

## Role of the Fakir Leaders in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal

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### Abstract

*In this paper, the author has delineated various aspects of the fakir rebellion of the eighteenth century, but focusing mostly on the role played by the fakir leaders in the fakir rebellion and how the skirmishes fizzled out after their deaths. The author has described the ethnic roots of the fakirs, and in turn the fakir leaders, their causes of discontent, the manner in which they provided leadership and the ultimate suppression of the rebels.*

**Keywords** Chirag Ali, fakirs, Madariyas, Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, Sobhan Ali, Tipu Shah.

### Existing Historiography

There is no dearth of literature on the Sannyasi and Fakir rebellions. Three major stands have been taken by Atis.K. Dasgupta, Ananda Bhattacharyya and Suranjan Chatterjee. Later William Pinch made his mark. Atis K.Dasgupta, in his book<sup>1</sup> and article,<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> finds the revolt to be a popular peasant revolt. According to him 'the sannyasis and fakirs were not dacoits'.<sup>4</sup>

Ananda Bhattacharyya's analysis is a shift from this popular peasant revolt model popularized 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> There is a dearth of scholarly works on the fakir leaders such as Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, and Chirag Ali. Thus I have attempted to discuss the role played by the leaders in the fakir revolt.

### Research Methodology

In this article, a number of sources have been used. The present author has sifted through doctoral theses, books, articles, poems, ballads, literary sources in addition to a number of archival documents from West Bengal State Archives (Kolkata) and National Archives of India (New Delhi).

### Introduction

The eighteenth century in Bengal witnessed numerous uprisings. These uprisings were orchestrated by the peasants (*Rangpur Dhing*), the *adivasis* (Jungle Mahals) and the religious mendicants (*sannyasis* and *fakirs*). In this article we shall discuss the fakir rebellion. It was led by Majnu Shah. It continued for several

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<sup>1</sup>Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprising*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi, 1992

<sup>2</sup>Atis K. Dasgupta, 'The Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion', *Social Scientist*, Vol.10, No.1, 1982, pp. 44-55.

<sup>3</sup>Suranjan Chatterjee, 'New Reflections on the Sannyasi, Fakir, and Peasant War,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.19, No.4, (January,1984), pp.2-13.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, 'Sannyasi-Fakir Uprising in Bengal in the Second Half of the 18th Century', Unpublished PhD thesis, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, 1991.

<sup>6</sup>William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics And Indian Empires*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

decades. It only fizzled out after his death. Karim Shah and Tipu Shah started a new religious movement known as the *Paganpanthi* revolt in the early nineteenth century. That is a discussion better be left for another day.

### **Who were the Fakirs?**

The *Madariyas* were subdivided into *Diwangan* (Madari *fakirs* in a fit of divine madness), *Khademan* (caretaker of tombs), *Taliban* (seeker of truth), and *Ashiqan* (lovers of religion).<sup>7</sup> The original *guru* of *Madariyas*, on the other hand, was Badi-u-din Shah—I Madar (1315-1436). He travelled from Arabia and Syria and finally settled in India, preaching Islam. He travelled to Gujarat, Ajmer, Kanauj, Kalpi, Jaunpur, Lucknow, and Bengal. According to local legends, one may trace his history back to Madaripur of Faridpur *zilla*, and Madaribari and Madarsha of Chittagong. He had supposedly converted many Hindus as well. Their descendants celebrate 'Madar er Bashtola' festival. In North India also, we hear about the preaching of Shah-i-Madar. It is debatable whether they ever set foot in Bengal, but their followers were indeed active in Bengal. Shah-i-Madar's follower, Shah Alakh, used to reside in Gaur or Shah-i-Nou. He was probably the sole representative of *Madariyas* in Bengal. In the sixteenth century, a poetry anthology called *Sunyo Puran* was written. In a poem titled '*Niranjanerrushma*' we find the word *dum Madar*, a word 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 chanting. In the seventeenth century, we found the mention of Sultan Hussain Murihayah Bar Hinah. In 1658 he received a *sanad* from Shah Shuja, the son of Sultan Shah Jahan.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps pertinent to mention that a *pir* from Baghdad had established a *darga* 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*, *debatter*, *brahmattor*, *pirpal*, *mataran*, and *bhagattar*. These were religious grants made out of one's holdings. In Mymensingh, Bagura, Dhaka, Rangpur *pirs* remained active.<sup>10</sup> There were about fifty rent free holdings around Baoli, village Barabazar, Dampara, Pandua, *hat* Barabazar, Dhilpur, Tenguri, Rainaid.<sup>11</sup>

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*.<sup>12</sup> 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* used to provide these religious grants. These *fakirs* were celibate. They used to teach their *chelas*. Upon the demise of the *gurus*, the *chelas* usually took over the clan. Those who could not manage to get any lands used to beg 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 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.<sup>13</sup> In terms of organisation, the *Sufi fakirs*, and Dasnami *sannyasis* (another Hindu religious mendicant clan) shared a closeness, not only in outer appearance but also in their core philosophy. This commonality permeated their 'mutual relationship'.<sup>14</sup> During their rebellion against the Company state, Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, Chirag Ali, Karim Shah, Tipu Shah Etc., provided the leadership.

<sup>7</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed. *Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bengal, Jamini Mohan Ghosh Revisited*, Delhi: Manohar, 2014, p.11.

<sup>8</sup>Mohammad Inamul Haq, *Bange Sufir Prabhab*, Kolkata: Vivekananda Book Center, 2012, pp. 63-65.

<sup>9</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, *Madari Silsila*, Kolkata: Obobhas, 2010, p.82.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.86-89.

<sup>11</sup>Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprising*, pp.10-23.

<sup>12</sup>Francis Hamilton-Buchanan, *An account of the district of Purnea, 1809-10*, Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1928, p.192.

