

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPRAISAL OF THE SANNYASI REBELLION

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The Sannyasi rebellion is an important episode in the early colonial rule in India. The rebellion started 1750 onwards but took a violent turn since 1773 when Warren Hastings assumed the Governor-Generalship of Bengal. The movement covered a wide range of Bengal and Bihar and continued for a long time. Historians have not only debated what events constitute the rebellion, but have also varied on the significance of the rebellion in Indian history. The colonial historiography mainly portrays them either as dacoits, bandits or plunderers. Some historians refer to it as an early war for independence from foreign rule, since the right to collect tax had been given to the British East India Company after the Battle of Buxar in 1764. Marxist views the uprising as an early peasant rebellion against the British colonial exploitation.

### I

In the present context the term sanyasi refers to the Dasnami sanyasi. We find that different words were used for them in the British documents; official accounts as well as by various authors. In the British documents and official accounts, they have been identified variously as 'gypsies of India', 'lawless mendicants', 'trading pilgrims', 'fanatics', 'religious vagrants', etc. W.W.Hunter<sup>1</sup> identified them as a set of 'lawless banditti.' H.H. Wilson considered them as 'erratic beggars' and 'religious vagrants' of the Hindu community.<sup>2</sup> G.S.Ghurey<sup>3</sup> and B.D.Tripathi<sup>4</sup> include them in the fold of Sadhus.

The term Sannyäsi refers to the Dasnämi Sannyäsis founded by the four disciples of the Great Sankaracharya. The four disciples of Sankar gathered ten disciples who were known as Dasanamis or ten names- Giri (hill), Puri (city), Bharati (learning), Ban (wood), Aranaya (forest), Parbat (mountain), Sagar (ocean), Tirta (temple), Ashram

(hermitage), and Saraswati (perfect knowledge). In north India, particularly Benares, they were commonly known as Gossä'ins. Similarly, some of them were identified as Nägas because of their practice of going nude in public. Thus the ten orders were more or less distributed over the four maths and akhras established by Sankaracharya.<sup>5</sup>

The Sannyasis were a wandering people no doubt but were neither unconcerned with worldly matters nor well-versed in the scriptures. They fought against the East India Company in the second half of eighteenth-century Bengal. Warrior ascetics first arose in India after the establishment of Delhi Sultanate. The earlier existence of violent conflict between kings and temples is documented in the Rajtarangini in the history of Kashmir. The cause of these conflicts was mainly economic, but during Muslim rule under Delhi sultanate this economic conflict was given a religion sanction. But in fact, they became politically significant only after the collapse of the Mughal Empire and particularly after British activities created political and economic chaos in the second half of eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

The Dasnami sanyasi played their role as mercenary soldiers on behalf of the regional powers. Such was their success as mercenary soldiers that regional powers even entrusted them with service in the field of civil and military administration. Their alignment with the state power increased their strength and resources. They also began to act as semi-independent chiefs and warlords.<sup>7</sup>

It appears that the Dasnämis, though of a religious background, were involved in multifarious. Their alignment with the state power increased their strength and resources. They also began to act as semi-independent chiefs and warlords. The Dasnämi Sannyäsis thus not only grew in strength and position but amassed large tracts of ma'äfi land (rent-free land). The resources derived from land and monetary privileges sanctioned by the Indian powers helped them to extend their influence in the field of economy. An important branch of the activities of the Dasnämis was investment in trade and money lending.<sup>8</sup> The Sannyasis would travel to North Bengal to visit shrines and sites of pilgrimage there.. During their travels, it was customary for them to collect a sizeable amount of alms from the local landlords.

The year 1765 is a landmark in the history of British

administration in India, for in that year the East India Company obtained the *dewani* and became directly connected with the revenue administration of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.<sup>9</sup> The British increased the Diwani amount by double in the first year they came to power and by ten per cent more the year after that. A number of their policy moves had a negative effect on the economy, one of which was the famine of 1770. The landlords could no longer afford to pay the travelling holy men. Warren Hastings tried to bar their entry into Bengal and severely restricted their movements within the state. This effectively put a ban on the kind of lifestyle the Sannyasis had been practicing since ancient times.

