalija and Daudpur. The area between Natore and Dinajpur remained unprotected, serving as a common route for the rebels.

It was the common route taken by the rebels to pass through the country to the borders of Behrampur and Chinsura, Purnabubbah and Bagura in Silberis.¹⁰⁷

The Final Suppression

By 1792-1793, the Raja of Nepal had entered into a questionable agreement with the government to collaborate on addressing the sannyasi raids. These raids became confined to the northern districts of Bengal. Sobhan Ali continued to 'plunder' according to Mr. Heatley (officer in charge). It appears that Gurkha officers provided Sobhan Ali with passive support, allowing him to seize rich *ryots* in Dinajpur and demanded alms from them. Eventually, some of his followers were detained at Purnea. Meanwhile, Murshidabad remained vulnerable to these raids. The sannyasis targeted *kachari* and committed 'robberies' in Malda, Nichhundpur, Badaul, and Bhowra. They reappeared in October in Salbari with the number of raiders still very high, almost 700 in number. This time the Company state once again sought the *harkaras* intelligence to locate Chirag Ali, who had encamped at Deotallah. This information resulted in the killing of twenty *fakirs* and thirty-five were severely injured. However, it did not deter them. They assembled in Dinajpur to show their solidarity and their unfaltering mission to cause havoc in Rajshahi. Colonel White of Berhampur requested additional detachments to help him challenge these men.¹⁰⁸ Even at this point, they were well armed and formidable and could not be challenged without a disciplined army. Later that year, the magistrates reported to Mr Harrington that the *fakirs* had assembled in Rajshahi and Rangpur, but Lieut. Ainslee

¹⁰⁶WBSA, Letter to John Shore from Harrington, dated 2nd November 1793, JUDICIAL CRIMINAL 1793 VOL. VIII (1st November–27th November).

¹⁰⁷WBSA, JUDICIAL CRIMINAL 1793 VOL. VIII (1st November–27th November).

¹⁰⁸Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR 142–147 (1930).

was unable to prevent them. These 'depredations' persisted in the regions of Purnea, Cajirhautor Kajirhat, Ramaganj. *Fakir* leaders such as Sobhan Ali, Chirag Ali, Hazari Singh, Karim Shah, Jowar Shah, remained active throughout these years. CoochBehar became a centre of turmoil in the 1790s, but the Company's troops were able to apprehend fifty-nine of Sannyasis in CoochBehar. Evidences suggest that the *sannyasi* 'raids' persisted until 1796 –1797, particularly in Poorsha. In 1797 they appeared in large numbers in Dinajpur. In March 1798, Sobhan Ali and Amudi Shah led another raid. However, this time, the government met success under the command of Captain Wroughton at Gajole which weakened Sobhan Ali and Amudi Ali. They, in retaliation, kidnapped two *mandals* (lower-level state officers) from Dehutt *pargana*. Subsequently, Capt. Charron apprehended a large number of them. Sobhan Ali and Amudi renewed incursions in Bogra in 1800. The Company state sought assistance from the Raja of Nepal, though this cooperation later proved to be uncertain. However, by January 1802, these incursions ceased, and it was noted that 'acts of outrages have not been recently committed on the (Nepal) frontier'.¹⁰⁹¹⁰⁸ According to Christoff Zotter, the rebels managed to elude the Company forces by escaping into Nepal. The Company officials often approached Prithwinarayan Saha of Nepal for help in this matter. Zotter also mentioned that the warrior ascetics remained active further north, near the Himalayas.¹¹⁰

Factors Influencing the Rebellion

According to Halvard Buhaug, Scott Gates and Paivi Lujala, some conflicts last for years, while others only for few months. Certain regions are more conducive to guerrilla warfare due to factors such as difficult terrain, porous borders, and access to lootable resources. Buhaug et al. have demonstrated that these conditions significantly influence the dynamics and longevity of conflicts. Here are some of them:

- 1) Understanding how the impact of geographic factors, natural resources, wealth, location, terrain significantly affects the power dynamics between the government and the rebels.

¹⁰⁹ Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR*, 170 (1940).

