

## Sannyasi Fakir Rebellion, 1770-1800: A Study in Overt Form of Rebellion

Amrita Sengupta

PhD Scholar, Jadavpur University

E-mail: [amritasengupta85@gmail.com](mailto:amritasengupta85@gmail.com)

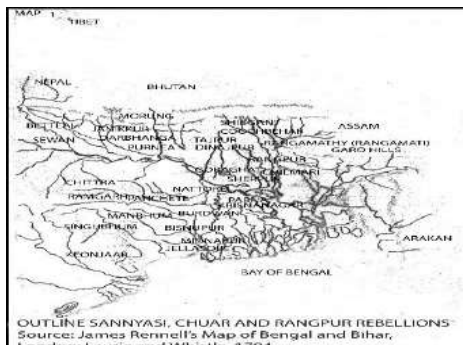
### Abstract

This article attempts to discuss the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion occurring during the years 1770-1800. The article shall reexamine the rebellion in the light of new sources. The article shall discuss the *sannyasis* and *fakirs'* heritage, their causes of rebellion, its contours, the final suppression. I have concluded that rebellion cost the Company state a huge amount of revenue. It affected the overall collection. The rebellion was an overt one and was directed against the Company state. The article is based on archival sources from National Archives of India and West Bengal State Archives, secondary sources and literary sources such as *Devi Chaudhurani* and *Anandamath*.

**Key words:** *sannyasi*, *fakir*, revenue, rebellion, overt revolt, *harkara*, *Anandamath*, *Devi Chaudhuri*

### Introduction

*Sannyasi-fakir* rebellion commenced in the mid-1760s. It took the Company state almost four decades to quell the 'disturbances' they caused and the 'violence' they perpetuated on the countryside of Bengal. The most affected areas were Purnea, Malda, Dhaka, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Murshidabad. *Sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion remain immortalised in our imagination because of the leadership provided by leaders such as Majnu Shah and Chirag Ali and the legends such as *Devi Chaudhurani* and *Bhawani Pathak* that it created.



### Brief Historiography

Jamini Mohan Ghosh was an administrator under the British rule (Ghosh 2010).<sup>1</sup> His book viewed religious mendicants such as *sannyasis* and *fakirs* as rogues. A.C. Chandra's book *The Sannyasi Rebellion* (Chandra 1977)<sup>2</sup> is informative. His thesis had been that the *sannyasi* rebellion was a collective political expression of protest against the 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 (Chandra 1977).<sup>3</sup> Atis K. Dasgupta, in his book (Dasgupta 1992)<sup>4</sup> and article (Dasgupta 1982)<sup>5</sup> argued that the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was a form of popular protest, against colonial exploitation. Suranjan Chatterjee, in his article, (Chatterjee 1984: 2-13)<sup>6</sup> finds the revolt to be a popular peasant revolt. According to him "the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were not dacoits" (Chatterjee 1984:2-13).<sup>7</sup>

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 (Bhattacharyya 1991).<sup>8</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 (Pinch 2006:100-105).<sup>9</sup> Matthew Clark observed that there was a possibility that the *sannyasis* who fought with the British troops in Bengal during the *sannyasi-fakir* rebellion was merely pretending to be *sannyasis*. They were involved in criminal activities (Clark 2012:81-100).<sup>10</sup> Bhattacharyya added that the *sannyasi* and *fakir* rebellion was undoubtedly against the Company, but it was not anti-colonial (Bhattacharyya 2016:1-23; Bhattacharyya March-April 2012:81-100).<sup>11</sup>

#### Who were the religious mendicants?

**The sannyasis:** Warren Hastings labelled the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* as 'gypsies of Hindusthan' wandering from place to place (Jones 1918:178-179).<sup>12</sup> He considered them as plunderers and freebooters,

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 (Jones 1918:178-179).<sup>13</sup>

However, in reality, the *sannyasis* of the eighteenth century descended from the ten branches, of the Advaita school which Shankaracharya and his disciples had started in the ninth century. They were known as the Dasnami orders (Farquhar 1925:482-483).<sup>14</sup> According to Matthew Clark, these ten groups of Dasnamis were divided up into four monasteries, located in Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, Badrinath and Sringeri (Clark 2006:2).<sup>15</sup> It is believed that Shankaracharya placed his major disciples as heads of four great *maths* (Farquhar 1925:482-483).<sup>16</sup> Clark added that in