Then in 1771, a hundred and fifty fakirs were killed for no good reason. This was a trigger for the rebellion to kick start. The rebels mainly engaged in guerilla warfare. They knew the countryside better than the back of their hands and had been nomadically travelling their whole lives. They were extremely mobile and could disappear at a moment's notice. Governor General Warren Hastings kept sending his best men to contain the rebellion- lieutenant Brennan, Captain Grant, Captain De Mackenzie, etc. But the rebels kept thriving. They did suffer a major defeat at the hands of Major Feltham in 1771, but managed to recover admirably.

The Fakirs and Sannyasis used to operate their activities in Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Cooch Behar or in other parts of eastern Bengal by using the rivers like Ganga, Kosi and Gandak. The river Brahmaputra, Teesta and Mahananda helped them to communicate with Assam and Bhutan.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The main Historical factor on which Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1882 novel, "Anandamath" has been built up is Sannyasi rebellion. Defining Sannyasi, Bankim Chandra writes, "They were generally a compact body, well-read, well-built, and deft in the use of arms and qualified in other ways."<sup>11</sup> The sannyasi do not believe in varna or caste system. They do not make any distinction between Brahmins and Sudrasi.<sup>12</sup>

Citing the causes of Sannyasi rebellion, Bankin Chandra in Anandmath describes the miserable condition of people of Bengal during dual administration of the East India Company." The English

raised the revenue of the province, but they had not taken up the work of protecting the life and property of its people. The work of collection then lay with the English and that of the protection of the life and property of the Bengalees lay with the wretched traitor, Mir Jaffer.<sup>13</sup>

The condition of people became worse during famine. Food became dear due to bad harvest. First, people began to beg. But soon there was none to give alms, they then began to starve. Then they began to suffer from diseases. They sold their cattle, sold their ploughs, ate up the seed grains, sold their houses and their holdings, and at last their daughters and sons and wives. Then there could not be found buyers of men, everybody wanted to sell. They then fed on leaves, grass and weeds for want of other food ; the lower classes and wild tribes fed on dogs, mice and cats. Many fled and died of starvation away from their homes. Those who did not fly away died from starvation or from diseases brought on by eating unwholesome food.<sup>14</sup>

In this miserable condition, peasants of the village have turned robbers for hunger.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Bankimchandra describes colonial misrule as main cause of Sannyasi rebellion. The Sannyasi rebellion according to him is a revolt of patriots against the unjust and tyrannical order of the day.

According to Dr. R. C. Majumdar, the movement was initiated by the anti-British activities of two different groups, Hindu *Sannyasis* and Muslim *Fakirs*, but they gained *momentum* from the support they received from the starving peasantry, dispossessed zamin-dars and disbanded soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

But he has not discussed the motives under which two different religious communities come together to make almost annual incursions into Bengal after 1763.<sup>17</sup> He also cite economic distress after the famine of 1770 as the major cause for the larger public support to the movement.<sup>18</sup>

In 1772 they defeated a company of sepoy and killed its commander Captain Thomas. In 1773, Captain Edwards also suffered a disastrous defeat. Further encounters between the sanyasis and the British Forces took places all over Western Bengal and Bihar, but the sanyasis could not be checked. The sanyasis, however, gradually moved their operations from Bengal and Bihar and probably joined the Marathas against the British.<sup>19</sup> According to him, economic distress and famine was the main cause of sanyasis movement.

A.N. Chandra criticised colonial historiography for completely ignoring the agrarian content of the movement and just describing the movement as an attack of outsider vagrant Sannyasis or wanderers of Hindoostan.<sup>20</sup> A.N. Chandra (1977) in his book extremely supports the nationalist approach and considers the movement as a nationalist outburst in an elementary form. These Sannyasis and Faqirs had already begun to settle as agricultural people in different parts of Bengal and Bihar during Mughal rule. While numerous Sannyasis, generally belonging to Giri, settled in Mymensingh and other districts of East Bengal, a substantial number of Faqirs also selected North Bengal, containing several religious centres and dargahs, for their settlements. Though their main occupation was cultivation, they did not give up their former life as pilgrims. They regularly took part in pilgrimage as Sannyasis and Faqirs. He also cited in detail about the causes of movement like enhancement in land revenue under colonial rule, devastating famine of 1770 and imposition of various taxes on pilgrims.<sup>21</sup>

The inroads of the Sannyasis, Fakirs and their followers in Bengal and Bihar have been referred to in the British records as 'banditti' activities of dacoits. But these, at least many, were not so. The peasants rose against the British with the help of these Sannyasis and Fakir and both were co-partners and equally responsible for the uprising. Activates of both, must, therefore, correctly termed as revolution or rebellion against the British, first of its nature.<sup>22</sup> Throughout Bengal and Bihar groups of people headed by Sannyasis and Fakirs fought the British and this fight for freedom continued for 38 years. Uncoordinated though it was, it was the first freedom fight against the British.

