

## **Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bihar (1767-1800)**

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### **Abstract**

*The Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion is an important episode in the early colonial rule in Bengal. 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. It has already drawn the attention of historians viz. Jamini Mohan Ghosh to the present time. There is also a distorted reflection of rebellion in Bankim Chandra's Anandamath for which Bankim Chandra has been accused. The present article implores how the Sannyasis and Fakirs launched their campaign in an anti-colonial attitude against the British Raj And their trusted zamindars. It was only possible due to their wide range of activities and organized network. Religious pilgrimage was no doubt a factor for combining the Sannyasis and Fakirs to launch a spontaneous movement for a long time. The dense forest and rivers also helped them to move different parts of Bengal and Bihar and also to build up an organizational network with the other parts of India.*

### **Geography and Physical features of Bihar**

The Sannyasi and Fakir uprising was an important episode in the early years of British rule in India. Although the uprising affected a very wide area of Bengal, for nearly half a century, neighbouring Bihar could not escape from the insurgency of the Fakirs and Sannyasis. The historians, both past and present, tried to show how the rebellion affected the East India Company's administration in Bengal. Their activities in Bihar have been simply ignored. The present paper intends to throw light on some specific aspects of their rebellion in Bihar, viz., the geography and history of the rebellion, the organization through which they were able to operate their activities, reasons of their sudden emergence as insurgents, and also to find out the link between the rebellion that took place in Bengal with various parts of Bihar.

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The present paper also seeks to explain whether the rebellion of the Sannyasis and Fakirs in Bihar was a separate movement or was just an offshoot of their insurgency in Bengal. Another question which needs to be answered in this context is why the Fakirs and Sannyasis chose Bihar as one of their hunting grounds. Geographically, Bihar was closely connected with the northern districts of Bengal, particularly with Malda, Dinajpur and Rangpur. Even there was a direct link between Bihar and Morung in southern Nepal. Even the vast region of Northern India, particularly, Benares, Allahabad and Mirzapur also had close links with Bihar. This geographical contiguity could be strategically used by people coming from the North-West towards Bihar and Bengal by river routes. 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, Coosee [Kushi] and Gunduck [Gandak]. The river Brahmaputra, Teesta and Mahananda helped them to communicate with Assam and Bhutan. As Glazier has remarked “In 1787 the Tista river which had flowed south-west into Dinajpur district, finding its way to the Ganges met with some obstructions in its course and turned its mass of water into a small branch running south-east into the Brahmaputra forcing its way among the fields and over the country in every direction and filling the Ghagat, Manas and other river to overflowing (the district of Rangpur, p.22).”

Bihar was situated in such a geographical location that it was not difficult for the Fakirs and Sannyasis to establish close link with Morung and the territories adjoining Nepal. This explains why the Fakirs and Sannyasis were chased in northern or eastern Bengal by the Companies forces, they took shelter in Bihar and from there they escaped either to Northern India or to Nepal. From their centers in Northern India like Allahabad, Benares and Mirzapur, their routes to their principal spoliation in Bengal ran through Bihar, and herein lies the importance of Bihar in the history of Fakir and Sannyasi uprising. Besides they had to fortify their subsidiary centers in various parts of Bihar and maintained active contacts with Nepal for purpose of trade and religious pilgrimage.

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. As L. S. S. O'Malley<sup>1</sup> has observed “the internal administration was left largely in the hands of the great landholders or zamindars who collected the revenue of the tracts under them and made it over the Nawabs Officers” In 1769 East India Company Officials under the designation of ‘Supervisors’ began to collect the revenue in the districts. Jamini Mohan Ghosh pointed out that “operations of the marauding

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<sup>1</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under the British Rule*, pp. 85-86.

bands begin to be recorded in reports and letters” since the period. Vincent Smith<sup>2</sup> also observed “their incursions into Bengal ceased in the second year of the administration of Hastings, and history does not mention any further depredation by them in other provinces. The bands evidently melted away when the Bengal hunting ground was closed by vigilance of the Governor”. In fact, Bengal, or parts of it, Bihar continued to be a hunting ground for some years to come, though Fakirs were more prominent than Sannyasis.

In order to understand the nature of the Fakir and Sannyasi rebellion that took place in various parts of Bihar and Bengal, it is necessary to have a rough idea of their jurisdictions. Purnea extended on the south-east to the river Mahananda including the western portion of the modern district of Malda. The eastern portion of Malda was included in Dinajpur which had the Mahananda on the south-west. Dinajpur included most of the modern district of Bagura, the Sirajganj of sub-division of Pabna and the Tangail sub-division of Mymensingh with the exception of Pargana Pukhuria on the north-west. It thus included the extensive Parganas of Attia, Kagmari, Barabazu, Silberis etc..Rajshahi which was co-extensive with the huge Rajshahi zamindari of the Maharaja of Natore extending over thirteen thousand square miles, included the present districts of Rajshahi, parts of Rangpur and Pabna. It even extended beyond the Ganges to some Parganas in the present districts of Jessore and Nadia. The rest of present district of Mymensingh including some portion of the north-west (Pargana Karaibari of Goalpara district in Assam) was included in Dacca under its chief. The above gives a rough outline of the revenue jurisdiction of the early British period. It was a very inconvenient arrangement from the point of view of the Resident officials who had to devise measures of protection or defense when suddenly confronted with presence of bodies of Fakirs and Sannyasis with their jurisdictions.