<sup>13</sup>National Archives of India, 18th January – 31st May 1773 Foreign Secret, S-NO 23, Vol.9.

<sup>14</sup>Jadunath Sarkar, *A History Of Dasnami Naga Sannyasis*, Allahabad: Mahanirvani, 1984, p.90.

### ***The Causes of the Fakir Rebellion***

During the reign of the Mughal emperors, the emperors used to grant *sanads* to the itinerant religious mendicants such as the Hindu *Sannyasis* and the Muslim *Fakirs*. They also gave the religious mendicants certain privileges. The *sanads* granted to these men 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 would be provided with alms or provisions by the people. No cess or contribution will be levied on them.<sup>15</sup> As long as the Mughal authority was recognised in Bengal, the religious mendicants could challenge any opposition to their *sanads* as these came directly from the Mughal emperor. Secondly, the *sanads* exempted the religious mendicants from paying any contribution to political authority.<sup>16</sup> Thus they enjoyed rent-free lands tenures as religious grants in the districts of Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Malda, and Rangpur. In addition they also acquired rent-free lands. None interfered with those who lived off these charity lands and led a reclusive life.<sup>17</sup> The new Company government was unwilling to allow this. This culminated in the Regulations of 1788.

According to Khondkar Fazli Rabi in *Hakikat- Mussalman-i-Bangala ,madat-i-mash, aima, nazoomatfakiran, nazr-i-dargah, nazr-i-hazrat, piran, brahmattor, mehtam, debattor*,<sup>18</sup> and *sibattor*<sup>19</sup> had been explicitly granted to Muslims and Hindu mendicants for religious purposes. The Amini Commission estimated the lands amounted to Rs.43 lakhs. If the revenues of Bihar were added, the revenue could go up to a crore.<sup>20</sup> 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 religious mendicants thoroughly resented it. One of their primary sources of subsistence was at stake. The *sanads* granted to them were being threatened as the Company government had started the process of resuming the rent-free estates of 1759 and 1764 near Sherpur and in Mymensingh.<sup>21</sup>

The Company state also started to intrude in their space, their religious identity, customs, rights, and privileges; features common to both the *sannyasis* and *fakir* was the annual round of pilgrimage to their sacred places. The *fakirs* who believed in *Sufii* deology<sup>22</sup> made pilgrimages to the *dargahs*, shrines, of *pirs*, in the districts of North Bengal, *dargahs* of Bogra- Shah Sultan at Mahasthan and Baba Aadam<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> The Mughal *sanad* of Prince Shah Shuja had permitted them to undertake such pilgrimages, accompanied by *jalus*, enjoy provisions from *ryots*, as well as *zamindars*. They were exempted from paying taxes on their contributions.<sup>25</sup> The government wanted to control these pilgrimages and put a stop to their practice of carrying arms and levying 'contributions'. The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* did not respond to this kind of intrusion kindly. They resisted with all their might.

We find a letter from Majnu Shah to Rani Bhawani that acknowledged her as the rightful ruler. He wanted her to provide them with justice against the East India Company. This letter encouraged the *fakirs* into rebelling in the mid-eighteenth-century Bengal. They viewed Rani Bhawani as the legitimate ruler, not the Company state. Thus, they would start to appear in Bengal in early 1773 in the northern districts

<sup>15</sup>Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi*, pp.10-23.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>West Bengal State Archives, Raja Shitab Roy's observation, 3<sup>rd</sup> August-30<sup>th</sup> August 1771, Comptrolling Committee of Revenue, Vol.2.

<sup>18</sup>*Debattor*- religious grants made to God.

<sup>19</sup>*Shibattor*-religious grants made to Lord Shiva.

<sup>20</sup>Atis Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi*, pp.10-23.

<sup>21</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Kolkata: Punthi Pushtak, 2010, p.159.

<sup>22</sup>J.A. Subhan, *Sufism, its Saints and Shrines*, Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House 1938.

<sup>23</sup>He was a great Muslim saint or dervish, known as Baba Aadam.

<sup>24</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.25-28.

<sup>25</sup>Maulavi Abdul Wali, 'Note on the Fakirs of Baliya Dighi in Dinajpur', *The Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.72, Part 3, No.1 and 2, 1903, pp. 61-65.

like Rangpur, Ghoraghat, Silberis, Cooch Behar and Purnea, in high numbers as a protest.<sup>26</sup> The protests took the form of 'raids' in the Company state governed areas.

### **The Fakir Raids**

In 1771, the 'raids' started at Ghoraghat. Lieutenant Fulham wanted to oppose them. However, even at that time, owing to the continuance call from the place on every incursion of the fakirs or other tribes of lawless plunderers in several districts of Rangpore, Edrackpore, Baharhund, Dinajpore and Rajshahi, our force is so very inconsiderable that we are not able to protect the ryots from the oppression of the dacoits who notwithstanding the severe example which had been made amongst them, continue their former evil and pernicious practices and encouraged by our want of proper force, do considerable mischief.<sup>27</sup>

