

## Sannyasi-Fakir, Chuar, Rangpur Rebellions (1760-1800): A Comparative Study

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### Abstract

*In this article, the author has tried to argue that the Company Government had made several changes in the economy. Three major rebellions – sannyasi-fakir, chuar and Rangpur rebellions took place during 1760-1800. They appeared to be all similar but they were different in terms of the direct causes, character, nature, goals and eventual target. The author has tried to focus on their similarities and dissimilarities, making this article a comparative study of the same.*

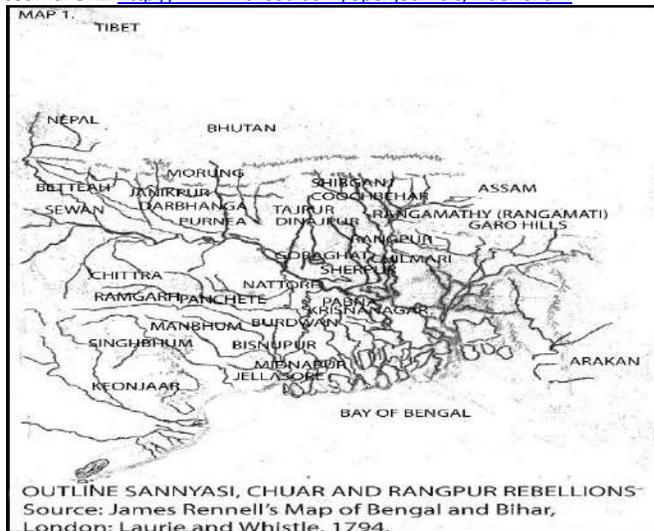
**Key words-** *sannyasi-fakir, chuar , Rangpur , rebellions, terrain, comparison, Company state.*

### Introduction

The eighteenth-century witnessed numerous changes with the influence of the Mughal empire waning and its erstwhile provinces becoming autonomous in the first half of the century and the English East India Company usurping power in the second half. In the second half of the century, the Company slowly made a transition from being a purely mercantile enterprise into an administrative body. The initial years of the Company state's administration were marked by several key elements, including attempts to maximise land revenue and stabilisation of their authority. To achieve that end, it experimented with a number of land revenue settlements and policies. These policies included the resumption of previously rent-free lands like the charity lands and the *chakran* lands<sup>1</sup> for extracting revenue. This was ill received by different segments of Bengal's society. For instance, when the Government attempted to resume the charity lands of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*, and tried to prevent them from carrying arms as well as stop them from acquiring alms *en route* to the destination of their pilgrimage, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* revolted against the East India Company's Government. Similarly when the Government tried to enhance the taxes of the Jungle Mahals, resume the *chakran* lands of the *paiks* of the Jungle Mahals and tried replace the *paiks* with a professional *thanadari*, the *paiks* revolted. When the Government also tried to sell the defaulting *zamindaries* of the Jungle *zamindars* as per the Sunset Law, the latter revolted. Joined them were the *chuars* who had tilled the lands for the *paiks*. In similar fashion, when Rajah Devi Singh, revenue farmer of Rangpur and Dinajpur tried to enhance the taxes of the peasants and tortured them when they could not pay, the peasants rebelled against Devi Singh. It appears that various sections of the Bengal population had rebelled during 1760-1800. However the nature, the motives, the target of their rebellions and their goals were different. In this article I shall attempt to discuss the similarities and dissimilarities of these three major rebellions.

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<sup>1</sup>*Chakran* lands - lands given by the *zamindars* to the employees in lieu of salary.



