

## **Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Dinajpur**

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The administration of the British East India Company in Bengal province was started as a shadow administration, the officials of Nawab acted as a machine of company. At the beginning of power, the company faced a hindrance from wandering mendicants namely Sannyasi and Fakir which is known as Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion. The duration of this rebellion 1763 to 1800 AD is accepted with little controversy. The present study deals with the analysis of the rebellion in Dinajpur district though the whole Bengal province was under disturbance.

In the beginning, we must focus on the introduction of the Sannyasi and Fakir. The rebelled Sannyasis were known as 'Dasanami Sannyasi' and the Fakirs were known as 'Madari' usually. The Sannyasis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century derived their religious descent from the ten branches of the Advaita School which Shankara charya and his disciples started organizing from 9<sup>th</sup> century and onwards. The wards ten (Dasa) formed the suffixes to the names taken by the marks as their order of ten their initiation. These were Giri(Hill), Puri(City), Bharati(Learning), Ban(Wood), Aranya(Forest), Parbat(Mountain), Sagar(Ocean), Tritha(Temple), Ashrama(Hermitage), and Saraswati(Perfect Knowledge). These ten pupils were their successors, are now the wards of the ten sects of Hindu monks or Sannyasis, are called 'Dasanana'<sup>1</sup>. The Madari Fakirs also was a religious sect of Islam. In 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Saint Baid-ud- din, popularly known as Shai- i -madar came to India. He was obeyed by both Hindu as Muslims people. His disciples were the Madari Fakirs<sup>2</sup>.

The Madari Fakir and the Dasanami sannyasi created confusion among the British officials. The officials in their reports to the council used these terms Sannyasi and Fakir sometimes juxtaposition and sometimes synonymously. Because of their lifestyle like the vagabond the Dasamani Sannyasis and the Madari Fakirs, this type of confusion arose. Even their out appearance was alike. The Naga Sannyasis and the Madari Fakir used to apply ashes to their bodies, wear iron chains around their head and neck and carry black flags and turban. They seldom pray and keep fast and use Bhang (one kind of narcotics) freely as a beverage<sup>3</sup>.

At the beginning of the company's rule in Bengal, Bihar and Odessa the Sannyasi and Fakir were revolted due to some material hindrances against them. Obtaining dewani of Bengal province by East India Company was not acquiring the administration of Bengal by them. They only had started to collect the revenue and the administration was in the hand of Nawab, which is known as 'dual administration'. Reza Khan and Sitab Roy were appointed as revenue collector by company but they officially were official of Nawab. In this situation they started to collect revenue from ryots as high as possible, even with oppression. Dr. Narendra Krishna Singha has shown that during the time of Aliwardi Khan total revenue collection of Purnia was four lacs, but during Reza Khan it increased to 25 lacs<sup>4</sup>. From this data the oppression of Reza Khan can be imagined. Against this exploitation and oppression, the Sannyasis and the Fakirs revolted against the British company and its collaborators namely zamindar, amil etc.

Against the oppression on ryots the Sannyasis and the Fakirs revolted, there was a background of this explanation. During the Mughal period, it had happened that the Sannyasis and Fakirs were started to live in different parts of Bengal and Bihar as peasants leaving their wandering mendicants' life. Under Muhammadans the Sannyasis and Fakirs were given tax-free land which prompted them to live permanently. They were also engaged as soldier under the rulers and zaminders. About this historical process Atish kr. Dasgupta has written "in Bengal the Sannyasis acquired rent free lands Malda, Dinajpur and Mymansing from small zaminders during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The settlement of land with Sannyasis seems to have served to purpose for the zaminders. First, the grants of sibottor were a religious performance of the zaminders and also a symbol of their status and power in village society. Secondly, the zaminders often got the service of the armed sanyasis to supplement their won force to repeal the aggression of their rival zaminders"<sup>5</sup>. Not only that, some of them were engaged in various trade, even they were indulged in the business of lending money and taking interests in it. Simply to be said, they had come back in a material life in spite of wandering mendicant's life before. But they used to travel the religious places together as a band in a particular season of years. These Sannyasis and Fakir were affected badly by the introduction of company's rule and exploitation in a different way.