From Ghoraghat to Silveries,<sup>28</sup> during the period 1774-1800, they made as many as 90 raids. On 18<sup>th</sup> January 1774, the *fakirs* assembled at Messidah to demand the payment of a debt from the *zamindars*. The same year, on 10<sup>th</sup> December, they arrived at Ghoraghat, Rangpur under Majnu Shah's leadership to demand money from the peasants on 'pretence of collecting balances'.<sup>29</sup> In 1773-1774, the Lakhipur *zamindar* had difficulty entering and establishing his authority due to Majnu Shah and his 100 men entering his *parganas*, fully armed to demand payment of a debt due from the deposed *zamindar*. On not receiving a satisfactory reply, Majnu Shah dispatched 200 of his men to seize the *zamindar* who had to flee. All the *zamindar's* officials had to leave as well. This hampered the collections.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, 2 years later, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1776, Majnu Shah arrived at Mahasthangarh to levy contributions. They also went to Bagura for the same purpose. They crossed the river Kasai (Cosi) to go westward on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1776. On 19<sup>th</sup> November, there was a confrontation between Majnu Shah and the Company troops at Malda. Surviving the skirmish, on 10<sup>th</sup> December Majnu Shah appeared at Kuttah to levy contributions. On 7<sup>th</sup> April 1778, he once again appeared at Messideh-Booleahand for the same purpose. On March 1781, he extorted money from Chandra Sekhar Acharya, *azamindari* official. That December, on 24<sup>th</sup>, he went to Rangpur, then to Rajshahi to levy contributions from the peasants.<sup>31</sup> The *fakirs* assembled in Dinajpur that year. We hear about a feud between *fakir* leader Khejur Ali and the *zamindar*.<sup>32</sup> Next year he made several additional 'raids.' On 3<sup>rd</sup> January he appeared at Bhattoreah to levy contributions, followed by his plunder at Jaisindhu (twice) and Siealand on 15<sup>th</sup> January and 29<sup>th</sup> January, 'maltreatment' of peasants by the *fakirs* at Bhattoreah on 15<sup>th</sup> August. On 7<sup>th</sup> June they arrived at Dinajpur to attend a religious fair. However, on 26 July, they appeared at Amrool to levy contributions. Later that year, on 11<sup>th</sup> October 1782, they arrived at Kisanpur and plundered the ryots. On 10<sup>th</sup> December they levied contributions from peasants of Sherpur. On 20<sup>th</sup> December they extorted money from Paradanga, Bhitteband. They continued their raids at Murshidabad, Moraudbaug (Muradbag). On 13<sup>th</sup> January 1783, Majnu Shah appeared at Jaffarshahi. The ryots felt terrorised. On 15<sup>th</sup> March they took Rs. 500-1000 from the merchants and terrorised the weavers at Nichindipur, near Malda. They continued their depredations in Jaffarshahi and Mymensingh.<sup>33</sup>

In October 1784, on 28<sup>th</sup>, they arrived at Silberis to levy contributions. They made a similar raid on 8<sup>th</sup> November. On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1785, they attacked the treasury at Mahasthangarh. On 9<sup>th</sup> September they attended an annual meeting. They raided Alepsingh and Mymensingh on 5<sup>th</sup> January 1786. The same year they committed various forms of depredations and made raids at Bhowaniganj, Nawabganj, Jagdippur, Jangipur, Gheelahary, Silberis, Beejnagar, and Kuttah. Lieut. Col. Anslie had to make a move

<sup>26</sup>NAI, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1773 Foreign Secret Progs, Vol.9.

<sup>27</sup>WBSA, Letter to Samuel Middleton from John Grose, Rangpore dated 21<sup>st</sup> July 1771, 28<sup>th</sup> March-18<sup>th</sup> July 1771, Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.4.

<sup>28</sup>WBSA, Letter to Samuel Middleton from G.W. Broughton dated 25<sup>th</sup> February 1771, 28<sup>th</sup> March-18<sup>th</sup> July 1771, Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.4.

<sup>29</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed. *Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion*, Appendix 2.

<sup>30</sup>WBSA, Statement of Cunango, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773-31<sup>st</sup> March 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue, Murshidabad, Vol.1.

<sup>31</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed., *Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion*, Appendix 2.

<sup>32</sup>WBSA, 2<sup>nd</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> May 1781, Committee of Revenue, Vol.3.

<sup>33</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed., *Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion*, Appendix 2.

against Majnu Shah that year because of his activities.<sup>34</sup>In 14<sup>th</sup>October 1784, Majnu with his 250 men mounted camels and horses crossedBetteah to make inroads into Silberis.<sup>35</sup>

They made fresh raids in 1787. On 20<sup>th</sup>July 1787, they seized and beat the collectors and renters of Rajshahi. They also plundered Mymensingh and Alepsingh. The *fakirs* attacked Phitkerah on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1787. Next year new raids commenced yet again. Pheragul Shah appeared in Shikapur on 23<sup>rd</sup>January to attack the *kachari*. The *fakirs* then appeared in Rangpur on 12<sup>th</sup> February, to collect contributions from the peasants. Majnu Shah did not stay quiet in this period. He made an appearance in Baikanthapur on 12<sup>th</sup> February to levy contributions. He also made an appearance at Tajpur at Dinajpur on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1788 to obtain contributions. They plundered Jaffarshahi on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1790. In 1791, both Chirag Ali and Roshan Ali appeared on the scene. They plundered and levied contributions from the people of Diggapara, Kazirhat, and Rangpur.PheragulShah appeared at Mymensingh on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1792, to levy contributions. The *fakirs* also extorted Rs. 375 from the *gomastas* of Cooty at Beertara on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1792. On 25<sup>th</sup> May they seized and detained the *ryots* of Teracordah.<sup>36</sup> From June 1793- December 1793, they made as many as 10 raids in Pandua, Thana Ranishankar, Mussedeh, Bhowra, Noagaon, Surjapur, Purnea.<sup>37</sup> Chirag Ali was quite active during this period. So was Shamsershad.

They later plundered Rangpur despite the presence of a *jamadar*, a *havildar*, *2naiks*, 24 *sepoys*, 2/2 *cross* from Company's *kuthi* at Ramaganj and fled into the Morung country. The leader of these 400 men was once again Sobhan Shah.