### III

According to Warren Hastings, the *Sannyasis* were roving pilgrims having neither homes nor families but were hardy and bold, enthusiastic to a degree surpassing credit and held in high veneration by the people.<sup>23</sup> Side by side there were Muslim *Fakirs* too who had organized themselves on the pattern of the Hindu *Sannyasis* and sometimes united in their common action against the Company's force. In his letter to the Court of Directors, Warren Hastings writes, "A set of lawless banditti," wrote the Council in 1773, 'known under the name of Sannyasis or Faqirs, have long infested these countries ; and, under

pretence of religious pilgrimage, have been accustomed to traverse the chief part of Bengal, begging, stealing, and plundering wherever they go, and as it best suits their convenience to practise.<sup>24</sup>

The history of this people is curious. They inhabit, or rather possess, the country lying south of the hills of Tibet from Caubul to China. They go mostly naked. They have neither towns, houses, nor families, but rove continually from place to place, recruiting their numbers with the healthiest children they can steal in the countries through which they pass. Thus they are the stoutest and most active men in India.<sup>25</sup> Many are merchants. They are all pilgrims, and held by all castes of Gentoos in great veneration.

This infatuation prevents our obtaining any intelligence of their motions, or aid from the country against them, notwithstanding very rigid orders which have been published for these purposes, insomuch that they often appear in the heart of the province as if they dropped from heaven. They are hardy, bold, and enthusiastic to a degree surpassing credit. Such are the Senassies, the gipsies of Hindostan.<sup>26</sup>

In his letter to George Colebrooke dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1773, Warren Hastings has narrated about the disturbances committed by the sannyasis who annually infest the Bengal province during spring season in bodies of 1000 and sometimes 10,000 in their pilgrimages to Juggernath.<sup>27</sup>

In an operation against the Sannyasis, Captain Thomas lost his life. By the effect of famine, the collection of revenue has also affected in northern districts. But Warren Hastings cites the major cause for fall in revenue due to disturbances created by sannyasis.<sup>28</sup>

In his letter to George Colebrooke Warren Hastings has written, 'after police action against the sannyasi, they changes their intention and instead of crossing Barhamputra river they and returned in several bands of about 2000 or 3000 each in different parts of the Rangpur and Dinagpur provinces. For in spite of the strictest orders issued and the severest penalties threatened to the inhabitants, in case they fail in giving intelligence of the approach of the Senassies.<sup>29</sup>

Several parties of the Senassies having entered into the Purnia province, burning and destroying many villages there, the collector applied to Captain Brooke, who was just arrived at Panity, near

Rajahmahl with his new- raised battalion of light infantry. officer immediately crossed the river, and entered upon measures against the Senassies ; and had very near fallen in with a party of them, just as they were crossing the Cosa river, to escape out of that province ; he arrived on the opposite bank before their rear had entirely crossed ; but too late to do any execution among them.<sup>30</sup> It is apparent now that the Senassies are glad to escape as fast as they can out of the Company's possessions. On account of the various depredations which the Senassies have committed, the revenue must fall short in some of the Company's districts; as well from real as from pretended losses.<sup>31</sup>

The Senyasis threatened us with the same disturbances at the beginning of this year as we experienced from them the last. But by being early provided to oppose them, and one or two severe checks which they received in their first attempts, we have kept the country clear of them. A party of horse which we employed in pursuit of them, has chiefly contributed to intimidate these ravagers, who seem to pay little regard to our sepoy, having so much the advantage of them in speed, on which they entirely rely for their safety. It is my intention to proceed more effectually against them by expelling them from their fixed residences which they have established in the north-eastern quarter of the province, and by making severe examples of the zemindars who have afforded them protection or assistance.<sup>32</sup>

For his monumental work, *Annals of rural Bengal*, W.W. Hunter has consulted numerous contemporary official records of the East India Company. Quoting letter of 1773 of Calcutta council, he writes, "A set of lawless banditti known under the name of Sanyasis or Faquirs, have long infested these countries ; and, under pretence of religious pilgrimage, have been accustomed to traverse the chief part of Bengal, begging, stealing, and plundering wherever they go, and as it best suits their convenience to practise."<sup>33</sup>