With the invasion of the East India Company, the Sannyasis and Fakirs rebelled because disturbance started in their material and religious life. Excess amount of revenue collection by Reza Khan and Sitab Roy with oppression was no doubt one of the important causes behind the rebellion. As the Sannyasis and Fakirs were tenants of Bengal and Bihar regions so they protested against the authority. Not only that, from the Mohammedan period the Sannyasis and Fakir were enjoying the rent free lands, granted to them namely 'lakheraj', 'madat-i-mas', 'Fakiran' 'brahmatar', 'debattara' etc. But after obtaining dewani the officials of company interfered in these sensitive issues. Generally, it hampered the interest of Fakirs and Sannyasis<sup>6</sup>.

A common custom of the Fakirs and Sannyasis was that they used to travel the holy places of respective religions as pilgrims. In Bengal, the Sannyasis usually concentrated in holy bath in some places like Mahasthangarh on the bank of Karatoya, Sagordip etc. and the Fakirs used to visit the grave of holy peers and different masques like darga of peer Bodor-uddin at Hemtabad, darga of mullah Allauddin at Damdama etc of Dinajpur district<sup>7</sup>. The Naga Sannyasis and Burhana Fakirs' general custom was to travel with weapons. But during company's rule this type of travelling and carrying weapons was prohibited by authority. This no doubt hurts the religious sentiment of the Sannyasis, Fakirs and the common religious minded men.

Another important cause of this rebellion was that silk trade of western and northern India was in the grip of the Sannyasis called Giri Gosain and that was a very profitable one. But in 1766 AD company declared a regulation that before fulfillment of company's needs no one could buy the raw silk<sup>8</sup>. This no doubt affected the economic interest of the Giri Gosain. The business of lending money in lieu of high interest was prohibited by the company also. Not only that, the Sannyasis specially the Naga Sannyasis used to wonder with weapons and work as soldier under native kings and zaminders. But after establishing the company's rule

they became workless due to disband of this army. These people were joined to the band of rebellious Sannyasis and Fakirs. William Hunter, Thomas and Garrate also stated that the rebellious were the peasants evicted from land and the members of the disbanded armies<sup>9</sup>.

The Sannyasis and Fakir rebellion was started in 1763 AD and continued until the end of the century. All around the Bengal they harassed the company's officials and zaminders by plundering rides. In the present study focus will be given to the activities of rebellious in Dinajpur district only. Dinajpur district was formed in 1772 AD<sup>10</sup>. Before famine of 1770 AD in Dinajpur area no incident of Sannyasis and Fakirs rides has been found officially. Generally history of this ride in this district is post-famine history.

In 1770 AD November supervisor of Dinajpur reported that a band of 5000 Fakirs entered into this district from Purnia and they were taking donation from the people and it was very difficult to resist them. The council of revenue advised the supervisor to bring one or two regiment army from Rajmahal. In 1774 AD the Sannyasis were gathered at Bhabanipur for a holy bath at Ganga<sup>11</sup>. The news of gathering both Sannyasis and Fakirs in 1775 AD November at Gobindapur had created a panic to the council of revenue. Captain Kularton was charged with responsibility to protect the treasury of Dinajpur. Two regiment of sepoy and two officers were sent to him and was stated that it was impossible to help beyond that as the whole state was affected by the Sannyasis and Fakir it would be better to protect the treasury only<sup>12</sup>.

During the second half of 1770's the acidity of the revolt in the district was becoming high. The provincial council of revenue claimed to Raja of Dinajpur to arrest Majnu Shah immediately. Majnu, the supreme leader of rebellion was riding across the district then. In response, Raja equipped his army and demanded British army for protection of himself because the subjects were not reliable. The villagers were in favour of rebellious as they were exploited by the officials of zaminders. In the meantime, revenue collection had become hard and alone with Raja of Dinajpur many zaminders had claimed to minimize the rate of rent to the authority. But in response company had ordered to collect revenue at high rate than before and in case of failure, company had threatened the zaminders of auctioning their property. In 1774 AD Warren Hastings wrote to the court of directors that if the taxes were minimized the excess money may be hand over to the rebellious<sup>13</sup>. No doubt this kind of prediction of Hastings was wrong because the leader of rebellion Majnu Shah's strict order to his disciples was not to oppress the villagers for donation but only voluntary donation they may received. On 22 June in 1788 AD the collector of Dinajpur wrote to collector of Murshidabad that lieutenant Cristi had attracted a band of Fakir headed by Majnu Shah was assembled at Jahangirpur and Chakhpur villages. The Fakirs were escaped leaving their goods but the villagers had collected these and returned to them<sup>14</sup>.