### The case of Sannyasis and Fakirs :Causes of their Revolt

The *Dasnami Sannyasis* and *Madariya Fakirs* drew substance from their *Maths* and pilgrimages for their trading activities. The *Sannyasis* used to receive *sanads* from the Mughal emperor. The *sanads* granted to the *Sannyasis* permitted them to travel freely, bear banners, standards, flags, poles, staffs, bands etc. and confiscate any unclaimed heirless land in Bengal. They were permitted to confiscate any rent free tenures. They were assured that they will be provided with alms by the people.<sup>2</sup> As long as the Mughal authority was recognized in Bengal, the *Sannyasis* could challenge any opposition to their *sanads* as the *sanad* directive came directly from the Mughal emperor.<sup>3</sup> The *Sannyasis* and *Fakirs* used to enjoy rent free lands tenures as religious grants in the districts Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Malda, Rangpur. The *sanads* granted to them were being threatened as the company had started the process resuming the rent free estates of 1759 and 1764 near Sherpur and in Mymensingh.<sup>4</sup> The company state also started to intrude in their personal space, their religious identity, customs, rights, and privileges. The *Fakirs* who believed in *sufism*<sup>5</sup> made pilgrimages to the *dargahs*, shrines, of Piris, in the districts of North Bengal, dargahs of Bogra- Shah Sultan at Mahasthan and Baba Adam at Adamdighi, the celebrated Adina Mosque, Bari Dargah of Saint Mukdan Shah Jalal at Pandua, Pir Badaruddin Dargah near Hemtabad and Dargah of Mullah Alauddin near Damdama in Dinajpur.<sup>6</sup> The Mughal *sanad* of Prince Shah Shuja had permitted them to undertake such pilgrimages, accompanied by *Julus*, enjoy provisions from *ryots*, as well as *zamindars*. They were exempted from paying taxes on their contributions.<sup>7</sup> The company state banned them from carrying arms, entering Bengal and levying contributions. They resumed the *Sannyasis* and *Fakirs'* charity lands as well. Obviously the *Sannyasis* and the *Fakirs* did not respond to this intrusion kindly. They resisted with all their might. Majnu Shah was their most fearsome leader. However there were some tensions between the *Hindu Sannyasis* and the *Muslim Fakirs*. In 1786, they met in a skirmish and many of the followers of Majnu Shah, the fakir leader were killed.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the mid to late eighteenth century, they made 'raids' in Rangpur, Coochbihar under the leadership of Mujnu Shah, Musa Shah, Chirag Ali and

<sup>2</sup>Atis K., *The Fakir And Sannyasi Uprising*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1992, pp. 10-23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Kolkata: Punthi Pusthak, 2010, p. 159.

<sup>5</sup>J,A Subhan, *Sufism, its saints and shrines*, Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1938.

<sup>6</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.27-28.

<sup>7</sup>Moulavi Abdul Wali, 'Note on the Faquires of Baliyadighi', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No. 2, 1903, pp.:61-65.

<sup>8</sup>West Bengal State Archives, Letter from Champion, Silberis, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1786 to the committee, Committee of Revenue, 3<sup>rd</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> April 1786, Volume 67.

Shobhan Ali<sup>9</sup> who continually refused to acknowledge the Europeans as their masters and continued to rebel until the end of the century when it died a natural death.<sup>10</sup> Silisberis Purnia, Malda, Murshidabad, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Assam, Coochbihar, remained volatile during the period under review.<sup>11</sup>

### **Chuar Disturbances: Causes and Contours**

While the *Sannyasis* and *Fakirs* wreaked havoc in North Bengal, *Chuars* devastated southern Bengal. But it must be clarified that *Chuar* disturbances was not one single event. It was a series of events, consisting of different phases, all different in terms of causes, leaders, participants, motives and outcomes. Ananda Bhattacharyya divided the movement in four phases. The first phase began in 1767 that 'witnessed the outbreak of the revolt of the *Bhumij* masses laid by their chiefs whose traditional rights, privileges, and independence were being violated by the company' followed by the second phase when the *Chuars* broke out in rebellion in January 1771. The third phase began in 1783 and the last in 1798-99.<sup>12</sup> While I have adhered to this model to an extent, I have also divided the rebellion in four phases- the *Chuar* rebellion of 1767 led by the jungle *zamindars*,<sup>13</sup> the *Chuar* rebellion of 1799<sup>14</sup> led by the *paiks*, the *Naik* movement of 1805-1816<sup>15</sup>, and the *Bhumij* movement.<sup>16</sup> In order to understand the economic factor stimulating the *Chuar* disturbance we have to form an understanding of the nature and structure of *Chuar* economy as it had developed since the advent of the breakaway groups of the *Mundas* in the southern part of western Bengal. The migrant *Mundas* acquired forest lands and carved out their village settlements. Since then they came to call themselves the *Bhumij* i.e. the sons of the soil or indigenous. We do not however have solid information about their village organization and nature of their socio-polity. On the basis of available evidences, we learn that from the 16th century, a section of them began to enjoy *Ghatwali* and *Bhuinhari* tenures. During the rule of Akbar, the Mughal emperor, his minister Todarmal conducted the land revenue settlement. Lands were divided by *Todarmali* settlement (1570–1580) into *Bangar*, *Parauti* and *Charchar*, based on the fertility and capacity to pay revenue. Tribal peoples in general tilled the lowest type of *Charchar* lands, which were mostly small in size. Naturally, they did not have the capacity to pay rents. The *Bhumij*s were ruled by semi-independent *zamindars*, who styled themselves as 'native' Rajas. Since the time of the Mughal rule, they had been accustomed to their independence and only paid a nominal tribute to the Mughal emperor. These jungle *zamindars* used to hire *paiks* (village police) from the *Chuar* community to serve as village police. The head *paiks* were known as the *sardars*. In lieu of salary,