### **Origins and Identities of the Sannyasis**

In order arrive at a clear understanding of the subject, the first essentials are to establish the connotation of the terms ‘Sannyasi’ and ‘Fakir’, the origins of these people, and their identities. As for the Sannyasis of the uprising, they were certainly not what the term ‘Sannyasi’ literally means, i.e., one who has renounced the world for the sake of a spiritual life, since these Sannyasis were very much men of the world. According to the conservative Hindu tradition, s Sannyasi is a religious ascetic who has renounced all worldly concerns. The term ‘Sannyasi’ is similarly defined by the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*<sup>3</sup>. Usually, he is a wandering monk without any permanent residence. But the Sannyasis of our study

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Smith, *History of India*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. VI, New Year, 1981, pp. 192-193.

hardly conformed to these definitions. They were a wandering people no doubt but were neither unconcerned with worldly matters nor well-versed in the scriptures. H. H. Wilson<sup>4</sup> considered them as ‘erratic beggars’ and ‘religious vagrants’ of the Hindu community. G. S. Ghurey<sup>5</sup> and B. D. Tripathi<sup>6</sup> include them in the fold of Sadhus. Whereas, in the official documents and accounts, they have been identified variously as “gypsies of Hindusthan”, “lawless mendicants”, “disorderly tribe of people”, “trading pilgrims”, “religious vagrants”, “fanatics”, “up-countrymen” and “gymnosophysts”. W. W. Hunter<sup>7</sup> identified the Sannyasis as a ‘set of lawless banditti’.

In spite of such conflicting views, it is not difficult to arrive at a realistic identification of the Sannyasi. The term Sannyasi here refers to the Dasanami Sannyasis whose origin can be traced to the ninth century A.D. In Bihar, they were commonly known as ‘Gossains’. Some of them were identified as *nagas* because of their practice of going nude in public. Each of the ten orders was divided into *Nagas* (naked) and resident Sannyasis. There was sharp distinction between them. In the first place, the resident Sannyasis were permitted to marry, but the *nagas* were celibates. The married Sannyasi leading a settled life were known as *Gossains*. Secondly, the resident Sannyasis lived in *maths* whereas the *nagas* lived in *akhras*. Thirdly, the resident Sannyasis wore full dresses of orange and blue colour, but the *nagas* wore the *Kaupin* or loin cloth. Fourthly, the *nagas* generally smeared ashes on the face and the body, and used shackles of iron chains. These habits adopted by the *nagas* drew attention of foreign observers during the British period and even before. But the resident Sannyasis did not smear ashes on the body, nor used iron chains.

### ***Maths and Akhras***

The *maths* and *akhras* were widely distributed in India. Besides the four original *maths* established by Sankaracharya, others were established in different places of India, including Bihar, which had become the major strongholds of the Sannyasis. In Bihar, Buchanan-Hamilton, the contemporary British observer, saw a number of *maths* during his survey of different parts of Bengal and Bihar. In Bihar he saw them *thana* Biloti of the district of Sahabad and Karangiya, Tibothu, Mohaniya and Ramgar division in Bihar. A *math* was established at Bodh-Gaya in Bihar in the year 1590 A.D. (997 Fasli). The first *Mohanth* of the Bodh-Gaya *math* was Ghamandi Giri. There is a detailed list of the *Mohanths* of the Bodh-

<sup>4</sup> H. H. Wilson, *Hindu Religions*, Calcutta, 1899, p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> G. S. Ghurey, *Indian Sadhus*, Bombay, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> B. D. Tripathi, *Sadhus of India : The Sociological View*, Bombay, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> W. W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, Calcutta, 1965 (reprint), p. 44.

Gaya from 1590 to 1892 A.D. when this report<sup>8</sup> was published. The *Mahanths* of the *math* were given patronage by the Mughal Emperors. There is a *sanad* granted under the seal of Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great by which a large tract of land was sanctioned in favour of them for performance of their religious rites. *Akhras* also came into existence in Bihar. Mahanirvani, one of the oldest *akhras* of the Dasanami *nagas* was founded in the Siddheswar temple at Kundaugud in Chhotonagpur. Buchanan-Hamilton<sup>9</sup> also noticed the existence of few *akhras* at Lokmanpur in Bhagalpur during his survey in early nineteenth century.

### **Identities of the Fakirs**

As for the fakirs connected with the rebellion were poor men belonging to madariya group of sufi silsila. H. H. Wilson identified them as religious beggars of Islam, whereas Buchanan-Hamilton considered all Hindu and Muslims religious mendicants in Bihar as fakirs. R. M. Martin was not so ambiguous like Buchanan-Hamilton. According to him the religious persons who were most respected among the muslims, were called Fakirs<sup>10</sup>. According to him the fakirs were in the habit of “shying”, “groaning” and “muttering prayers”. Under the circumstances it is pertinent to discuss about the origin of the madariya group of fakirs. The Persian manuscript *Mirat-ul-Madari*<sup>11</sup> and the texts written in Urdu and Persian refer them as the followers of Syed Badiuddin Qutb-ul-Madar, a distant descendant of Hazrat Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam. The immediate followers of Syed Badiuddin were divided into four *tariqas* namely, viz., *Madariya Khademan*, *Madariya Dewangan*, *Madariya Asheqan* and *Madariya Taleban*. The *Madariya Dewangan* were also known as *Madariya Fakirs*, who took an active participation in the fakir rebellion of eighteenth century Bihar and Bengal. The *fakiri* tradition started from Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin, the immediate followers of Syed Badiuddin Qutb-ul-Madar. Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin was brought from Arab. After the death of Syed Badiuddin 838/840 A. H. Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin settled himself at Hilsa in Bihar. His brother Syed Ahmad Badpa concentrated himself at Kalhuaban in Azamgarh district. The fakir uprising against the British was actually a revolt of the *Madariya Fakirs*.