The main objective of the Sannyasi and Fakirs was to plunder the company's 'kuthis'(Banglows) and the treasuries. In this operation they usually used to murder the guards and got onto direct agitation with the company's army. In 1772 AD at Thakurgaon of Dinajpur a cohort of Fakirs was attacked by company's army headed by captain Thomas. But in counter attack by the riders Thomas was died. Fakir leader Sobhan Ali in his returning from Dinajpur with 400 followers plundered the Banglow of Ramganj in Purnia district and

looted 6000 rupees. In that case they murdered two sepoys and kidnapped four of them. Getting the news company's army had reached there but became failed<sup>15</sup>. The Sannyasis and Fakirs in their extremity against company's army used to scattered among the villagers. In the case of north Bengal they sheltered in the mountainous forest area beyond Tarai region and from there invaded the Banglows of the plain. For taking no action against rebellious Hestings threatened the king of Bhutan, Debraja. Reverse incidents have happened when they looted the banglows of Tarai and Dooar region and sheltered in Dinajpur district. In this district the most important incident was happened at Balurghat. Captain Edward alone with his army attacked the rebellious at Balurghat. But guerilla technique of counter attack by Fakirs smashed the company's army and Captain Edward had died<sup>16</sup>.

In Dinajpur district, no report has been found about the followers of Bhabani pathak the leader of Sannyasi though it has been proved that the relation of Pathak with Majnu Shah was cordial . The Naga Sannyasis were very much fundamental and seldom had they engaged in agitation with the Burhana Fakirs. But overall situation revealed a harmony against the company and its collaborators. The village people of the affected areas were in favour of the rebellious. Because the interests of the Sannyasis and Fakirs were similar to the villagers. So they helped the rebellious in various way like serving food and money, giving them shelter and the news of March of company's army etc. Even the weapons used by the rides like Javelin, sword and others were supplied by the village forger. In 'Majnu shaher Hakikat'<sup>17</sup> the author has written in Bengali.....

“kamarer mukhe hasi pailo sudin  
Tairi hoi kamarsale astra ratdin”

The villagers were sympathetic to the Sannyasis and Fakirs. The rebellious were also aware that they were part of indigenous society. As we have got the picture in 'Majnu Shaher Hakikat' that in defense of ryots and artision of Bengal and Bihar the Fakirs and Sannyasis rebelled against the company and its collaborator. As we get the Bengali verse .....

“Dese dese fire majnu vic nahi mile  
Vukhader kanna heri chot lage dile,  
Ghori chasi bhikharir loiyachhe vek,  
Ma beche chhele meye loiya bede reg.  
Joru goru bichi kini chole gaye gaye,  
Mara manusher gosth jentora khaye.  
Majnu fakir ailo ghuri kato jela ,  
Sangete asilo loiya bahutoro chela.  
Bura peere kohilen sob atihal,  
Suniya kadilo peer hoiya behal.

Kohilen dol badho nagader sathe,  
Toloyar leho beta jone jone hate.  
Hana dao gonja gonja ano chal dhan ,  
Bhukhader khedmote sope dao pran.  
Ferengo engrej vagaite hoibe,  
Iha chhara poth nai dekho beta bhebe.”  
“ Jutilo majnur sathe hajar fakir,  
Dekhite dekhite hoilo fakirer vir.  
Sannasi o nagaq sathe gao admijon ‘  
Kachharite hana dei khaddar karon.  
Companir kato kuthi luth hoiya gelo,  
Rajar sepia kato gayeb hoilo.  
Erase feraggagan chup kore much,  
Rayot himmat pai bhabe jabe dukh”.