Despite subduing the *fakirs*, the *fakirs* came back and committed robberies in Dinajpur. They plundered the inhabitants and hid in the mountains. At that time *fakirs* under Behum took up residence in Pansualy jungle of the Nizam town. Theyentered Surjapur district and plundered the inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> It is pertinent to mention that at that critical juncture, Motigiri killed Chirag Ali. Sobhan Ali was Chirag Ali's *chela*, and he took the initiative to plunder after Chirag Ali's death.<sup>39</sup>

In 1797, the *fakirs* appeared in Dinajpur, and in 1798 they appeared in Dehut. By the end of the century, they had made their last raid in 'Keitmool' in Dinajpur. During these years they pillaged many places. They attacked and plundered the house of Bunderam Pramanik. They seized Bhagwan Sahu, a *talukdar*.<sup>40</sup> In fact on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1794, some of the Company's *kuthis* were looted by 300 *fakirs*. Sobhan Ali led the assault and later fled to Morung. They had arrived on horses, armed with swords. They bound the *amla* and looted the *kuthis*. A *barkandaz* was gravely wounded. Capt. Welsh stationed at the northern boundaries were instructed to oppose them.<sup>41</sup>By the end of the century, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were eliminated from Bengal by 'judicious position of the troops stationed in Purnea, Dinajpur, Rangpur.' Awards were also offered for the apprehensions of these 'marauders.' They were eventually captured and committed for trial.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Role of the Leader Majnu Shah**

The *sannyasi* and *fakir* raids continued to 'devastate' the Company state until the end of the century. One of the main reasons for their vigor was the leadership provided by their leader Majnu Shah. The term Majnu means a lunatic while the term Shah signifies a king. So, Majnu Shah means the mad king. According to Khan Amanat Ullah Chowdhuri's *Cooch Beharer Itihas*,<sup>43</sup> his real name was Md. Bakr Ali, a landowner of

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>WBSA, Letter to the Collector of Silberis, from J. Champion, Murshidabad dated 14<sup>th</sup> October 1784, 27<sup>th</sup> September-28<sup>th</sup> October 1784, Committee of Revenue, Vol.46.

<sup>36</sup>Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed., *Sannyasi and Fakir*, Appendix 2.

<sup>37</sup>WBSA, 31<sup>st</sup> May-7<sup>th</sup> June 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.2.

<sup>38</sup>WBSA, Letter from Raja of Nepal to the Collector of Purnea, 2<sup>nd</sup> January- 30<sup>th</sup> January 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.17.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>WBSA, Letter to Bird, from Bruce, dated 18<sup>h</sup> June 1794, Cooch Bihar 13<sup>th</sup> June-8<sup>th</sup> August 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.13.

<sup>41</sup>WBSA, Letter to Bird, from Udney, Malda dated 25<sup>th</sup> June 1794, 13<sup>th</sup> June-8<sup>th</sup> August 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.13.

<sup>42</sup>WBSA, Letters dated 20<sup>th</sup> February, 24 April 1800, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1793- 30<sup>th</sup> September 1802, General Letters to the Committee of Revenue, Judicial. See also WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Smith, dated 9<sup>th</sup> December 1794, Coochbihar, 21<sup>st</sup> November-19<sup>th</sup> December 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.16.

<sup>43</sup>Khan Amanat Ullah Chowdhuri, *Cooch Beharer Itihas*, Cooch Behar: Cooch Behar State Press, 1936 in Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*.

Rangpur. He was a descendant of the Mughals. According to Ranjit Samadar, the Company deliberately kept his real identity hidden lest it should rally more followers and become a symbol of resistance in North India as well.<sup>44</sup> According to Jamini Mohan Ghosh, he belonged to *Burhana* sect of *Madari* order. They had their headquarters at Makhanpur.<sup>45</sup> One of his strongholds was Madarganj near Goail.<sup>46</sup> Another of his stronghold was Mahastan where he had a fort.<sup>47</sup> Depicted in our descriptions as both a monster and a prophet of sorts, Majnu Shah was undoubtedly a charismatic leader. We find conflicting pieces of evidence of these ruthless rampages and his desire not to involve the *ryots* in his war with the Company. He would request Rani Bhawani of Rajshahi to provide them with protection as for centuries the *fakirs* had worshipped God and the shrines without oppressing anyone, living on charity and felt it unreasonable that at present they were being prevented from doing so. He looked up to Rani Bhawani as the true queen of the land, 'the ruler of the country' who ensures their welfare.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, the Naib of Cottah (Kottah)<sup>49</sup> *pargana's* testimonials portrayed him and his men as plunderers whose severity had resulted in the desertion of lands by the *ryots*.<sup>50</sup> This, of course, corresponds with the East India Company's portrayal of him. It is said the ancestors of the present Raja of Gauripur in Assam had to leave Karabari, their original home, on account of the depredations of Majnu. He was allegedly in league with Bhawani Pathak, Devi Choudhurani and their band of 'dacoits'.<sup>51</sup> Majnu himself admitted, 'Formerly the fakirs begged in separate and detached parties, but now we are collected and beg together.'<sup>52</sup> The Chief of Provincial Council at Dinajpur, Mr Gladwin wrote, 'Majnu did not come this time attended merely by a Bengal rabble but had with him a number of well-armed Rajpoot.' Gladwin added he had 25 disbanded sepoy in his band.<sup>53</sup> Thus it is evident that Majnu Shah's party had both Rajputs and sepoy in it. Thus, most of the official Company state documents portray him as a monster and the oppressor of the weak. Panchanan Das in *Majnur Kabita* describes his oppressive ways:

*Shuno shobe ek bhabe notun rachana.*  
*Bangala nasherhetu Majnu barona.*  
*Kalantok Jom betak ke bole fakir.*  
*Jar bhoye raja kaape, praja nohe shtir.*  
*Saheb subhar moto cholonsutham.*  
*Agey chole jhanda, baan, jhaul nishaan.*  
*Uth gadha ghora haati koto bogda sangoti.*  
*Jegaan telenga saaj dekhite bhoy oti.*  
*Choudike ghorarsaajtirborkandaji.*  
*Majnu tajir por jeno morod gaji.*  
*Dol bol dekhiya sob akkel hoilo gum.*  
*Thakite ek rojer poth pora gelo dhum.*  
*Boroi dushkitohoilopalaibokotha.*  
*Mon diyashunsobhelokerobostha.*  
*Je din jekhaneja'yakorenaakhra.*  
*Ekebare shotadhikbondhukerdehora.*  
*Shohoje bangalilokoboshyobhaguya.*  
*Asami dhorte fokir jay para para.*  
*Fakir ailoboligramepoilo hurr.*

<sup>44</sup>Ranjit Samaddar, *Bangla Sahitya Sanskrite Sthanio Bidrohor Probbab, Sannyasi theke Sipahi Bidroho Porjonto*, Calcutta: Mamudi House, 1982, p.65.