¹¹⁰Christoff Zotter, *Ascetics in Administrative Affairs: Documents on the Central Overseers of Jogīs and Saṅnyāsīs in Nepal*, 1 HEIDELBERG UNI. PUBL. 445 (2018).

2) Rough terrain provided the rebels with good defense.

3) In situations where geography does not play an effective role, the capacities of the rebels take the centre stage.

4) Natural resources too play a role.

5) The strength of the rebels is another key factor in a rebellion.¹¹¹

Further, it is pertinent to know the factors influencing the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions. During the period of the rebellions, the Company forces encountered many setbacks. First of all, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* operated in large bands. The armed *sannyasis* and *fakirs* travelled on horseback, camels and on foot. Sometimes they even showed the courage to return to those locations from which they had been expelled at some point of time in the past. Purnea was one such place.¹¹² They continued to shift from one place to another.

They moved from Golla to Morung and from Govindnagar to Dinajpur which provided them with a strategic edge over the Company sepoy. This mobilisation gave the government a false sense of security, compelling them to believe that the marauding *sannyasis* had left the area. Consequently, some troops and its commanding officers like Edmonstone were withdrawn from the disturbed areas.¹¹³ Thus it clearly demonstrates that the rebels were very capable.

The period was very challenging for the emerging company as all those years were particularly difficult for the nascent Company state as it not only had to dealt with the *sannyasi* and *fakir* 'raiders' but the threats from the *adivasi* / *Bhumij* people (*chuars*) as well as the Arakanese people. They could not withdraw all their sepoy from the known and troubled hotspots as it undoubtedly would have severely impacted revenue collections. Forts and hills emerged as important strategic locations for both the rebels and the government. They strongly held that if disturbances occurred at Betteah orchestrated by the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and others,

¹¹¹ Halvard Buhaug and Paivi Lujala, *Geography, Rebel Capacity, and Duration of Civil Conflict*, 53 J. CONFLICT RESOL. 544 (2009).

¹¹² WBSA, LETTER TO RICHARD BECKER, PURNIA 2ND–28TH NOVEMBER 1770, CONTROLLING COMMITTEE OF REVENUE AT MURSHIDABAD 1770 VOL. XIV (25th October).

¹¹³ WBSA, CONTROLLING COUNCIL OF REVENUE PATNA 1773 VOL. VII PART. II (9th April–28th June).

then the forts could become significant assets for the 'enemy' as they were dwelling close to the borders of the East India Company's possessions.¹¹⁴

In this context, geography and the difficult terrains played a very crucial role. According to B. S. Das, the boundaries of the Company's territories were not well- demarcated, especially where the jungles started.¹¹⁵ Besides the rebels knew the land, terrain, environment of Bengal which they used to their advantage. They used guerrilla techniques to confront the Company's troops and receded into the hills, dense jungles and navigated the perilous rivers by boat to avoid arrests. The Company troops were challenged by the unpredictable climate and terrain of the place. The rough terrains in some parts of Bengal and Bihar were conducive for guerrilla fighting.

Furthermore, the forces were inadequate to be effective. The Company sepoys often ran out of ammunition and there were not enough troops to dissuade *sannyasis* and *fakirs* from playing havoc in the countryside. The rebels typically arrived in groups of 700-1500 men, though not all were armed. Their sheer numbers were adequate to drive peasants out of their habitats.¹¹⁶ The rebels outnumbered the sepoys. It appeared that the number of sepoys who were typically deployed to neutralise the rebels did not exceed a hundred at a time.¹¹⁷¹¹⁶ The Company needed greater and stronger leverage to manage the situation.

Fortunately for them, they received assistance from the *harkaras*, the indigenous intelligence agents, the spies who supplied them with crucial information about the whereabouts of the *sannyasis* and the *fakirs*. Without this support, the Company sepoys (soldiers) would have faced significant challenges in pursuing the rebels. Sometimes the rebels vanished into the hills and jungles. Sometimes they crossed the large rivers in boats. Moreover, there was very little prospect of the Company sepoys overtaking them in these unknown terrains intersected by so many rivers and other water-bodies.¹¹⁸ They needed the assistance of the *harkaras* so that

¹¹⁴ WBSA, COPYBOOK OF LETTERS RECEIVED BY THE COMPTROLLING COMMITTEE OF REVENUE AT PATNA 1771 VOL. VI (1st January–20th December).