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<sup>8</sup> G. A. Grierson, *A brief history of Bodh-Gaya Math, District Gaya*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1893). The report was actually compiled by Anugraha Narayan Singh Bahadur, Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector under the order of G. A. Grierson, Magistrate cum Collector of Gaya District.

<sup>9</sup> Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An account of the District of Shahabad in 1812-1813*, Patna, 1934, pp. 52-53, 78, 131, 140.

<sup>10</sup> R. M. Martin, *The History Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India etc.*, London, 1838, Vol. I, p. 142, Vol. III, p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> *Mirat-ul-Madari*, A Persian Manuscript written by Abdur Rahman Chisti, now available in Khuda Bux Oriental Public Library, Patna, consulted by the author.

## Dargahs

The *dargah* of Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin, situated at Hilsa, had a long story. Abdul Latif, son of Abdullah Abbassi of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, made mention of this mausoleum in his diary in 1608 A.D. When he accompanied his patron Mirza Abul Hasan, the newly appointed Dewan of Bengal in a river trip from Agra to Rajmahal. He wrote “Hilsa is a village in the jurisdiction of Bihar, and containing the tomb of Shah Chaman (Jaman) Chisti (Jati). It has a lofty dome in which a pitcher called *kalas* in hindi tongue .. some good men have seen the phenomena and I am writing what they told me.”<sup>12</sup> The mausoleum contained eight tombs, the largest and the western most being that of Syed Jamaluddin Madari. Besides the tomb, there was a *khanqah* and *naubat khana*. The *dargah* was a square built structure and had a wooden doorway supported by stone pillars. There were many niches made of bricks and decorated with floral designs. It was said that Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin used to stay here for a long time and after of his death a tomb was built by a merchant in year 1604 A.D. during the reign of Akbar. It appears from the inscription that the *dargah* of Shah Jaman Madari was built in the presence of venerable Shaikh Alam Adam Shah Jaman Madari during the time of Sultan Sher Shah. It is said that Shah Jaman Madari died in the 925 A.H. He was also noted pithy and learning and thousands of his followers were benefited by him. This *dargah* was actually a place of pilgrimage of the Madariya Fakirs during and after the period of rebellion. Prof. Syed Hasan Askari<sup>13</sup> in the second half of twentieth century took an interview of the *Khadems* attached to the *dargah*. His observation should be mentioned in this context “A very old and seeming reliable man .. gave the information that though this practice (the *urs*) still continues many more things which he had seen with his own eyes had now become the things of the past. Some forty or fifty years before, every year, on the occasion of annual *urs* or fair which falls on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, about a hundred and two of *Malang* Fakirs of the Madari order used to flock to this place, besides many others, and there were fifty-two chowks in the village where they stayed. They were provided with food and in the time of departure each was given a ‘Rumal’ of one yard of cloth and 4 ‘Gorakhpuri paisa’. On such occasions fire set to a huge collection of fuel timber within the enclosure in front of the shrine and when it was ablaze the *malang* used to trample upon the timber and reduced them to ashes, crying all along “*Ya Ali, Ya Ali, Dam Madar, Dam Madar*”. [The technical word for this practice of running through fire on religious occasions is ‘*Dhamal*’. This superstitious ceremony was in vogue in Hilsa, Mackwanpore and other places of UP.

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<sup>12</sup> This diary was collected by Sir Jadunath Sircar and published in the *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*.

<sup>13</sup> Syed Hasan Askari, “The Mausoleum of a saint of Madari order of Sufis”, *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. IXVIII, 1949, pp. 40-52; *Islams and Muslims in Medieval Bihar*, Patna, 1989, p. 27.

As the *akhras* and *maths* were the Sannyasi's centers of activities the *dargahs* were the centers of the Fakir's activities. The word *dargah* means a tomb constructed on the *mazar* of a pir, belonging to any sufi order. Besides the *dargah* of Shah Madar at Mackwanpore in Kanpur district, the other important *dargahs* of the Madariya fakirs were in Bihar. The *dargah* of Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin, Shah Kangan Dewana and other madariya fakirs were situated at Hilsa at Bihar. Buchanan-Hamilton was also recorded the existence of some burial grounds in different parts of Bihar, which were centers for pilgrimage of the madariya fakirs in connection with the *urs* and *fairs*. Some *dargahs* also came into existence near the forests of Purnea which became centers of congregations of the Madariya Fakirs.