In the years subsequent to the famine, their ranks were swollen by a crowd of starving peasants who had neither seed nor implements to recommence cultivation with, and the cold weather of 1772 brought them down upon the harvest fields of Lower Bengal, burning, plundering, ravaging, ' in bodies of fifty thousand men.'<sup>34</sup>

The collectors called out the military but after a temporary success our Sepoy ' were a length totally defeated, and Captain Thomas (their

leader), with almost the whole party, cut off.<sup>35</sup> On the 31st March 1773, Warren Hastings plainly acknowledges that the commander who had succeeded Captain Thomas ' unhappily underwent the same fate;' that four battalions of the army were then actively engaged against the banditti, but that, in spite of the militia levies called from the landholders, their combined operations had been fruitless. The revenue could not be collected; the inhabitants made common cause with the marauders, and the whole rural administration was unhinged.<sup>36</sup> Such incursions were annual episodes in what some have been pleased to represent as the still life of Bengal.

Hunter writes that the English found Bengal in the hands of banditti. Their country-houses were robber strongholds, and the early English administrators of Bengal have left it on record, that a gang-robbery never occurred without a landed proprietor being at the bottom of it. They frequently dressed themselves in the Company's uniform, with a view to wholesale extortion from the villagers,—a fraud rendered so plausible by the disorderly conduct of our own troops on the line of march, that a series of stringent enactments failed to put it down. Lawlessness breeds lawlessness, and the miserable peasantry, stripped of their hoard for the winter, were forced to become plunderers in turn.<sup>37</sup>

Another Colonial author Colonel Sleeman has the sanyasi movement in these words, "This proto-nationalist imagining of the sadhu patriot would counter a British colonial representation of the ascetic as little more than a criminal disguised in ochre robes, quite literally a variation on the thag typologies of the early nineteenth century."<sup>38</sup>

William Sleeman himself, creator of the Department of Thagi and Dakoiti, argued in the 1830s that, "This is mass of religious mendicants who infest every part of India, and subsist on the fruits of all manner of crime, and upon the fear of the people."<sup>39</sup> They are all vegabonds and lazy drones; and dazzle the eyes of the people with a false zeal, and them believe that whatever comes out of their mouth is an oracle.<sup>40</sup>

Sleeman writes, "Three-fourths of these religious mendicants, whether Hindoos or Muhammadans, rob and steal, and a very great portion of them murder their victims before they rob them; There is hardly any species of crime that is not throughout India perpetrated by

men in the disguise of these religious mendicants; and almost all such mendicants are really men in disguise; for Hindoos of any caste can become Bairagis and Gosains; and Muhammadans of any grade can become Fakirs."<sup>41</sup> Sleeman also alleged that monks were guilty of spreading seditious rumours, and recommended the compulsory registration of all such individuals according to a strict Vagrant.

Jamini. Mohan Ghosh in his book strongly supports the colonial view. He attempted to reconstruct the sanyasi movement on the basis of official documents of the East India Company. Being a loyal Rai Sahib of the British Raj, he expressed the same view as previously described by Hunter and Gleig etc. He said little about why the sanyasis came in conflict with colonial power. He supported the views of Warren Hastings and Hunter by expressing them as a set of lawless bandits who collect funds on the name of charity every year while travelling to Bengal.<sup>42</sup>

In new Cambridge History of India (1987), P.J.Marshall has described sanyasi movement in the following words, "A large body of Hindu sanyasis who travelled from North India to different parts of Bengal to visit shrines. En route to the shrines, it was customary for many of these ascetics to exact a religious tax from the headmen and zamindars or regional landlords, the Dasnami naga sanyasis who likewise visited Bengal on pilgrimage mixed with money lending opportunities."<sup>43</sup> To the British, these ascetics were looters and must be stopped from collecting money that belonged to the Company and possibly from even entering the province. It was felt that a large body of people on the move was a possible threat.