ethnographic accounts the Dasnami *gossains* were treated as mendicants as well as priests, bankers, traders, farmers and mercenaries. Therefore, they had a complex relationship with their social environment (Clark 2006:14).<sup>17</sup> These men were named after the group of monks, Giri, Puri, Bharati, Ban, Aranya, Parbat, Sagar, Tirtha, Ashrama, Saraswati. Out of the ten names, the Tirthas, Ashramas, Saraswatis, Bharatis, were called *dandis* and the rest were called *gossains*. These *gossains* abandoned celibacy and took up religious and professional activities (Farquhar 1925:482-483).<sup>18</sup> According to Clark, the *gossain* is also the name for heads of *Vaisnavabairagis*, Ramanandi order and the followers of Vallabhacharya (Clark 2006:14).<sup>19</sup> 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* (Chattapadhyay 1938).<sup>20</sup> According to Farquhar, the *sannyasis* were usually non-violent and were prohibited from using violence by their vows of *ahimsa* (Farquhar 1925:482-483).<sup>21</sup> 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 (Farquhar 1925:482-483).<sup>22</sup> However, J.N. Sarkar believed that the Dasnamis had originated long before Akbar's reign. 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 (Sarkar 1984:90).<sup>23</sup> William Pinch observed that there is an 'ethical claim' to the oral tradition that the *sannyasis* and *yogis*<sup>24</sup> 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 Dasnamigroups used to fight with each other. Even emperor Akbar had to intervene on one such instance (Pinch 2006:34-37).<sup>25</sup>

These *sannyasis* were not particularly poor as they were involved in economic activities such as trade with Nepal and usury. Even the 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 Northern India, Punjab and Gujarat since the Mughal period. They acted as traders as well as money-lenders in those areas (Rose 1991:303-304).<sup>26</sup> They were also called the vagrant race, traders and spies.<sup>27</sup> Bernard Cohn has also commented on the trade relations and the role of *gossains*. (Cohn 1964: 176-177)<sup>28</sup> 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 (Steele 1986).<sup>29</sup> 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 latter Mughal period (Sarkar 1984:90).<sup>30</sup> There appears to be 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* (Sarkar 1984:90).<sup>31</sup> 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* (Clark 2006:73-74).<sup>32</sup>

**The *fakirs*:** The *Madariyas* on the other hand, 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) (Bhattacharyya 2014:2011).<sup>33</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 (Haq 2012:63-65).<sup>34</sup>

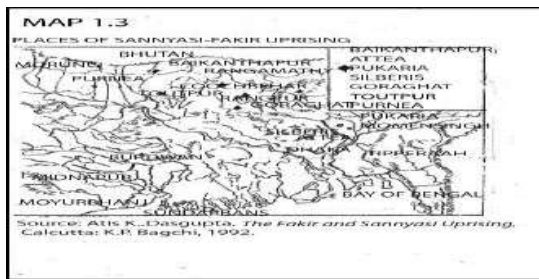
## Causes of revolt

The *maths* financed the Dasnamis for their pilgrimages and their trading activities. The *sannyasis* used to receive *sanads* from the Governor of Bengal. The *sanads* granted to the *sannyasis* permitted them to travel freely (Dasgupta 1992:10-23).<sup>35</sup> The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* used to enjoy rent-free lands 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 a reclusive life.<sup>36</sup> The government was unwilling to allow this. This culminated in the Regulations of 1788. 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. Thus, they would start to appear in Bengal in early 1773 in the northern districts like Rangpur, Ghoraghat, Silberis, Cooch Behar and Purnea, in high numbers as a protest.<sup>37</sup>

## The turbulence in the countryside

The rebels quickly began to 'raid' different areas of Bengal, something they had been forbidden to do. From the government's standpoint, they were a "great source of villainy and menace to the ryots" and deserved "capital punishment".<sup>38</sup> The government rightly assumed that the areas around Patna would never be free from disturbances of some kind or other. They had to keep some battalions stationed there however insufficient it might have been to suppress a rebellion. Moreover, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* proved them right by making incursions in *sarkar* Saran rendering two forces of the Company insufficient to stop them.<sup>39</sup>





The *sannyasis* and *fakirs* appeared in Burdwan and Krishnanagar in the early 1760s for 'plunder'.<sup>40</sup> Ralph Lister was the head of the Company's *kuthi* at that time. However, he was unable to save it. Upon hearing this, Capt. Grant commanded 29 sepoys to control the situation. This expedition resulted in the defeat of the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*.<sup>41</sup> However, this minor setback did not prevent them from making fresh 'incursions'. From the early 1760s to 1800, they continued to 'raid' the countryside until they were finally suppressed. With the dubious assistance of the Raja of Nepal, the government was able to suppress the rebels. Most of them were executed. The *fakirs* were also captured and quickly forced into coolie labour.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

It may be inferred that *sannyasis* and *fakirs* were religious mendicants who also acted as mercenaries and indulged in trade and usury. They in addition had been enjoying *sanads* to charity free lands. The nascent Company state took that right away from them. As a result the religious mendicants took to a violent, overt form of resistance. They chose banditry as a valid form of defiance of the government *dikats*. The uprisings affected the Company state's yearly revenue collections from the districts.<sup>43</sup>

Sources reveal that the government and the *zamindars* allied against the *sannyasis* and *fakirs*. They shared a common interest. The *zamindars* of Bengal were in the habit of borrowing large sums of money to pay revenue to the East India Company. They borrowed from the merchants as well as the mendicants. When they failed to repay their debt, they often went to the East India Company for redress. Many merchants and *shroffs* had a flourishing money

lending and usury business and lent money to these *zamindars*. The Company state was however, against the money lending business and usury business of the religious mendicants and wanted to stop it (Bhattcharyya 1992:157-158; Bhattacharyya 2014:1-23; Bhattacharyya 2016:81-100).<sup>44</sup>