<sup>9</sup> WBSA. Letter to Abraham Hilland, Patna, Judicial Criminal 7<sup>th</sup> November – 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1815, Volume 355. WBSA. Revenue Department 24<sup>th</sup> December 1774. WBSA. Letters to the Court of Directors, Judicial Department, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1801.

<sup>10</sup> . WBSA, General Letters to the Court of Directors, Revenue Department, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1793.

<sup>11</sup> WBSA. Letter to Samuel Middleton from G.W Boughton, Nattore, 25<sup>th</sup> Feb 1771, Provincial Council of Murshidabad 18<sup>th</sup> Feb-28<sup>th</sup> March 1771, Volume 4. WBSA Letter to the Collector of Siberris from J. Champion Murshidabad 14<sup>th</sup> October 1784, Committee of Revenue, 27<sup>th</sup> September-28<sup>th</sup> October 1784. WBSA. General Letters to the Court of Directors, Judicial Department, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1801. WBSA, General Letters to the Court of Directors, Revenue Department, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1793.

<sup>12</sup> Ananda Bhattacharyya, "The Chuar Rebellion of 1799", pp.70-72 in Rajkumar Chakrabarti., and Kalyan Chatterjee (eds), *Nation and Its Tribal People: Historical Political and Literary Perspective*, Kolkata: Booksway, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> WBSA. Letter to the Committee of Revenue, from Mr Short, 8<sup>th</sup> January, 1784, Bagri, Committee of Revenue, 19<sup>th</sup> January-5<sup>th</sup> February 1784, Volume 36.

<sup>14</sup> . WBSA, General Letters to the Court of Directors, Revenue Department, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1799. . WBSA, General Letters to the Court of Directors, Revenue Department, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1800.

<sup>15</sup> WBSA. General Letters to the Court of Directors, Judicial Department, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1817.

<sup>16</sup> Amrita Sengupta, 'The Role of 'Unknown' Terrain, Rivers, Hills and Jungles and the *Chuar* Disturbances (1767–1833)', *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)* Vol.IV, No.2, (August 2016), pp. 28-38.

*zamindars* allotted rent free *chakran* lands (land of the employees, also known as the *paikan* lands) to these *paiks*. The *paiks* considered this ownership to be their 'ancient right'. Instead of cultivating the lands, they mostly hired landless *Chuars* to till their lands. They therefore acquired the status of *Paiks'* tenants. These tenants were different from non-tribal peasants who lived in the nearby villages. Even though the *Chuars* did cultivate these *paikan* lands, there was no marked solidarity between them and the non-*Chuar* peasants of the villages. It becomes clear therefore that land and earning from land formed the very basis of *Chuar* economy affecting different such elements as *zamindars*, *paiks* and ordinary tenants. This economic base came under serious threat under the company state's rule. Between 1766–67 they pursued the policy of bringing the *Chuar* region under their revenue network.<sup>17</sup>

