

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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***Abstract:** The second half of eighteenth century Bengal Presidency witnessed an armed resistance against the British Raj. The warlike activities of these militant peripatetic armed monks is popularly known as Sannyasi- Faqir Rebellion, though distinct in their activities, but ran separately. It was a confused and turbulent period in the history of Colonial India, when the British had not struck roots deep in the Indian soil and the subcontinent was a battleground for the local chiefs, nawabs, zamindars, the East India Company, and other groups. This rebellion was directed against the ruling East India Company and their lackeys like the zamindars, jotedars and other property holders. It was the first formidable resistance against the British. The Indian ascetics were a strange lot, very far from the traditional ideas of a saffron-clad sadhu or one who had renounced the world for the sake of a spiritual life (monk; ascetic or mendicant). But the ascetics of our study hardly conformed to this idea. These ascetics had the owner of rent-free land, carried on trade, engaged military administration and rendered their services as mercenary soldiers. Besides, they extracted money from the people, local zamindars and also in some cases from the regional powers of Bengal and outside.*

***Keywords:** Bharatpur, Fakir Rebellion, Gossains, Madaris, Sannyasi Rebellion, Zamindars*

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## Introduction

The second half of eighteenth century Bengal Presidency witnessed an armed resistance against the British Raj. The militant ascetics were both Hindus and Muslims. The Hindus were mostly Dasanamis<sup>1</sup> ( who were also known as gossains), Nagas ( naked ) , Bairagis and Jogis , whereas, the Muslim mendicants were mostly the *be-shar*(nonperformance of Islamic scripture) , commonly known as , Madaris, who also sailed from Haryana and its neighboring regions. The Bengal Presidency of eighteenth century covers a larger portion of present day Haryana, (formerly known as Bharatpur), Western Uttar Pradesh, Eastern Rajasthan and some portions of Punjab. The warlike activities of these militant peripatetic armed monks is popularly known as Sannyasi- Faqir Rebellion, though distinct in their activities, but ran separately. It was a confused and turbulent period in the history of Colonial India, when the British had not struck roots deep in the Indian soil and the subcontinent was a battleground for the local chiefs, nawabs, zamindars, the East India Company, and other groups. This rebellion was directed against the ruling East India Company and their lackeys like the zamindars, *jotedars* and other property holders. It was the first formidable resistance against the British .Though the rebellion took place in Bengal Presidency but the rebels were not the people of Bengal but very much belonged to the regions of Bharatpur and its environs. The Indian ascetics were a strange lot, very far from the traditional ideas of a saffron- clad sadhu or one who had renounced the world for the sake of a spiritual life (monk; ascetic or mendicant). But the ascetics of our study hardly conformed to this idea. These ascetics had the owner of rent-free land, carried on trade, engaged military administration and rendered their services as mercenary soldiers. Besides, they extracted money from the people, local zamindars and also in some cases from the regional powers of Bengal and outside.

Let me explore the social basis of the Sannyasi- Faqir Rebellion that sparked out in between 1770 – 1800 A. D. ). Since they were mainly a religious group of people, they used to wander different fairs, *maths* (monasteries), *dargahs* (tombs of the Sufis) of Bengal Presidency and beyond. Religion and religious activities acted as a catalyst in the formation of social basis of the rebels which they had earned, but, these religious habits and performing of such practices were not at all tolerated by the British since they used to levy contribution from the local people and the zamindars of Bengal Presidency and beyond. Their styles of wandering in the form of a naked ascetic were considered by the British a great nuisance in the civil