From the above description, it is clear that the Fakir and Sannyasis aimed to quit foreign rulers only. They looted the courts of zamindars and other riches as they were the collaborator of company's administration. But a reverse picture is also here in the villages. In few records is there from which come out that the Sannyasis and Fakir were engaged in plundering the ryots of villages. The company's officials and Zamindars reported the rebellious as dacoits

Here it is also to be mention that the records which depicted the picture of rapine by rebellious to ryots were made by the company's officials and the Zamindars. But this kind of blames was not true. Because the Zamindars had claimed these in the intention of reduction of revenue and they were the victims of rebellion. The company's officials had done that because they wanted to show that the ryots were infavour of them. Intention was to abet the exploitation they had done on the ryots of Bengal. Even the letter from deputy supervisor of Bogra to the council of revenue on 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 1772 proved that the allegations to the rebellious were false. He wrote that the villagers served food and weapons to the rebellious and every kind of help they got from the villagers<sup>18</sup>. It proved that the villagers and the rebellious Sannyasis and Fakirs were united for the cause of eviction of the company's rule and from their point of view the rebellion was a nationalist one. This view was strengthen by the episode of Devi Choudharani who was in close relation is Bhabani Pathak. The little Choudharani proved that she was a Zamindar. That means few Zamindars also supported the rebellion to end the company's rule in Bengal. But in the record of Zamindars her name has not found. Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta has written that a Marathi Sannyasi at kali temple of Dacca used to say that the rebellious Sannyasis used the slogan Bandemataram<sup>19</sup>. If this story is true then undoubtedly the objective of the riders was to get the freedom of the company's rule. Historian Lester Hutchinson also argued so<sup>20</sup>.

The Sannyasi and Fakir rebellious offer 1780's become weaker gradually. The memories of famine were going to be pale and in 1793 AD the introduction of permanent

settlement by Cornwallis strengthened the administrative set up of company. Permanent settlement had created a very loyal Zamindar class who began to act as sound political weapon against the rebellious. The death of Majnu Shah in 1786 AD and Bhabani Pathak in 1787AD no doubt weakened the rebellious. The responsibility of maintain law and order in the village was shifted to 'Darogas' which created strong hindrance to the rebellious. Even afterwards the Fakirs were active in Bihar and North Bengal region. In 1793 AD a band of Fakir lead by Ramjani shah and Jahuri Shah ride across the Dinajpur and Malda district and looted rupees 19000 from Zamindars and money lenders<sup>21</sup>.

As the company government accelerated the brutality against rebellious to suppress then with extending army and emergence of communal division between Hindu Sannyasis and Islami Fakir also weakened the spirit of rebellious. They engaged themselves at the last phase in plundering the ryots of other warship. We have got the rhyme in villages of Dinajpur which reveal the plundering activities of rebellious. Even little rhyme local folk Bengali language of the villages of Dinajpur depicted such kind of picture. Such as-

“fakir ailo boli grame poilo hur’  
Pachhuya bepari palaye gachhe chhera gur.  
Narilok na bande chul na pore kapor,  
Sorbossa ghore thuya pathare deyi nor.  
Haluya chhariya palaye langol joyal,  
Poyati palaye chhari koler chhaoyal.  
Baro manusher nari palaye sange niya dasi,  
Joter maddhe dhon loiya palaye sannasi.”<sup>22</sup>

But it was not the whole picture of rebellion. In the last phase due to several causes, the character of rebellion had changed – Introduction of permanent settlement reduced the pressure of taxes on ryots primarily which made them aloof, the villager began to forget about the company made famine and as a result lake of food and provisions made the rebellious oppressive to the villagers. Another reason may be that with the passes of time the members of disbanded armies in the north and western India joined with the rebellious those intentions were not good which changed the character of the rebellion.

Though the Fakirs were very much active in north Bengal the authority also had taken stapes strongly to suppress them. The company government declared an award against the leaders to the public for information. Even that Sobhan Ali alone with a band of Fakirs plundered in Dinajpur and Malda district in 1796 AD. During this ride, Jahuri Shah and Matiullah were arrested and sent to prison for a long time. But Sobhan Ali was escaped<sup>23</sup>. In 1799 AD government declared four thousand rupees for information of Sobhan Ali. After then no mention of him had been found. It is accepted that in 1800 AD the Sannyasi and Fakir rebellion, the first protest movement against the company's rule came to an end. This first and armed rebellion established an instance that was followed by the latter extremist freedom fighter. The Dinajpur district also we find a glorious history of freedom struggle in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Notes and References

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