### **Forests and Hills**

Like forests the Fakirs used to retreat under the hills in different parts of Bihar. Mr. Goodlad, the Collector, reported to the Committee of Revenue, "a party of Sunnassies joined by a body of Mussalman Faqeers amounting to about seven hundred passed through of this district...they came in from Dacca and crossed Burrumputre at Dewangunge. As they will probably on the approach of sepoy's make their retreat under the hills into the northern Parganas of Purnea"<sup>14</sup>. The Fakirs being tired off, were unable to cope with the Company's forces either retired into the hills or change their usual routes of travel. Lieut. Col. Stewart, the Commander of troops in the districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur and Purnea made some observations; "On the appearance of a force they [Fakirs] are unable to cope with, either retire rapidly .. in the hills or separate to elude observation and again assemble .."<sup>15</sup>. The close link between Purnea and Nepal we also be evident from the letter from the Collector of Purnea. The Fakirs who had already fixed on the Nepal Tarai as a place of safety when pursued by the Company's sepoy's. It was reported that their leaders Mohan Giri and Musa Shah together with some others escaped under the hills.<sup>16</sup> The Fakirs were also equipped with arms and weapons. In their latest incursion particularly after the plunder of Ramgunge Cootie, the East India Company forces arrested some of them including the property stolen in Bodah – one hundred one swords, match-locks, lenses and weapons and after an examination all the prisoners were sent to the Rangpur jail for trial<sup>17</sup>.

### **Geographical Connections: Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Nepal**

<sup>14</sup> (Revenue Deptt. 20 December, no. 25)

<sup>15</sup> Judicial Criminal, 31 October 1794, No. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from the Committee of Revenue to the Collector of Rangpur dated 19 December 1782. Rangpur District Records, p. 297, Bangladesh National Archives, Dhaka.

<sup>17</sup> Judicial Criminal, 21 November 1794, No. 1

The geographical connection with Malda is also evident from the contemporary sources. Mr. Grant, Agent at Malda Factory, reported to the Collector of Bhagalpur “the country in the neighbourhood of Malda was being infested by several large bodies of Fakeers (headed by Shaw Burhan).. seem all to belong to Mujnoo Shaw, who is himself with a greater force. At Bydell on the borders of Purnia.. Hearing that there are some regular troupes in Dinajpur or Rangpore they keep further to the south and these whole quarter is alarmed as being exposed to whatever these freebooters may think proper to attempt”<sup>18</sup>. Due to the geographical connection between Rangpur and Purnea the Fakirs used to exploit this advantage and they on so many occasions entered in Purnea. The Fakirs had a “A pukka magazine in the Puchely jungle near Malda in which the Fakirs deposited their arms and ammunitions”<sup>19</sup>. Subhan Ali Shah used to reside in the Puchely jungle with his followers and was in the habit of extorting money from the villagers. Even Moygunge jungle in Malda district helped the Fakirs for their safety and security. Their number could not have been less than six hundred and who were set to be the followers of Subhan Ali Shah.

It has already been said that Nepal was a major stronghold of the Sannyasis and the Fakirs. The Fakirs established their stronghold in Hurrcondurgury [Goorka Soobah on the part of Nepal and about three coss to the west-ward of Rungaelly, a dense forest], Hissargurry jungles {near to Bhutan} which were full of elephants, tigers and other wild beasts and also in Boda {in Purnea}. The Fakirs operating their activities in Dinajpur and Rangpur used to take shelter in Nepal as and when they chased by the Company’s forces. Mr. Burges, Collector of Purnea, gave a vivid description of the Fakirs’ camp near Morung “About two years ago I was in Morung and encamped at Cherag Ali’s Chowney at Quilah. He drew out his people about four hundred... they made a good appearance went thro’ their platoon firings better than I could had expected and gave an excellent volley”<sup>20</sup>. Even Subhan Ali Shah, *chela* (disciple) of late Musa Shah, used to operate his activities on the borders of Purnea and Morung. Mr. Heatley, Collector of Purnea, informed the Board of Revenue, in 1793 that “Soobhun Alley Shah .. with a party of Fakirs had plundered several places on the frontier and carried off a principal ryot whom he did not release until by torture he had extorted a considerable sum of money. The Fakirs also made an attempt on one of the frontier posts but were repulsed”<sup>21</sup>. Even Subhan Ali also, committed depredations in Dinajpur the areas adjacent to Morung. Dinajpur was a hunting ground of the Fakirs as because they on their return towards Morung

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<sup>18</sup> Revenue Deptt. 8 April, 1783, No. 14

<sup>19</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 12 February 1796, No. 5)

<sup>20</sup> (Letter dated 9 January, 1795, from the Collector of Purnea to the President and Members of the Board of Revenue)

<sup>21</sup> (Revenue Deptt. 25 January, 1793, No. 13)

used to attend a religious congregation held in the *dargahs* of Neckmardan (now in Bangladesh) usually held on the 11 April every year. Suryapur, adjoining arganas of Dinajpur and Purnea was frequently visited by a group of Fakirs under the leadership of Subhan Ali Shah. It is learnt “A small detachment accordingly marched but Sobhan Shah with his followers had taken flight a day or two preceding the arrival of sepoys which precluded the possibility of a pursued. A slight skirmish took place between the Fakirs and the Guard stationed at Thana Mundamela (in Araria sub-division of Purnea district) in which it was reported several of Subhan Shah’s party was killed and wounded”<sup>22</sup>. The Fakirs also under his leadership passed through Kishanganj in 1794. Subhan Ali also plundered the Company’s Commercial Settlement at Ramgunge in Purnea on his way back from Dinajpur to Morung and “carried off Rupees six thousand; the Fakirs killed two sepoys and took four away”<sup>23</sup>. They also surrounded the Cootie (factory) of Ramgunge. The description of atrocities of Subhan Ali runs as follows: “On the 8<sup>th</sup> Ashar (19 June, 1794), Thursday at two and half per of night about three or four hundred Fakirs all armed with two or three horses came .. with drawn swords- advancing to the doorway they shot with a ball the Burkandaze Krishnaram .. and then rushed into the Cootie, ceased all the amlah and bound them .. the money and effects belonging Gomasta .. they carried off ..”<sup>24</sup>.