<sup>45</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, p.133.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Letter from Gladwin to PCR Dinajpore dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1776, Quoted in Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, p.133.

<sup>48</sup>WBSA, Majnu's Letter translation, 7<sup>th</sup> June-25<sup>th</sup> August 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, Vol.3.

<sup>49</sup>Modern name is unknown.

<sup>50</sup>WBSA, Naib's letter translation, 7<sup>th</sup> June-25<sup>th</sup> August 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue Dacca, Vol.3.

<sup>51</sup>E. G. Glazier, *A Report on the District of Rangpore*, Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press Company Limited, 1873.

<sup>52</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, p.136.

<sup>53</sup>Letter from Gladwin to PCR Dinajpore dated 26<sup>th</sup> June 1776 in Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*.

*Gachuya bepari polay gache charya gur.  
Nari loknabandechulna pore kapor.  
Sorbossho ghore thuya pathore dey nor.  
Haluya chariyapalaylangoljowal.  
Poyatipolaycharikolechaol.  
Boro manushyer nari songe loya dasi.  
Jotar modhyodhonloyapolaysonnyasi.*

.....  
*Ihakeybharothey thuya pashricheyjom.  
Itisomopto Majnur kobita.<sup>54</sup>*

[Summary of the poem: Majnu Shah is the bearer of death in Bengal. He comes riding on horses, with hundreds of his followers, bearing flags and poles. He is a strong stout man. People flee the scene immediately upon his arrival. He goes looking for a victim to exploit in every village. People, both rich and poor, run and flee when he comes. He plunders everything in sight. They do not even spare the women. The inhabitants beg before them, telling them that to plunder and assault are immoral acts for *fakirs*. They curse them that one day they will be punished for their acts.]

It is clear from the poem that a section of the Bengali population considered Majnu Shah *fakir* to be the flag bearer of death and destruction who terrorised the countryside. It appeared that the people wanted his demise. From various other sources, it appears the Lakhipur(Lakhypur)*zamindar* had difficulties establishing his authority in the area due to Majnu Shah's incursions. Majnu Shah had been demanding money that the *zamindar* had borrowed from him. When the *zamindar* just like Alepsingh's *zamindar* was unable to pay his debts back, Majnu Shah dispatched 200 of his men to seize the *zamindar* who had to flee. All his officers left the *pargana*s well. This hampered the revenue collections from the area for that year. The *fakirs* also took off with Rs.1057 from *sadrkachari* and Rs. 1500 from the villagers. As a consequence of these events, the *zamindar* requested leniency from the government.<sup>55</sup> However, there are some, although few, who suggest that he may have instructed not to harm the hapless and poor peasants. Some of the *fakirs* were quite surprised that the government wanted to prevent them from taking money from the rich people as they had honourably refused to molest the poor and the destitute.<sup>56</sup> One gets a different picture from the following poem. *Majnu Shaher Hakiki* says:

*sethayrajotto kore Asad-Jaman.  
Dorbesh Hamider majartothay.  
Khankar khadim chilo ek buro pir.  
Tenarey salam dilo Majnu fokir.  
Khadim kohilen....  
Kahatey durbhikkhomoritecheylakhoinsaana.  
Bachaitey kor chestatahaderjaan.  
Bohu gaon hoiyachebebakbiran.  
Ghor feliya palatok mojur kirshan.  
.....ei haley Companyr paik peyada.  
Julum chalaykhajnachaitajaida.  
Deshe deshe fire Majnu bhikh nahi mile.  
Bhukhader kannaherichotlagedile.  
Ghori (grihi) chashibhirkharirloiya cheybhek.  
Ma bichey chele meye loiya bede reg (bina dwidhay).  
Joru-goru biki kini choley gaye gaye.  
Mora manushergostjantorakhay.*

<sup>54</sup>*Majnur kobita*: by Panchanan Das in Ananda Bhattacharyya, ed., *Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bengal, Jamini Mohan Ghosh Revisited*, Delhi: Manohar, 2014.

<sup>55</sup>WBSA, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1773- 31<sup>st</sup> March 1774, Provincial Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, Vol.1.

<sup>56</sup>WBSA, 30<sup>th</sup> January-27<sup>th</sup> March 1795, Judicial Criminal, Vol.18.

*Majnu fokirailoghuri koto jela.*

.....

*Jutilo Majnur satheyhajarfokir.*

*Dekhite dekhite hoilo fokier er bhir.*

*Sonnoyasi o naga sathey gaon admi jon.*

*Kacharitehana dey khadyerkaron.*

*Companyr koto kuthi loot hoiya gelo.*

*Rajar sipahibohu gayed roilo.*

*Torashey (trashey) feranggon chunk ore mukh.*

*Raiyat himmotpayey, bhabeyjabeydekh.*<sup>57</sup>

[Summary of the poem: Once upon a time, an old Pir used to live. When Majnu Shah went to take his blessing, the Pir told Majnu Shah that people were dying of starvation and famine. Majnu must try to save their lives. The villages had been abandoned. The peasants had fled. The police and the collectors perpetrate violence on the people to extract revenue from the people. So, when Majnu Shah started to travel, he was unable to find any alms. He could only hear the people cry in despair. They seemed destitute, on the verge of selling themselves and their children. They seemed to survive on the rotten carcass of their cattle and other human beings. Eventually, Majnu Shah was able to acquire a large number of followers. They decided to fight the foreigners and drive them out of the country. Many other *fakirs* joined him. As did the Nagas and *sannyasis*. They all raided the *kachari* and *kuthi* of the Company. They slaughtered the Company's sepoys. The foreigners lost face. The ryots gained confidence from these activities.]