In 1776, the board of revenue ordered the then Chief of Burdwan to fix revenue known as the *Mocurrery* with all the jungle *zamindars*. It was not merely an 'aggrandisement of revenue but settlement of rent as an acknowledgment of the company's sovereignty'.<sup>18</sup> But the jungle *zamindars* viewed this as interference in their economic life. They believed that payment of regular revenue and the enhancement of its quantum would be adverse for them. The periodic settlements and the implementation of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 made their condition more precarious and challenging. First of all, the Company state made the settlement directly with the *zamindars* for ten years but with the provision of selling the land of the defaulter. This caused destruction of their *zamindaris*, which passed to non-tribal *zamindars*. Secondly, it brought about the police regulations in the rural Bengal. This rendered the system of hiring 'native' *paiks* obsolete as they came to be replaced by professional police. Thirdly, the government adopted the policy of resuming the rent free *paikan* lands. This created two problems. It left the *paiks* without a means of subsistence. The ordinary *Chuars*, who used to till these lands, lost their source of earning. Thus, the first *Chuar* rebellion broke out in 1767 as a reaction to the enhancement of the revenue of the jungle *zamindars*. When the Company also resumed the *paikan* lands to turn these cultivable rent free lands into revenue generating cultivable lands, the disgruntled *paiks* and ordinary *Chuars* joined hands with the jungle *zamindars* stimulating the second *Chuar* rebellion. The government used brutal force to suppress the *Chuar* rebels of 1799. But they knew they would need the *paiks* to maintain peace and order in the Jungle Mahals. So they made a settlement with the *sardars* of the *paiks*, but hanged most of the ordinary *Chuars*. But the disturbances in the Jungle Mahals did not end there. Soon the *Naiks*, the *sardars* of the *paiks*, rose up again. The Company state again crushed them. Finally, with the *Bhumij* revolt of Ganga Narain and establishment of a separate *pargana* in 1833, the disturbances came to an end. The nature and character of each phase was different, as was the composition and the result. But the economic grievance turned out to be the common factor.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Rangpur Rebellion Inception and Causes**

When Bengal was in turmoil because of the *Chuar* and *Sannyasi-Fakir* rebellions, the *ryots* of Rangpur-Dinajpur grievances' against the revenue farmer Devi Singh took the shape of an insurgency in 1783. Their grievances included forceful imposition of a special tax at anna and a half, confinement and physical abuse of their person on non-payment of revenue etc. These basically bled them out economically; leaving them without any assets for the next year. On top of that they were also forced to pay their revenues in a currency they were not familiar with. It had been changed from *naraini* rupees<sup>20</sup> to French Arcot. And to make matters worse, they were even unable to harvest a simple crop like tobacco to supplement the income. As a result, the *ryots* were forced to sell their women and children. But when it became impossible to do so anymore, they broke into a rebellion. This was the beginning of the Rangpur rebellion of 1783.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> WBSA. Letter from J Pearce, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1785, Midnapore, Committee of Revenue Volume 53, Part 2, 4<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> April 1785.

<sup>19</sup> Amrita Sengupta, 'The Role of 'Unknown' Terrain" pp.28-38.

<sup>20</sup> Coin named after zamindar Narnarain.

The revolt started at Beedaltur in Bamandanga *pargana* and Cornarmonah in Tapa. They chose Drijinarain, or Dhirajnarain as their *nawab* and prepared a joint petition. Kena Sardar was one of the foremost leaders of the insurrection.<sup>21</sup> They pledged to stop paying revenue. It was their 'everyday form of struggle' but it was not covert<sup>22</sup>. It had by then become an overt form of resistance. A body of rebels marched to Dakhalyganj in Kakinaparagana in Salmari, released the prisoners there. They also captured a few amlas.<sup>23</sup> At Kishoreganj in Cajirhat, they attacked the *cutchery*(office and granary), burnt it down and seized zamindars Ramakanta and Shyaam Choudhuri.<sup>24</sup> A party of ryots also plundered and burnt the *cutchery* of Govindaram, beat him and left him to die. They then proceeded to Dimla along with Drijinarain. This may be called as a cycle of making petitions, rioting, arson, plunder, loot and murder. On 11<sup>th</sup> of Bengali month Magh, they entered Dimla. *Burkandazes*( footmen) dishonourably fired on them after assuring them of their safety. Three of the ryots fell. In retaliation, they killed a *burkandaze*. They subsequently attacked the *cutchery* of Gouri Mohan, plundered it, including the papers and later decapitated him.<sup>25</sup> Then they went to Bhawaniganj and plundered the rice *gola* (Where grain was kept.).<sup>26</sup> The revolt spread to Kakima Tapa, then to Dinajpur's Dhee Jumla. Kriparam Bose became one of the insurgents primary target. On 19<sup>th</sup>Magh, 1000 ryots attacked the *cutchery*, beat up Kriparam Bose, plundered the *cutchery* and stole the papers.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile the Rangpur insurgents murdered Gokul Mehta at Tapa. It was probably a 'second general revolt'.<sup>28</sup> The insurgents divided themselves into several groups.<sup>29</sup> Some even tried to secure the assistance of the ryots of CoochBihar, Dinajpur and Andewah.<sup>30</sup> They continued to be a source of worry for Goodland. They even killed a *subedar* (Warrant officer).<sup>31</sup> On 8<sup>th</sup>Falgun they had another skirmish with another *subedar*. After this engagement, they went to Patong, which was probably their last battle. The last one was fought on 22<sup>nd</sup> February.<sup>32</sup> During the first phase of the rebellion, Richard Goodland, the collector of Rangpur spared the lives of the rebels. However during the second phase, presumably orchestrated by the *busneahs* (village headmen), they were publicly hanged after the revolt was suppressed. After the revolt was suppressed the government formed a commission under the leadership of J. Paterson to discover the causes of the insurgency. Drijinarain, the landlord who styled himself the *nawab* of the insurgency was expelled from Rangpur.<sup>33</sup>Hareram *gomastha* was punished for oppressing the *ryots*. Devi Singh was imprisoned for some time but eventually released.<sup>34</sup>