### **Bihar: Stronghold of Rebellion**

In fact, Bihar was actually a major stronghold of the Madari Fakirs. In this context the activities of Karim Shah may be mentioned who always had with him fifteen cavalry and three hundred barkandazes. W. W. Hunter has remarked, “The Fakir named Shah Karim attended by fifteen cavalry and near three hundred barkandazes and men with a camel and a horse furnished with military ensigns arrived from the west-wart daily collecting more followers to which such as barkandazes he gives Rs. 5, per mensem and to such as are mounted he gives Rs. 15. ..He pays them for one months in advance and he takes rupee one as a salami from each village he passes through”<sup>25</sup>. Karim Shah was actually a resident of Tirhoot in the zamindari of Raja Madhoo Singh. He usually received one rupee from each village throughout his zamindari of which pargana Dharampur forms a part. He also collected *Russum* [fee] from parganas Dhappa and Nautpur which were under the zamindari Cummollani Chowdry and Rani Inderoutty. It is said: “this man has of late however thought proper to assemble with the other marauders on the borders of this zilla and sent two

<sup>22</sup> (Board of Revenue, 6 August, 1793, no. 12)

<sup>23</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 19 September, 1794, No. 7)

<sup>24</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 25 July, 1794, No. 11)

<sup>25</sup> W. W. Hunter, (*Statiscal Account of Bengal, Bhagalpur*, p. 90)

threatening letters to mother of Khya Keram demanding from her as a loan the sum of four thousand rupees. .. the merchants and other inhabitants of Nautpur are also under continued apprehension from similar threats”<sup>26</sup>. Like Karim Shah other Fakirs namely, Shumsher Shah and Zahuri Shah plundered the houses of “Mundals who reside close to the borders of Morung, but followers of Cheraug Ally did not .. molest anyone in the Purnea district in their route”. Tirhoot was actually a stronghold of both Sannyasis and Fakirs. We know from official evidence that the Sannyasis under the leadership of Moti Giri, alias Moti Singh resided there and used to lend money to the neighbouring people. As the Fakirs were not so financially sound they used to take loans from the Sannyasis residing there. It is learnt from the deposition of the barkandazes sent to Nepal: “Cherag Ally who lived at Rangelly had some transactions with Mooty Singh, a Sannyasi who lived in Tirhoot. They Sonnassy sent people to recover the money which Cherag Ally owed to him but without success for the latter treated them rudely and refused an answer; when they returned and complained to Mooty Sing he was greatly enraged and set about collecting people to take his revenge. He marched by night till he waylaid him and then cut him off.”<sup>27</sup>. The Fakirs in the last decade of eighteenth century committed their usual attacks in the district of Purnea. Mr. Burgess, the Collector of Purnea, reported “.. the incursions of three separate parties of Fakirs who have killed six men and plundered .. two thousand rupees .. about twenty days since a banditti of Fakirs from Morung attacked one of the villages on the frontier in Pergunnah Futtypore wherein decided two principal ryots .. attacked their houses, possessed .. 1500 rupees in money and they tied the two men to bamboos set round with grass and other combustible matters and absolutely burnt them to death because there were no more money. ..<sup>28</sup> it was ascribed that this plunder was made possible with the help and connivance of the Subah of Nepal in Morung. Darbhanga was not free from the attacks of the Fakirs. Karim Shah, the noted Fakir leader, was the main participant in this respect who in the village of Aber in Turriany erected a small fort and collected a body of armed followers “Curreem Shah has had the insolence to make a demand on the Raja of Tirhoot and to threaten him with an attack in case of non-compliance.” R. M. Martin’s observation may be mentioned in this context “It was a number of adoptive Fakirs that some years ago assembled in great bodies in this (Rangpur) and the neighbouring districts which they plundered with most utmost barbarity when pursued .. retired to Morung in the dominions of Nepal, where they found shelter and the sell of their booties. Many still reside in Morung.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 25 July, 1794, No. 9)

<sup>27</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 19 September, 1794, no. 7)

<sup>28</sup> (Judicial Criminal, 16 January 1795, No. 4)

<sup>29</sup> (R. M. Martin, *History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol. II, p. 727).

It is necessary, to mention the original homeland of the rebel Sannyasis and Fakirs of eighteenth century Bengal and Bihar. There are broadly two distinct views in this matter. J. M. Ghosh<sup>30</sup> and B. N. Bandyopadhyay<sup>31</sup> considered them as up-country Hindus and muslim group of people who flocked in lower Bengal. O'Mally<sup>32</sup> identified them as a cast of up-country religious fanatics, who came from the North-West. Recent historian like Suprakash Roy<sup>33</sup>, Atis Das Gupta<sup>34</sup> and others considered them as a group of people long settled in Bengal. On the basis of the primary sources available in the West Bengal State Archives and National Archives of India it may be mentioned that the Sannyasis and the Fakirs were not the people of Bengal or Bihar. They came from Northern, Western India and also from Deccan for the purpose of trade, money lending, mercenary and religious pilgrimage.