The merchants were not always eager to lend either, but the East India Company had bigger stakes in stopping the business. The merchants feared that if the *jamawere* raised, the *zamindars* would be unable to pay back their debts unless compelled by the East India Company. However, the East India Company were reluctant to assist the money lenders. They preferred balances in arrears as they were sure they could recover it by selling off the lands.<sup>45</sup> For example, when the Nadia *zamindar* found himself in arrears in 1780, he like the *zamindar* of Rajshahi took a loan from the merchants amounting to Rs.45000. This debt often rendered them destitute, making them incapable of paying any increased *jama*. All profits had to be siphoned off to pay back their debts. It is possible they had borrowed a large sum from the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* and eventually were unable to repay their debts. That was the principal motives behind the *zamindars'* repeated petition to the government to intervene and deal with them. So, it was in the company's best interest to ally with the *zamindars* against the marauding *sannyasis* and *fakirs*. It was in the end all about revenue. They had the moral justification for expelling and slaughtering the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* on the grounds of protecting the ryots. They believed this would prove advantageous for them if they could manage to ensure a lasting victory against the religious mendicants. In addition, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* posed a threat to the stability of the Company state. By repeatedly looting the *kothis* and *kacharis*, they had challenged the very existence of the Company state. They repeatedly raided the countryside. It affected the annual revenue collections. The 'revenue' served a dual purpose. On a more pragmatic side, it ensured the solvency of the Company's mercantile exchequer. However, it also symbolised their

legitimacy as Bengal's rulers. By disrupting the revenue collections, the *sannyasis* and *fakirs* questioned the Company state's existence and its *raison d'être*. The Company state had no qualms about defining the rebels. They 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 government.<sup>46</sup>

Majnu Shah, the venerable *fakir* leader, may have instructed not to oppress anyone and accept voluntary contributions. However, the very term 'voluntary' is in question. Government records such as Rous' letters reveal that these armed 'banditti' had taken Rs.500 from Nurnagar village belonging to one Dayaram Ray, Rs.1690 from the *kachari* which was later deserted by the officials. One would find some legitimacy in their persistent attacks on the *kacharis* and the subsequent 'loot' and 'plunder' that followed. However, the same 'contributions' can be viewed as extortion. Moreover, by doing so, they would be forced to negate the views that endorsed the *sannyasi-fakir* and peasant alliance paradigm/theory. However, we are not merely debating whether or not these contributions were made voluntarily. 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.

**Table 1:1: Amount due in the districts in 1780.**

Name of the districts	Approximate amounts due in <i>magh</i> 1780 (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
<b>Total Amount due from all districts( in rupees)</b>	9,56,412

**Source:** WBSA, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1781-5<sup>th</sup> April 1781, Committee of Revenue, Vol.1.

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

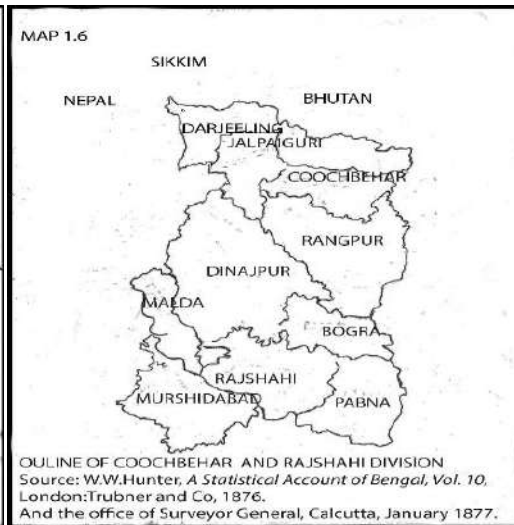
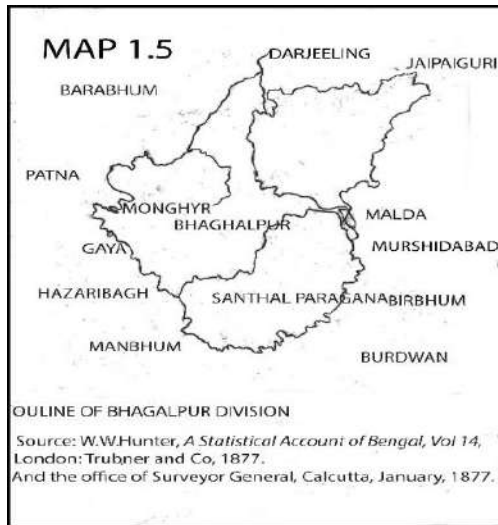
**Table 1:2: Amount due in the Districts in 1781.**

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

**Source:** WBSA, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1781-5<sup>th</sup> 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. For instance, the number of arms and ammunition owned by the troops played a comparatively secondary role. On

several occasion, simple matchlocks owned by the rebels bested them. However, what tipped the scale in their favour was the information, and intelligence provided by the *harkaras*. While the spy system aided 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 an overt resistance movement and it was against the Company state. (Sengupta 2019:25-53)<sup>47</sup>.



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