Thus during the years 1770-1800, Bengal witnessed three very important upheavals. The participants were different from one another. Their goals and targets were also different. The nature of these movements would be dealt in the next section. These rebels used multiple forms of defiance. From praying to the Government to petitioning to them, then covertly rebelling to overtly revolting, from every day forms of resistance to more violent forms of eruptions, the rebels took various methods to achieve

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<sup>21</sup> WBSA.Revenue Department Proceedings 27<sup>th</sup> March 1787.

<sup>22</sup> James Scott coined these terms for peasant insurrections.

<sup>23</sup> WBSA.Committee of Revenue Proceedings 29<sup>th</sup> December 1783.

<sup>24</sup> WBSA, J. Patterson's letter,. Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>WBSA.Testimony, Revenue Department Proceedings29<sup>th</sup> March 1787.

<sup>26</sup>WBSA.Letter from Richard Goodland, Committee of Revenue Proceedings 27<sup>th</sup> January 1783.

<sup>27</sup>.Kaviraj,1972:28.

<sup>28</sup>WBSA.Letter from Richard Goodland, Committee of Revenue Proceedings 24<sup>th</sup> March 1783.

<sup>29</sup>WBSA. Committee of Revenue 24<sup>th</sup> March 1783.

<sup>30</sup>WBSA.Committee of Revenue Proceedings 6<sup>th</sup> February 1783.

<sup>31</sup>WBSA.Letter from Richard Goodland, Committee of Revenue Proceedings 24<sup>th</sup> March 1783.

<sup>32</sup>WBSA.Testimony, Committee of Revenue Proceedings 29<sup>th</sup> December 1783.

<sup>33</sup> WBSA. Enclosure from the collector of Rangpore. Committee of Revenue, 2md-25<sup>th</sup> May 1785, Volume 54,

<sup>34</sup> WBSA. Letter to John Shore from Cornwallis , Fort William December 1<sup>st</sup> 1788, Board of Revenue proceedings 13-20 January 1789. See also Letter to M. G. Hutch. See also Letter to McDowell, the collector of Rangpore, Board of Revenue proceedings 13-20 January 1789..

their goals. Three major rebellions occurred during the period 1760-1800. We shall briefly compare and contrast the nature of their rebellion and their forms of defiance.

### A comparative Study

The *chuars* had rebelled in 4 phases. The jungle *zamindars* orchestrated the first phase. It, thus, must be noted that the disturbances in the Jungle Mahals started with prayers and petitions which can be labelled as a primary form of resistance. Later it turned into an everyday form of resistance. The jungle *zamindars* refused to pay revenue at an enhanced rate on various pretences. However, the Government viewed it as a rebellion and dealt with them accordingly. Later the *paiks* and *chuars* joined in. Their collective action escalated into collective violence, including arson, murders, plunder and banditry. Thus initially, it was a covert form of rebellion. Then their rebellion became more open. In the second phase, the *chuars* and *paiks* openly rebelled. The *zamindars* joined in later. The Naik and Bhumij rebellion, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> phases were respectively, an open and overt rebellion as well. This can be compared with Rangpur rebellion, where the rebels initially sought redress by prayer and petitions, then it escalated to non-payment of revenue and finally to collective violence. However, their collective action turned violent, and they eventually killed *gomasta* Gourimohan Chowdhury. Rangpur rebellion, quite like the *chuar* rebellion, initially had demonstrated signs of everyday forms of resistance. Then it shifted to a more open and overt form of resistance. It is believed, “those who rebelled were able to do so because they had illicit means of violence”<sup>35</sup>. The Rangpur rebels were peasants. They were not accustomed to being violent. They did not even have resources for inflicting violence. However, during the *dhing*, we find evidence of such brutality. The rebels did not use physical force on the intermediaries because they had means to do so but because they had no other alternative left to urge the Government to provide them with redress. Their prayers and petitions had failed. They had no other method but to openly, overtly demonstrate their defiance. The *sannyasi* and *fakirs*, on the other hand, never tried to negotiate with the Government or attempted to pray or make petitions to them. *Sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was an open rebellion from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that the English officers were quick to deem the *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, and the *chuars* as bandits and criminals.