### **Mercenary Activities of the Sannaysis**

Their mercenary service on behalf of the Raja of Hatwa Raj may be mentioned in this context. Raja Sitab Roy, Naib Dewan of Patna reported that the zamindar of Halsipur set on foot disturbances with the help of naga sannyasis. But this plan was frustrated by Capt. Wilding who marched against them and dispersed them by taking the Fort of Halsipur in Saran district<sup>35</sup>. Even in 1775, the zamindar, Fateh Sahi, again rebelled and took refuge in a dense jungle on the borders of Audh and “had under him a regular battalion of trained horsemen and match-lock men which went on increasing because of the enlistment of large bodies of lawless Fakirs and banditti who came flocking in to join his standard.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Sannyasis: Civil and Military Administration**

Although, it is not definitely known, what sort of role did the Sannyasis play in civil and military administration of Bihar, there is some evidence that they enjoyed land holding rights in the different parts of Bihar. These lands were granted by the *amils*, zamindars and the Rajas for the maintenance of the sannyasis' daily life and religious rites. For example, Achal Bharati, received an endowment of two hundred forty bighas of land in thana Tarapur in Bhagalpur. Bhunjan Giri obtained some portion of land in the village Junor in Pargana Angooley in Bihar. Similarly Raja Madhoo Singh of Tirhoot endowed villages Baboor Bun, Peparahdee, Ramnuckah and Anderee as *Shibottar* to Deo Giri, Baher Giri,

<sup>30</sup> J. M. Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1930.

<sup>31</sup> B. N. Bandyopadhyay, *Dawn of New India*, Calcutta, 1927.

<sup>32</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bogra Gazetteer*, Allahabad, 1910, p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> Suprakash Roy, *Bharater Krishok Bidroho O Ganatantrik Sangram* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> Atis Dasgupta, *Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion*, Calcutta, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> (Calendar of Persian Correspondence, Vol. II, 202-203)

<sup>36</sup> (Ghosh, *op.cit.*, p. 68)

Bucket Giri and Ranjit Giri for the performance of their religious rites<sup>37</sup>. Besides land and jaigirs it had also been the practice of the native government to grant pensions to them. In the year 1145 B.S. (1748 A.D.) a pension of Rs. 90 and 12 *annas* was sanctioned to Atbal Bharati for the support of wandering pilgrims and for himself by the local chief Koony Behari Lal<sup>38</sup>. Besides, Bhurt Giri, another sanniyasis received a *sanad* from Mahmud Ashraf, *amil* of Sircan Champaran for an allowance of five rupees ten annas. An identical reference may be cited in this context that Adham Giri was reported to have received a sanad of ninety nine rupees from Shaikh Abdul Shukur, *amil* in Sircar Champaran in 1174 B.S. (1768 A.D.)<sup>39</sup>.

### **Trade and Money Lending**

Purnea and Champaran in Bihar were also the major centers of money lending operations of the Sannyasis. In Purnea Soba Giri and Bucket Giri stood security for local zamindars<sup>40</sup>. The Supreme Court and Mayor's Court Records throw light on the transactions operated by the Sannyasis of Bihar with the leading men of Calcutta at an exorbitant rate of interest.

### **Financial Solidarity of the Fakirs: Role of Regional Powers**

The fakirs without doing any services to the regional powers, received favors from the same ruling for the religious purpose alone. They were also allowed complete freedom to perform religious customs viz., to attend the *urs* and fairs in spite of the restrictions imposed by the East Indian Company's officials. The ruling class deemed it to be one of their bounden duties to save guard the interests of the fakirs and to help them observe their ritualistic performances unhindered. Since the religious activities of the fakirs were primarily based on pilgrimages to *dargahs* it was quite essential to provide land for the upkeep of those *dargahs* and also to conduct the *urs* festival in an organized way. A close study of the *Madad-I-Mash* grants during the pre-Company and Company period reveals how the madariya order enjoyed land grants for the maintenance of their religious activities. It is learnt that Badshah Mohammad Shah in 1729 A.D. confirmed the grant of village Basarha in Pargana Bisara in favour Shaikh Mohammad Ashique Madari and their predecessors<sup>41</sup>. Similarly, Shah Alam II,

<sup>37</sup> Collector, Tirhut to Sir John Shore dated 24 October 1788 : Revenue Department Governor-General in Council, 1 December 1790, no. 28; Committee of Revenue, 28 July 1785, no. 38; Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810-11*, Patna, 1939, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Proceedings, Collector, Saran dated 16 February 1796: Revenue Department 18 March 1796 no. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Account of Pension paid by the zamindars and farmers of Sircar Saran : Board of Revenue 5 November 1790, No. 7.

<sup>40</sup> List of the Tucavy Bonds for Sircar Champaran delivered by the Renter: Committee of Revenue 5 September 1782, pp. 73-76.