¹¹⁵B.S. Das, CHANGING PROFILE OF THE FRONTIER BENGAL 1751-1833, (1984).

¹¹⁶WBSA, 1st November–27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

¹¹⁷Jamini Mohan Ghosh, THE SANNYASI AND FAKIR, (1940).

¹¹⁸WBSA, Letter from James Alexander from G.W. B. Rous, dated 28th January 1778,

the rebels had 'little or no chances to elude pursuit'.¹¹⁹ The intelligence reports provided by the *harkaras* enabled the government to achieve victories against the rebels. It enabled them to deploy troops quickly in their pursuit. Every expedition thus aimed to expel, defeat and capture these mendicants.¹²⁰ Thus the *harkaras'* information about the whereabouts of the 'raiders' became an important thing for the Company state. For instance, on one occasion, *subedar* Asharam (junior commissioned officer), who was pursuing the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* at Silberis found himself surrounded by them at a place near Mirzapur.¹²¹ The *harkaras* informed the government that he required assistance.¹²² Also, the government decided which battalion they needed to replace with a bigger one, based on the reports of the *harkaras*. This was the case in Poorsa.¹²³

The Company state required information about these armed groups to deal to address the issues with permanent solutions. The fact that the sepoys themselves feared for their lives and anticipated attacks after running out of ammunition made it imperative to have accurate intelligence about their foes.¹²⁴

It is also evident from the sources that the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were displeased by the Company state's use of 'native' intelligence to capture them.¹²⁵ C.A. Bayly¹²⁶ demonstrated that establishing and utilizing a network of native intelligence was an essential part of the Company state's empire-building process. Consequently, the role of indigenous intelligence during the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellions is unquestionable.

Nattore, 7th June – 25th August 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, Vol. 3.

¹¹⁹WBSA, 1st November–27thDecember 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

¹²⁰WBSA, 7th May–28th June, Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.12, p. 3232.

¹²¹It appears to be between 'Kernan' and Mirzapur.

¹²²WBSA, Letter to Smith, 20th October 1793, Dinajpore, 1st November – 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

¹²³WBSA, Letter from Harrington to White dated 31st October 1793, 1st November – 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

¹²⁴WBSA, Letter to Smith from Harrington dated 2nd November 1793, 1st November– 27th December 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.3.

¹²⁵WBSA, 7th May – 28th June 1772, Controlling Committee of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.12, p. 3232.

¹²⁶C.A. Bayly, EMPIRE AND INFORMATION: INTELLIGENCE GATHERING AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION IN INDIA, 1780-1870, (1996).

It is noteworthy that, at times, the *ryots* were unwilling to aid the Company sepoys and had even warned the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*. However, the available data is insufficient to suggest a formal peasant-rebel alliance. Interestingly, the villagers, who were often terrorized by violence and rampage, decided to abandon their lands and seek refuge in the jungle, which for some reason provided safety to them. According to Gerald Bryant, while the government was able to capture the itinerant bandits, they endured considerable challenges in subduing the religious mendicants. The infantry struggled to negotiate with Bengal's terrain and climate. Ultimately, the government had to deploy cavalry after the religious mendicants. The cavalry had a force of over four thousand men¹²⁷.

The skirmishes and subsequent capture of the rebels had some far-reaching consequences. It became clear that at least one *sannyasi-fakir* band was native to Bengal, with a leader who was not only a local but also quite revered.¹²⁸ Naturally, with these initial defeats their pace slowed down a bit. However, they recovered quickly to regroup and reassemble at Dinajpur, Bagura, Jalpaiguri etc. They concentrated on rebuilding their forts and their forces¹²⁹ which played an important role in their resistance movement. It aided them to sustain themselves against the systematic and repeated assaults from the Company troops. From this point onwards, Majnu Shah emerged as a formidable figure in the Company's narratives as well as later representations in Bengali literature and also the Nationalist historiography.