There was no large-scale popular support for the *chuars*. There was no alliance between the ordinary peasants and the *chuars*. However, there appears to be some connection between the ordinary people and the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and the former's reluctance to cooperate with the Company's troops. The Company troops were entirely corrupt themselves and were infamous for committing grave atrocities including plundering villages.<sup>36</sup> Although it is too early to speculate, it is possible that the ordinary inhabitants did not always trust them either. However, despite their reluctance to fully cooperate with the troops and spies, I have tried to demonstrate that Hobsbawm's social banditry was virtually absent in eighteenth-century Bengal. The rebels and outlaws indulged in banditry and robbery, but they shared no solidarity with the peasants.

We may also similarly infer that neither the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* nor the peasants were anti-state. They all looked toward the state for redress. Of course, the definition of 'state' and whom they perceived to be a legitimate authority differed from a rebel to rebel. While the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* considered Rani Bhawani to be the legitimate authority, the Rangpur peasants asked the Company state to intervene and ease their burden. It is safe to assume that the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* rebelled against the Government's policy to restrict their movements and their habit of imposing taxes wherever they went and the *chuars* fought against the Government's decision to resume their *chakran lands*<sup>37</sup>, i.e. their rent-free lands and the Government's decision to abolish the traditional village system, thus stripping them of their means

<sup>35</sup>Timothy Brook, “Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China” (review), *China Review International*, Vol. 9, No.2, (Fall,2002), p. 532.

<sup>36</sup>Archival Materials at WBSA will attest to the fact that these men used to plunder and possess the materials looted by the *Sannyasis* and *fakirs*.

<sup>37</sup>WBSA, Letter to Hastings from Anderson, Croftes, Bogles, dated 25<sup>th</sup> March 1778, Calcutta, 1<sup>st</sup>- 28<sup>th</sup> April 1778, Revenue Governor General in Council Proceedings, Vol.38.

of livelihood. The Rangpur peasants directed their insurgency toward the revenue farmer Devi Singh, an intermediary between the Government and the ordinary peasants. They acknowledged the company state as the legitimate rulers and sought redressal and justice from them. This made them less of a threat. This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that not once do we see the mention of the words like 'bandits' 'robbers' or 'banditti' in the context of the Rangpur peasants; terms the Government was all too happy to use for the *sannyasis*, *fakirs*, *chuars* as well as for the 'common outlaws'.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, from the beginning of the Rangpur disturbances and until the very end of the first phase, the Company state was reluctant to use brutal force against the Rangpur rebels. Richard Goodland, the collector of Rangpur, had no doubt that the rebels had no legitimate causes, but he was not prepared to send a military force against them; he preferred peaceful means and wanted to be as 'lenient' as possible. This 'benevolence' did not last for long. He too was quick to respond to the resistance with violence once he realised that peasants were in no mood to stop.

On the contrary, when the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* rebelled and wreaked havoc across the countryside, the Company state was not only relentless in suppressing the insurgency but also in executing as many *sannyasis* and *fakirs* as possible, not even sparing the innocent bystanders.

Similarly, when the *chuars* rebelled at the close of the eighteenth century, the Company sent battalions to annihilate them. They hanged as many ordinary *chuars* as they could find. Goodland wanted to execute a few 'ringleaders' of the Rangpur insurgency in order to make an example out of them. He was more forgiving toward the ordinary ryots. However, in the case of the *chuar* rebellion, the ordinary *chuars* were not spared. They were openly executed while the jungle *zamindars* were not. The latter were spared so that they could become the Company state's allies and help them to quell such disturbances, should such disturbances occur in the future. Thus, we may conclude that as long as the Government believed the rebellion to be a mere disturbance and not a threat to their sovereignty, they were willing to compromise. When it threatened to topple their Government, their benevolence and leniency vanished. Moreover, besides, they needed the peasants as chief producers of revenue. They negotiated with the jungle chiefs and *zamindars* because the Government required their assistance. Ordinary *chuars* and *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were comparatively expendable people. Thus, the Government considered all the rebels to be criminals even though they did not deem every rebel a bandit.