<sup>41</sup> K. K. Dutta, *Sanads, Farmans and Parwanas*, Patna, 1962, p. 106.

the Mughal Emperor sanctioned the villages Rampur Jadu, Chak Fatima and Chak Mamraz in Pargana Babra in the name of Shah Ramzan Ali for lighting *chirag* in the *khanqah* of Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin's *dargahs* at Hilsa in Bihar<sup>42</sup>. The fakirs by means of their religious activities were so influential that they enjoyed the revenue right of Jamalpur-Alda and Doomry, two villages in Bihar to defray their daily expenses. The Chaudhuries and Kanongoes of Gyaspore Pargana in Bihar reported in 1782 that the fakirs controlled the revenue of that region. Besides the land revenue, the Bengal Nawabs, like Siraj-ud-Daulla and Mir Kashim assigned pension for the subsistence of the fakirs. For example, Assoor Shah, a fakir was sanctioned an allowance by virtue of a sanad. Siraj-ud-Daulla was so interested in the religious performances of the fakirs that most of them were granted pension as hereditary right. Mir Jafar (1757-1760), in spite of his financial troubles, permitted the fakirs to draw their pensions as sanctioned earlier. Even he additionally issued orders for Shaikh Jewad Ali, Kullender Ali, Farzundee Ali and others to receive pension from the Nawab's treasury. The practice of giving monetary help to the fakirs from the Nawab's treasury continued during the British period. It appears that the sanan regarding Iman Shah's pension was renewed during the regime of Nawab Mir Kashim. Like the Bengal Nawabs, Asad Ali Khan, the regional chief of Bihar, used to entertain a group fakir by providing pension in the British period. It is to be noted that, famous rebel Karim Shah Fakir was sanctioned a pension of 3 annas per diem by Raja Madhoo Singh of Tirhoot and Rani Indravati.

### **Organisation of the Sannyasis: Hills, Forests and Rivers**

The sannyasis used to visit Bihar for attending a *mela* (fair) at Janakpur (north of the Darbhanga district) in commemoration of the birth and marriage of Sita. It was reported by the Supervisor of Tirhoot stationed at Darbhanga, "they amount in number 20 or 50000 sunnassies. Lest they should come into Tirhoot, the cultivation of which is now beginning, I should be glad that a sufficient force was sent for about ten days till they are all separated to prevent their alarming the riyots"<sup>43</sup>. The anxiety of the East India Company officials was also noticed in their later correspondence of 1773 when the sannyasis moved Bengal through Purnea. Governor-General Warren Hastings reported to Sir George Colbrooke that, "Several parties of the Sannyasis having entered into the Purniah province burning and destroying many villages there, the Collector applied to Captain Brook who had just arrived at Panity near Rajmahal with his newly raised battalion of light infantry."<sup>44</sup>. Similarly the

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> (Proceedings of the Controlling Council of Revenue at Patna, dated 22 March, 1773)

<sup>44</sup> (Secret, Committee Proceedings, March, 1773)

Superintendent of Sircar Saran reported to the Chief and Council of Revenue at Patna on the 7<sup>th</sup> April due to the appearance in Champaran and other parts : “The Sunnassis are moving in very large bodies along the borders of Sircan Champaran and have greatly alarmed the inhabitants of that district. ..The Sunnassis now take their route to the westward and must cross the Gunduck”. It appears that the sannaysis coming from Nepal or upper India used to enter Bihar through the river routes. The sannaysis also would enter Singbhum through the westward of Midnapur jungles at the back of the hills. Dinajpur was also a convenient place for entering into Purnea. On the 27 December, 1773, the Resident at the Durbar received information from the Collector of Purnea that a large body of sannaysis had appeared in the district and were moving towards their residence.<sup>45</sup>

### **Urs and Fairs: Fakirs**

Contemporary documents clearly show that the Madariya Fakirs used to attend the *dargahs* in a cyclic system bringing the whole community together. Though the *dargahs* of Shah Madar situated at Mackwanpore in the Kanpur district was their most important center of congregation, there were also other centers in Northern and Eastern India including Bengal. Because of its great importance to the Fakirs the *urs* of Shah Madar at Mackwanpore was attended by the Madariya Fakirs. The Fakirs residing in Nepal as well as different parts of North India started their annual cycle of pilgrimage with the attendance at Mackwanpore in Kanpur district of 17 jamadil Aiwal. From Mackwanpore they moved towards Akbarpur in Gorakhpur district and other *dargahs* situated in various parts of North India. In July they went to Bihar to attend the *urs* at the *dargahs* of Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin, the founder of the Dewangan order, and other unidentified *dargahs* situated near the jungles of Purnea. They they would move towards Bengal to celebrate the *urs* and fairs at the *dargahs* situated in Malda, Dinajpur, Murshidabad and Bagura. From those places they either returned to their places of residence in North India and Nepal or went to Eastern Bengal. In fact, the *dargahs* situated in the Northern Bengal acted as links with *dargahs* situated in various parts of Bihar for their convenient location. Their journey towards Bihar might have two major reasons, viz., either to attend the *dargahs* of Syed Muhammad Jamaluddin or others or take shelter in the hills and forests adjacent to Gorakhpur, Morung or other parts of Northern India.

During the *urs* the fakirs were given opportunities to renew their friendship, exchange thoughts among themselves, share religious beliefs with others and also to chalk out future programs by organizing meetings among themselves. The fakirs used to settle disputes and

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<sup>45</sup> (letter dated 27 December from the Resident at the Durbar to the Collector of Dinajpur, letter to the Court of Directors, letter dated 30 December, 1773).

adopt future plans by submitting them to the decisions of the Pirs. The *urs* aroused a sense of unity among the fakirs which they imbibed by remembering their common Pirs. It appears that the fakirs used to practice the rite of fire walking over burning coals with the cries “*Ya Ali, Ya Ali, Dam Madar, Dam Madar*”, “*Medini Shah Madar*” and “*Chatiyal Madar*”. This tradition of shouting was also found among the fakirs who attended the *urs* at Hilsa in Bihar even up to the second half of the twentieth century as recorded by Professor Syed Hasan Askari. The main reason for paying their homage and respect to the Pirs was to receive their blessing which would help them in their mendicant life and overcome all sorts of difficulties, like danger from fire, snakes, scorpions and wild life of hills and jungles.