This poem, however, depicts Majnu Shah as a defender of the public. The poem portrays a forlorn picture of the villages of Bengal, destroyed by excessive revenue demands of the Company state and the oppressive ways of the *paiks* and other employees of the government. However, their 'raids' or 'contributions' did affect the countryside leading to the desertion of land by the *ryots*, which in turn affected the revenue yields. The Company state often received conflicting intelligence regarding the nature and extent of Majnu Shah's oppression of the *ryots* and his violence. One thing, however, remained constant. From the moment he rebelled against the Company state to the day he died, he never ceased making inroads into Bengal. Let us consider two statements. In 1776, Majnu Shah appeared in the vicinity of Dinajpur-Rajshahi. One of the religious leaders reported that he had committed 'many acts of violence'.<sup>58</sup> However, a few days later Mr Gladwin admitted that even Majnu Shah owned the Mahastangarh mosque, he had not levied a substantial contribution on the *ryots* from the *mela* and intended to move on to Malda without attacking anyone.<sup>59</sup> The Company state also admitted on the occasion that the fear of contribution often drove the *ryots* out of the lands.<sup>60</sup> The fear and the apprehension probably played a more prominent role in their desertion than the actual act of violence though no one can deny the devastating effects of this rebellion on Bengal's countryside. Majnu Shah probably died sometime in 1786 near Rajshahi after being fatally wounded. The Kaleshwar 'raid' was perhaps his last one. The successors of Majnu Shah were Musa Shah, Chirag Ali, Pharagul Shah, Sobhan Shah, Madar Bux, Jori Shah/Jawar Shah and Karim Shah.

#### ***Chirag Ali and the Role of the Harkaras***

Majnu Shah's followers continued to rebel after he passed away. Chirag Ali carried the torch of the rebellion in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Basant Lal Amin wrote in 1794 about these *chelas*, I have the honour to sent you all the accounts I have as yet been able to collect concerning the Fakeers who live in Goorka formerly belonging to Morung but long since annexed to the Nepal Government. Not far from this on the north and south side of the river is the Chowny camp of Cheraugally, the chela of Mojnus Shah. Three cosses from here... there is also a tehsildar cutcherry and chowny of Mossy Shah who

<sup>57</sup>Majnu Shaheer Hakikiat by Jamiruddin Dafadar in Atis K. Dasgupta, *The Fakir and Sannyasi Uprising*, 1992.

<sup>58</sup>WBSA, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1776, Provincial Committee of Revenue at Dinajpore.

<sup>59</sup>WBSA, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1776, Provincial Committee of Revenue at Dinajpore.

<sup>60</sup>WBSA, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1776, Provincial Committee of Revenue at Dinajpore.



was a slave of Modjus Shah. They have no commerce or lands or revenues. They are supported by the Haukum of the place.<sup>61</sup>

They continued to march across Bengal covering a vast area including Dumdumma, Natore, Dinajpur, Malda, Poorsa, Silberis, Chincura, 'Baggoova', 'Purv nabubah', the Brahmaputra to the borders of Assam.<sup>62</sup> They even appeared near Bhutan, bordering Cooch Behar. The chief of Assam employed them. Chirag Ali, Huzuri Singh, Fateh Burwa, Janggar Giri commanded the troops at different times.<sup>63</sup> Huzuri Singh was not new to rebellions. He was a former employee of Derrung Raja. He was the head of a number of matchlock men and had attacked the Company's troops at Gauhati. After Majnu Shah's death, he openly rebelled. The government in retaliation ordered to confiscate his property and lands.<sup>64</sup>

During this period, about 2000-3000 *fakirs* also appeared in Cooch Behar. They threatened to attack the *kachari*. The Raja sought assistance from the government. Graham, from Rangpur, wrote to Witherston at Tajpur to comply with the request. Also Lieut. Stoa,<sup>65</sup> commanding a battalion, stationed at Govindnagar moved to Bihar. This left the area unprotected. The *fakirs* were at that time merely 48 hours away from the town. They were *en route* to Assam, according to the *harkaras*. Consequently, Capt. Welsh was notified.<sup>66</sup> Eventually, Welsh had to quit the area. He stated that the country had been severely ravaged. He claimed the 'raiders' had been particularly cruel to the inhabitants. There was an urgent need for military protection.<sup>67</sup> During this period Cooch Behar remained vulnerable to the raids. A detachment from 14<sup>th</sup> battalion infantry was instructed to act against the *fakirs*. It consisted of *subedars, jamadars, havildars, paiks* and sepoys. The government was aware this would continue until the Nepal Raja took severe measures against them.<sup>68</sup>