William Pinch (2006) in his book 'Warrior Ascetics And Indian Empires' traces warrior ascetics who variously called themselves sanyasis, gosains, bairagis, and nagas - from the beginning of the sixteenth century. He suggests first, a process of expansion and institutionalization during the seventeenth century under Mughal rule; second, a peak of influence in the eighteenth century when armed ascetics were employed as inexpensive and well-armed infantry and cavalry soldiers; and third, an incomplete domestication of militant ascetics under the suspicious vigilance of British rule.<sup>44</sup>

William Pinch also argues that the terms of Mughal military service increased recruitment of lower caste boys, strengthened the

discipline and identity of fighting akharas as non-biological corporate groups, especially in Dasnami Saiva orders, and routinized their employment as shock troops of the infantry. At the same time, fighting ascetics also operated independently in wandering and predatory bands.<sup>45</sup>

W.R.Pinch Writes, "The long history of the armed ascetic reveals, then an important phase in the institutionalization of a transformative ethic, perhaps a kind of home-grown secularism, based on tapas, grounded in the akhara — wherein people of widely differing origins could come together and produce a new kind of corporate identity. Hence the armed insurgency of gosains in the 18th and 19th centuries was ideologically inchoate and generally reactionary — and, hence, doomed to classification as subaltern failure."<sup>46</sup>

#### IV

Marxists view the uprising as an early peasant rebellion against the British colonial exploitation. The origin of Marxist Historiography of the Sanyasi and Fakir uprisings can be traced back to Suprakash Roy's *Bharater Krishak Bidroho o Ganatantrik Sangram*. This book Portrays all the pre- 1857 Indian uprisings as 'anti-imperialist', 'anti-feudal' struggles.<sup>47</sup>

David N. Lorenzen, has discussed in length about sanyasi and fakir movement. According to him warrior ascetics first arose in India sometime after establishment of Delhi sultanate. Under muslim this economic conflict continued but was also given religious sanction. These orders became politically significant after the collapse of the Mughal empire, and more particularly after British activities created political and economic chaos in the second half of the eighteenth century. The basis of their conflict was in large measure economic.<sup>48</sup>

#### V

The four decades of sanyasi and fakir skirmishes with Company troops in Bengal possesses many of the elementary features of subaltern insurgency — the agrarian strife that seems to have acted as the spark, the sporadic and inchoate nature of the sanyasi. Ranjit Guha writes, "Discrete powers of the landlord, the moneylender and the official came to form, under colonial rule, a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant. His subjection to this triumvirate—sarkari, sakukari and

zamindari— was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several instances. For the appropriation of his surplus was brought about by the authority wielded over local societies and markets by the landlord-moneylenders and a secondary capitalism working closely with them and by the encapsulation of that authority in the power of the colonial state.”<sup>49</sup>

Guha also argues that the The peasant obviously knew what he was doing when he rose in revolt. The fact that this was designed primarily to destroy the authority of the super ordinate elite and carried no elaborate blueprint for its replacement does not put it outside the realm of politics.<sup>50</sup>

Ranjit Guha also writes that the activities of the sannyasis and the fakirs in the 1770s have been left out because not enough is known at the present state of research about the volume and character of actual peasant involvement in them.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

My contention is that the Sanyasi movement was first movement against the oppressive policy of the colonial rule. Although this movement was started by religious leaders to restore the privileges they enjoyed prior to the British rule like collection of religious tax and freedom to pilgrimage, it was supported by peasants community also due to distress economic condition after the Bengal famine of 1770. One significant feature of this movement was Hindu- Muslim unity. The Sanyasi movement was a peasant movement and causes of this movement were religious as well as economic.

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## ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE OF TAMILNADU

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### SYNOPSIS

*Struggle for freedom is an epoch making event in the history of India. The advent of British revolutionised an entirely new phase in the Indian society besides the transformation caused by experiencing constant invasions and conflicts. Social revolution which aims to change people in all walks of life necessarily involves political participation. The bridge to freedom struggle will be filled only when role of Indian women who participated is highlighted. This political transformation has gained momentum and assumes a great deal of importance. Women in large numbers had undauntedly fought for India's freedom with their daring true spirits and courage though they faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships. Their thirst for freedom and its achievement is what we enjoy today in our motherland India. The entire history of freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of women. Their extraordinary courage, integrity, self-respect, combined with the spirit of sacrifice, dedication and devotion to motherland, made them champions of freedom movement. These distinct qualities have symbolized the spirit and qualities of Indian womanhood. The exceptional contribution of women in Tamilnadu towards the freedom struggle deserves a special focus in the history. Though it is difficult to compile the voluminous role of women in Freedom struggle, yet an attempt has been made here to highlight their active participation in various movements in Tamilnadu.*

**“When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place”- Mahatma Gandhi.**

Freedom movement is a great event in the history of India. For the first time ever, people of India had shed their differences and disparities that contributed to their enslavement and disunity in the