The religious fairs also provided an opportunity to store arms and ammunitions for fighting against the East India Company’s forces. In this context, the *dargahs* situated in the Pucky jungles of Howasgarh near Purnea may be mentioned where they kept different types of weapons like, twenty-seven match-locks, three spears, four battles axes, twenty five swords, ten targets, fourteen pouches of gun powder, nine dagger horns during the last phase of the rebellion. Arms recovered from the jungles of Purnea by the British officials on different occasions also proved the fakirs’ use of arms in their military activities against the British. Since, the fakirs were thus well organized in arms and ammunitions, the Magistrate of Dinajpur proposed in 1793, that a well armed force to be maintained to disarm the fakirs.

### **Course of the Movement**

The earliest appearance of the sannyasis in Bihar was in 1767 as the Chief of Patna reported in 1767, “A body of 5000 Sinnasees entered the Sircar Saronge (Modern Saran in Bihar) country; the Phousdar sent two companies of sepoy after them, under the command of a sergeant who came up with them; the Sinnasees stood their ground and after the sepoy had fired away part of their ammunitions, fell on them killed and wounded near eighty and put the rest to flight”<sup>46</sup>.

The organization of the fakirs was also strengthened because of their familiarity with rivers and various routes of Bengal and Bihar. Mr. Ducarel, the Supervisor at Purnea being apprehensive of the sannyasis and fakirs, “stationed harcaras at the Ghats and passages of the Koosy river.” In October 1770 Mr. Ducarel received news that “body about 300 armed with Matchlocks and other offensive weapons were at Cundwah Ghat 12 coss from hence and were preparing to cross the Koosy river. He accordingly directed Lieut. Sinclair to march against them with the sepoy at Purnea ... he with his 150 men captured the entire body of 500 fakirs, .. their arms, brought them to Purnea. The fakirs represented that they belonged to the Madari

<sup>46</sup> (M. P. Saha, *Selections from the unpublished records of Reverend James Long* p. 526)

sect of the fakirs and were on their pilgrimage to a darga near Maldah an another 10 coss from Ghoraghat". This explains that the Madaris used to visit the *dargahs* situated at Bagura frequently and if necessary they would return to Purnea for their own security. The fakirs' tendency to change their routes of travel is also evident from the report submitted by Mr. Cottrell, the Supervisor of Dinajpur, "the fakirs coming from Purnea had changed their professed route to Ghoraghat on pilgrimage and were also armed with personal arms besides four camels loaded with rockets. They were then 20 coss north of Rajganj and had levied contributions as they passed along. Their number was 2000, it was apprehended that they would make a circuit of the province"<sup>47</sup>. Similarly, the sannyasis passing through Bihar and Bengal moved towards Mirjapur and Benares is also evident from the letter of Gen. Barker to the President of Select Committee on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1770 who reported from Patna "of an assembly of 10000 armed sannyasi fakirs at Benares who intended to pass through Bihar and Bengal .. returned towards Mirzapur."<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the Sannyasis and Fakirs would travel with arms and ammunitions and levied contribution in the name of charity from the people of Bengal and Bihar. So, after the assumption of Office as Governor-General, Warren Hastings took stern measures against them and issued a notice. "It is declared that if any of the abovementioned sects shall be found in Bengal or Bihar at the expiration of two months they are to be seized and put on the roads for life made to work at the public buildings and have their property confiscated to the Government."<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

It appears that the Sannyasi and Fakir rebellion continued for nearly half a century with its multi-dimensional activities. These activities brought them into close contact with the contemporary ruling class. So in order to be more prosperous the Sannyasis employed their whole energies in trade, money lending and mercenary activities. The fakirs were neither traders nor money lenders nor even mercenaries. Since the Sannyasis were economically prosperous, they were not wholly dependent on the religious contributions of the local people and the zamindars. The Fakirs in comparison were not prosperous and wealthy. They had no other means of subsistence and lived upon the charity of the local people. The economic and political necessities of the Sannysis forced them not to continue their plundering activities on any large scale but rather come to an agreement with the English East India Company. In

<sup>47</sup> (letter from the Supervisor at Dinajpur, to the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, dated 27<sup>th</sup> November and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1770)

<sup>48</sup> (letter from the Controlling Council of Revenue at Patna to Capt. Camac, dated December, 1770)

<sup>49</sup> Secret : Committee Proceedings 10 March 1773.

contrast with conduct of the Sannyasis the movement of the fakirs was very much aggressive and frightening, because the English had stopped their only source of livelihood, viz., charitable contributions of the common people and the zamindars.

Though the Madariya Fakirs and the Dasanami Sannyasis were very militant in nature, the Fakirs were not such experts in the art of warfare as to lend their services to regional princes. While the Sannyasis were better equipped for warfare and their mercenary services were very useful for the regional princes.

Although both the Sannyasis and the fakirs had religious origins, their respective emphasis on religious matters differed. While the Sannyasis were seriously pre-occupied with political and economic activities, the fakirs participation in this matter was practically nil. Consequently, the Sannyasis commitment to such religious rites as pilgrimage was not as exclusive as that of fakirs. This to some extent explains why the fakirs reacted so sharply unlike the Sannyasis to British restrictions on pilgrimage and other religious rites.

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