On 24<sup>th</sup> March Mr. Stoa (Commanding Officer) expressed his intention to march with his detachment toward Bihar, hoping to deter the *fakirs* as the district appeared to be in danger. He asked for more troops to oppose such a large number of *fakirs*.<sup>69</sup> Even Matthew Leslie (Commanding Officer) was unable to apprehend the *fakirs*. Their number was 'frightening'. Bihar raja sought his assistance. Mr. Witherston (another officer – in – charge) was unable to provide any aid.<sup>70</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> February 1794, Mr. Barlow wrote to Mr. Bruce that the *fakirs* had retired from Bihar. Now they appeared to be plundering Rangamati. They had looted the property of Balchand Barua. This time the 'incursions' seemed even more alarming. As a consequence, the troops were ordered to protect Gauhati.<sup>71</sup> Assam seemed to be in chaos. Bruce had to ask for assistance from Tajpur for the purpose.<sup>72</sup> It appears that some *barkandazes* were stationed in Rangamati. The troops had been previously withdrawn from there. When the *fakirs* under Hazari Singh<sup>73</sup> made inroads into the area, the *barkandazes* were asked to cooperate with Pir Muhammad *daroga*. 4 *barkandazes*, 80 *paiks*, 10 *paiks* on boats, as well as a great deal of gunpowder, were there for the *barkandazes*.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, 30 sepoys were sent by Mr. Witherston to Bruce's aid.<sup>75</sup> Eventually, the *fakirs* left Cooch Behar.<sup>76</sup>

However, the troops were unable to deter the *fakirs* as the latter continued to move. They first moved to Sobhaganj, then went to a place called Sounasilla. This information was provided by Leslie's sepoy,

<sup>61</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.138-139.

<sup>62</sup>WBSA, 6<sup>th</sup> July-31<sup>st</sup> July 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.4. See also WBSA, Letter to Major Smith et.al., dated 27<sup>th</sup> May 1793, 31<sup>st</sup> May-7<sup>th</sup> June 1793, Judicial Criminal, Vol.2.

<sup>63</sup>WBSA, Letter to John Shore from Bruce dated March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>64</sup>WBSA, Letter from Leslie to the magistrate of Rangpore dated 24<sup>th</sup> April 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>65</sup>It appears as Stoa as well as Sloan in archival sources. I chose to go with Stoa. Any mistake regarding the spelling is my own.

<sup>66</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Leslie, Rangpore dated 4<sup>th</sup> March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>67</sup>WBSA, Letter to Bruce, et.al dated 12<sup>th</sup> March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>68</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow, from Bruce, Coochbihar dated 5<sup>th</sup> August 1794, 15<sup>th</sup> August-26<sup>th</sup> September 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.14.

<sup>69</sup>WBSA, Letter to Matthew Leslie from Stoa, dated March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March-23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>70</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Leslie, Rangpore, dated 4<sup>th</sup> March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>71</sup>We also hear about a place called 'Jagigapah' which also needed protection.

<sup>72</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Bruce dated 27<sup>th</sup> March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>73</sup>Also spelt as Hussary Singh.

<sup>74</sup>WBSA, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>75</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Bruce, dated 18<sup>th</sup> April 1794, Coochbihar, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>76</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow from Leslie dated 21<sup>st</sup> March 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

disguised as a *fakir* in that camp.<sup>77</sup> Ainslee and Sloan (Sloan) claimed that due to their zeal, the intensity of these incursions had waned. He was able to neutralise 29 of Roshan Ali Shah's men.<sup>78</sup> However, it also appears they carried 'hostile incursions into the Company's territories' at 'Kwaliah and Rungaily' in Nepal.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, there is no reason to assume they slowed down after Majnu's death. Majnu Shah's *chelas* like Jawhar Shah, Raszanni Shah, Musa Shah also proved to be a cause of concern for the government. They repeatedly engaged in skirmishes with the Company's sepoy and often 'plundered' the *ryots* of Barbakpur. Musa Shah, for instance, collected money from the *ryots* and did not hesitate to use force to persuade them. Moreover, as a result, many of the *ryots* deserted their lands.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* repeated their 'raids' over and over again until their final suppression. Notwithstanding the raids, they continued to 'raid' Bengal, especially near Kazirhat and Baikanthapur. They had assumed Leslie would be unable to deter them. Additionally, the Faujpur battalion was weak. Other battalions were too far away.<sup>81</sup> Leslie also received intelligence that the *fakirs* had arrived at Burrabary, 12-14 *cosses* from Dimla and plundered the house of Shyamcharan Pramanik and kidnapped 6 men.<sup>82</sup> The Company's troops were unable to prevent their movement and the depredations in Ranganj and Cottee. The *fakirs* eventually fled to Morung. They had 3 chiefs and numerous followers who were 'continuing during the rainy weather in that country where they recruit their force, collect arms, ammunition, and plan future operations'.<sup>83</sup>

### **The final suppression**

Sobhan Ali continued to 'plunder' according to Mr Heatley (officer in charge). It appears the Gurkha officers of Nepal provided Sobhan Ali with passive support. He continued to seize rich *ryots*, in Dinajpur and demanded alms from them. Eventually, his followers were apprehended at Purnea. Meanwhile, Murshidabad remained vulnerable to their 'raids.' They 'raided' the *kachari*. They also committed 'robberies' in Malda, Nichhundpur, Badaul, and Bhowra. They reappeared in October in Salbari. The number of *fakirs* raiders did not wane. There were almost 700 of them. This time the Company state once again needed the aid of the *harkaras* to find information on Chirag Ali who had encamped at Deotallah. This information helped them kill 20 *fakirs* and injure 35. However, it did not deter them. They came back again and assembled in Dinajpur. They were committing depredations in Rajshahi. Colonel White of Berhampur requested additional detachments to help him challenge these men.<sup>84</sup> 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. Lieut. Ainslee was unable to prevent them. These 'depredations' continued in these years in Purnea, Kajirhat, Ramaganj. Sobhan Ali, Chirag Ali, Hazari Singh, Karim Shah, Jowar Shah, remained active throughout these years. CoochBehar became an area of turmoil in the 1790s, but the Company's troops were able to apprehend 59 of them in CoochBehar. There is evidence to suggest that the *sannyasi* 'raids' did not wane until 1796-1797. They were quite active in Poorsha. In 1797 they appeared in large numbers in Dinajpur. In March 1798, Sobhan Ali and Amudi Shah led another such 'raid.' However, this time, the government had some success under the command of Capt. Wroughton at Gajole. Sobhan Ali and Amudi Ali were weakened. They in retaliation kidnapped two *mandals* from Dehutt *pargana*. Capt. Charron was able to apprehend a large number of them. Sobhan Ali and Amudi renewed 'incursions' in Bogra in 1800. The Company state sought the aid of the Nepal Raja whose cooperation was later revealed to be uncertain at best. However, by January 1802, these incursions ceased, and it was noted that 'acts of outrages have not

<sup>77</sup>WBSA, Letter from Leslie, 14<sup>th</sup> March -23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>78</sup>WBSA, Letter to John Shore, et.al, dated 14<sup>th</sup> May 1794, Dinajpore, 14<sup>th</sup> March - 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.11.