It may be said that Rangpur rebellion was unique in eighteenth-century Bengal history. It was an insurgency orchestrated by the peasants, it was for the peasants and was comprised of the peasants. It can be said it was a peasant insurgency. The disgruntled warrior ascetics orchestrated the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion. The tribal people initiated the *chuar* rebellion that occurred in South West Bengal - Jungle Mahals at the close of the century. There were some peasants involved with the disturbances; but not enough to make it a peasant insurgency. The revolt of the *chuars* was not so much about the entrance of "diku" (Meaning Outsiders) in their private sphere as was about the question of means of subsistence. Besides the question of their 'ancient rights' was directly linked to their livelihood and in a way, it shared many of its traits with other resistance movements of the same period. The question of colonial intrusion into their social lives was never an issue with them as was the colonial intrusion into their economic sphere. So even this rebellion at best can be called anti-Company state.

Specific grievances indeed drove the rebels of Bengal in the mid to late eighteenth century. The fear of land deprivation played a part in the *chuar* and *paikan* movement. Similarly, the fear of being deprived of their means of subsistence and hunger played a role in the Rangpur and *chuar* movements. Frustration and anger directed toward the Company state played a role in *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion. The loss of *sanads* was a case of 'relative deprivation' for them. All of these grievances eventually led to 'collective outbursts'. We can only speculate whether the hope for a 'material benefit' enticed them to rebel.

There was an underlying tragedy to all these protest movements. From the Government's standpoint, the peasants received everything they demanded. However, on a fundamental level, nothing

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<sup>38</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*.

changed for them. On the whole, the system remained the same. The material benefits that Rangpur peasants achieved during and after the rebellion were minimal. They were allowed to pay in Naraini rupees, and the Company dropped some of the extra taxes. They also 'punished' some of the intermediaries who were found guilty of cruelty. Drijinarain paid for his involvement in the rebellion by being banished. While the peasants themselves were spared, the *busneahs*, the village headmen who rebelled during the second phase were all slaughtered. The tragedy of this particular peasant resistance movement does not lay in the fact that it failed. It did not. Some of their demands were met. And a commission was indeed set up by the Company to determine the causes of the rebellion to enable the Company state to prevent disturbances of this kind in the future. This was supposedly one of their gains. However, the revolt was stripped of any political legitimacy. It was either alleged by the Company state that the peasants had no grievances, or that they were violent by nature or they had been instigated by Drijinarain and their supposedly more conniving *busneahs*.

The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and the *chuars* had nothing to offer in terms of revenue. Their presence, their resistance was an obstacle to the collection of revenue. Hence, it did not matter whether that had any legitimate cause for rebellion. It did not matter that their 'banditry' was an expression of their defiance and their desperation. They were a nuisance and needed to be crushed. However, the Rangpur peasants could not be treated that way. They may have caused a great deal of chaos. However, the Government knew that they must put up a guise of appeasement if they wanted to ensure next year's revenue collections. The Rangpur Commission headed by J. Paterson was set up to ensure that. We do not see any attempt on their part to appease the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*.

In the case of the *chuars*, because of their local knowledge of the terrain, the Company state was willing to cooperate with them. Even after the second phase of the rebellion, when the ordinary *chuars* were suppressed, they kept the *paiks* and the jungle *zamindars* as village police only because they had a vast knowledge of the area. The Government had no such need for the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*.

However, the ultimate tragedy was their inability to document their resistance movements as legitimate, spontaneous and completely independent of 'elite' influence. The Company state strategically appeased the Rangpur peasants. The jungle *zamindars* and *Sardar paiks* received amnesty and other material benefits. The history of *chuar* and *sannyasi* and *fakirs* remain a tale of failure and loss.

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion it may be said that the years 1770-1800 were a turbulent period in the history of Bengal. Three major rebellions took place. They occurred in response to the overall changes made in Bengal but they were different in nature, character, goals and target. Despite the rebels' valiant efforts, the Company state came out stronger than ever.