Conclusion

The *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion has been depicted in both fiction and non-fictional literature as a range of phenomena which includes raids, peasant wars, acts of banditry and mercenaries and even as a war of independence. While there is

¹²⁷Gerald Bryant, 'PACIFICATION IN THE EARLY BRITISH RAJ, 1755-85', (2021).

¹²⁸*Id.* 116.

¹²⁹*Warfare, Expansion, and Resistance*, Vol. V, (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 61 –73.

insufficient evidence to categorize it as a peasant war, the mercenary character of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* remains undeniable. The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* not only posed a threat to the stability of the Company state by repeatedly looting the *kothis* and *kacharis* but also challenged the very existence of the Company state. The repeated raids disastrously affected the annual revenue collections which not supported the Company's finances but also symbolized its legitimacy as rulers of Bengal. The company considered it imperative to take serious measures to oppose and prevent the depredations of these freebooters who from year to year from the breaking up of the rains to the months of April, traverse this and the adjacent district in large armed bodies and plunder the inhabitants and with frequent acts of violence and cruelty in often defiance of the government.¹³⁰

Majnu Shah may have advocated for non-oppression and voluntary contributions, but the very term 'voluntary' is in question. The government records authenticate the fact that Rous's letters clearly reveal that the armed 'banditti' had taken five hundred rupees from Nurnagar village belonging to one Dayaram Ray, sixteen hundred ninety rupees from the *kachari* which was later deserted by the officials. While one might see some legitimacy in their attacks on government properties, these contributions can equally be interpreted as extortion, complicating the notion of a sannyasi-fakir peasant alliance.

The fact that these contributions were made, put a shadow over the overall revenue collections of the countryside. As a great act of defiance, this proved to be the most effective one as it crippled the rural economy for some time in some parts of the region. There were balances in revenue during the 1780s and 1790s. For instance, in 1780, there were considerable arrears in various districts of Bengal.

¹³⁰WBSA, 20th September – 20th October 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.7.

Table1:2: Amount due in the districts in 1780.

Name of the districts	Approximate amounts due in <i>magh 1780</i> (in rupees)	Total Amount due from all districts(in rupees)
Murshidabad	4,40,426	
Purnea	no balance	
Dhaka	3,74,020(no explanation for it)	
Sylhet	(no information),	
Birbhum	88,025	
Chittagong and Tipperah	25,199	
Rajmahal and Bhagalpur	(hardly any)	
Silberis	952	
Rangpur	44,442	
Ramgarh	17,199	
		9,56,412

Source: WBSA, 20th February 1781-5th April 1781, Committee of Revenue, Vol.1.

The areas continued to be in arrears in these years, and it appears the amount had increased.

Table1:3: Amount due in the Districts in 1781.

Name of the Districts	Approximate Amount due in 1781(in rupees)	Total Amount (in rupees)
Dinajpur	60,342	
Calcutta	9,10,215	
Murshidabad	6,46,033	
Purnea	21,575	
Dhaka	3,32,603	
Burdwan	89,065	
ChittagongandTipperah	16,550	
Boglepore/Rajmahal	No balance	
Silberis	2023	
Rangpur	1,06,807	
Sylhet	45,173	
Ramgarh	15,369	
Midnapur	60,740	
		2,306,495

Source: WBSA, 20th February1781-5th April 1781, Committee of Revenue, Vol.1.

Thus, we may say they were successful in questioning and challenging the very existence of the East India Company. However, the Company state retaliated with military actions. However, it also became clear that the success of the Company state was dependent on a number of factors. However, what tipped the scale in their favour was the information, and intelligence provided by the *harkaras*. While the spy system assisted them, the hills, jungles the rains, rivers and forts aided *sannyasis* and the *fakirs* to sustain their struggle for so long against a better-equipped army. We may conclude that the *sannyasi-fakir* rebellion was against the Company state. The *sannyasi-fakir* merely wanted their previous privileges restored in a world they knew.¹³¹

¹³¹There are some books which had been used in entirety, for example, Anandamath and Debi Chaudhurani. Their pages are not numbered. The archival documents have no page numbers as they were impossible to decipher. Their volume numbers are given. Their entire references have also been included.