<sup>79</sup>WBSA, Letter to John Shore from Bruce, dated 25<sup>th</sup> July 1794, Coochbihar, 15<sup>th</sup> August-26<sup>th</sup> September 1794, Vol.14.

<sup>80</sup>WBSA, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1787, Board of Revenue, OC No 3.

<sup>81</sup>WBSA, Letter to Barlow, from Leslie dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 1794, 13<sup>th</sup> June -8<sup>th</sup> August 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.13.

<sup>82</sup>WBSA, Letter to Gouriprasad Thanadar from Leslie dated 14<sup>th</sup> June 1794, 13<sup>th</sup> June-8<sup>th</sup> August 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.13.

<sup>83</sup>WBSA, Letter to Peter Murray from Witherston Tajpore dated 11<sup>th</sup> July 1794, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1794, 13<sup>th</sup> June -8<sup>th</sup> August 1794, Judicial Criminal, Vol.13.

<sup>84</sup>Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.142-147.

been recently committed on the (Nepal) frontier'.<sup>85</sup> According to Christoff Zotter, the rebels eluded the Company forces by escaping into Nepal. The Company officials often approached Prithwinarayan Saha of Nepal for assistance in this matter. Zotter also mentioned that the warrior ascetics were also quite active farther north, near the Himalayas.<sup>86</sup>

### **Afterword**

Both Chirag Ali and Musa Shah<sup>87</sup> proved to be formidable adversaries for the Company state as they continued to travel, march across Bengal and continued to collect 'religious donations' and 'to raid' until Musa Shah's demise in early 1792.<sup>88</sup> However, eventually, the Company state was able to suppress the rebellion. Maybe the demise of Majnu Shah and Musa Shah played a role in demoralising the mendicants. Alternatively, perhaps the Company state finally became acquainted with the terrain to deal with them in a disciplined and organised manner. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, the fire of the rebellion had died out. Buchanan Hamilton, surveying some of the districts from 1807-13 commented that a large number of the *fakirs* who used to assemble near Rangpur, plundered with barbarity had not entered the district for some years.<sup>89</sup> He added that 'the horde of fakirs which resided at Nidantara in the dominions of Gorkha and infested this district (Rangpore and Dinajpore) has of late entirely dispersed'.<sup>90</sup>

### **By Way of Conclusion**

It is important to reinterpret the sources. From one source (ballad), it becomes clear that Majnu Shah and his associates were bandits. From the others, it appears that they were not interested in looting poor peasants. In fact some peasants supported their cause. It may have been due to their veneration toward these religious mendicants or out of fear. It is still unclear. Therefore it would be imprudent to call it a national, anti-colonial, peasant revolt as scholars such as Atis K. Dasgupta and Suranjan Chatterjee had done. But we should not unequivocally subscribe to Ananda Bhattacharyya's view point that every *fakir* (to an extent the Hindu *sannyasis* too) was a bandit. I would like to comment that the *fakirs* under the leadership of Majnu Shah and others were neither bandits, nor social bandits. They were not even Messiah of the masses. They were merely looking to get those rights back that they had been enjoying for centuries.

Majnu Shah passed away sometime in 1787. Chirag Ali died a few years later. From the above discussion we may conclude that Majnu Shah's leadership was critical for the *fakir* rebels. Chirag Ali and Musa Shah also provided able leadership but after their deaths, the rebellion fizzled out. In fact they lost their banking businesses to the East India Company's banks.<sup>91</sup> The majority of the common population stopped believing in these *fakirs'* superhuman abilities. They began to look at traditional religions for answers and guidance. Finally these religious mendicants lost their mercenary character as well. They became irrelevant.<sup>92</sup> Karim Shah and Tipu Shah started a different religious rebellion known as the *Pagal Panthi* rebellion in the early nineteenth century after the *fakir* rebellion was suppressed. Due to constriction of space, we shall leave out the *pagalpanthi* rebellion from our discussion.

<sup>85</sup>WBSA, JC, OC No.11, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1800. Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *The Sannyasi and Fakir*, pp.147-170.

<sup>86</sup>Christoff Zotter, 'Ascetics in Administrative Affairs: Documents on the Central Overseers of Jogis and Samnyasis in Nepal' in Simon Cubelic, Axel Michaels and Astrid Zotter (eds.), *Studies in Historical Documents from Nepal and India*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2018, pp.445-492.

<sup>87</sup>Spelt as Moosa Shah in some documents.

<sup>88</sup>WBSA, Letter from the Magistrate of Rajshahi to the Governor General in Council, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1792 Revenue Judicial.

<sup>89</sup>WBSA, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1800, Judicial Criminal, Para 27.

<sup>90</sup>WBSA, 31<sup>st</sup> January 1802, Judicial Criminal.

<sup>91</sup> Matthew Clark, *The Dasanami Samnyasis, The Integration of Ascetic Lineages into an Order*, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006, p.258.

<sup>92</sup> William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics And Indian Empires*, pp.100 – 105.