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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society. All these activities added a new dimension when they continued their activities by recruiting children in order to strengthen their solidarity in the *dargah* based organization. All these social habits were no doubt the contributing factors behind their rise as armed mendicants against the colonial rule. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries several armed ascetic orders such as the Dasnamis, Bairagis and Naths emerged from erstwhile reclusive religious spaces. The loss of respectable lifestyle tied to temples and state patronage, following the foreign invasions of the previous century, had perhaps led to this evolution. Some orders were newly founded to resist invaders bent on iconoclasm and forcible conversion. These orders soon controlled major trade routes and access to major pilgrimage sites. Caste was not much of a concern for these orders, and core principles were based on the Saiva and Tantric streams. Many orders utilized Hatha Yoga and other physical training routines to prepare themselves for both ascetic life and combat. The training regimes nurtured in the orders' *akharas* (training congregations) were reportedly similar to military drills. The militarized orders did not hesitate to contest state power, or fight between themselves, to preserve their interests. Some orders were mobile, roving across different regions and a few of these gained notoriety as mercenaries, albeit with a mystical veneer.

Till the mid-19th century, the armed orders stoutly resisted the rising socio-economic control by the British. The Hatha Yoga practicing orders were perceived as prime threats due to their physical prowess and organisation. It took the British over a century to eliminate or disband the orders. A handful managed to survive by relocating to remote locations where they could retain their core practices. Most renounced their militarised nature and settled as seminaries, still calling themselves *akharas*. A popular disdain for such orders developed following these events.

### **Ascetic Orders**

The Dasanami Sannyasis, particularly, the naked nagas is perhaps the most powerful monastic order belong to the Dasanami group organized by Sankaracharya. They are divided into two sections; the *shastradharis*, who specialize in sacred lore, and the *astradharis*, who specialize in arms. Sankaracharya combined saintly purity with *shastric* learning and intellectual acumen of the highest degree. Besides the Dasnamis, Fakirs, Bairagis, Jogis and Natha Panthis belonged to these ascetic groups. The Dasanami Sannyasis were so militant that their fighting propensity

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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was a basic characteristic of them. Mughal Emperor Akbar in 1567 witnessed a fight between the armed Sannyasis of 'Giri' and 'Puri' sub-orders at Thanesar. The basic reason for entering into armed conflicts was over the collection of contribution from the pilgrims who had come there to bathe during an eclipse. Farquhar<sup>2</sup> thought that the traditional account of the revival of the armed Sannyasis began in the mid-sixteenth century when both the Sannyasis and Fakirs went about with arms and took part in frequent warfare.

### **Armed Mendicants and Religious Pilgrimage**

It may be assumed that these ascetic orders came into limelight during the decline of the Mughal Empire. The gradual decline of central authority and the rise of regional kingdoms helped them to act independently and thus their fortunes began to change rapidly till they faced stiff opposition of the English East India Company. This political instability encouraged them wandering all over India to become more militant and they began to act as semi-independent chieftains in the form of roving war bands.

Side by Side they continued their ascetic way of life by attending the religious fairs and festivals like *Kumbha Mela*<sup>3</sup>. During the *Kumbha Mela*, *Niranjani*, *Juna* and *Atal Akhras* would present and marched like a procession with arms and ammunition<sup>4</sup>. It appears that Maharaja Mudoji Bhonsle permitted Moti Giri and Sumer Giri, two remarkable *gossains* to visit that place. In *Kumbha mela* the *gossains* entered into bloody warfare<sup>5</sup>.

The Dasanamis as the disciples of Great Sankaracharya were controlled by four *maths*<sup>6</sup> viz. Sringeri, Joshi, Sarada and Govardhan. As E. T. Atkinson<sup>7</sup> said that "These people became the heads of the Dasanami or 'ten-named mendicants' and anyone joining the fraternity adopts one of these names. They are ruled by an assembly called *Dasanama* composed of the representatives of ten divisions, which has a complete control over all the *maths* of the order". In fact the Ukhi *math* founded by Kedarnath order of Sankaracharya with the principal *math* of the North, viz., the Joshi *math*. The Giri sub-order was originally meant to wander in the mountain with the Joshi *math* as its headquarters. In course of time Benares became their *de facto* headquarters because of its commercial and religious importance to the Sannyasis. By the close of the eighteenth century there was *maths* also in Mirzapur, Poona, Nagpur, and Gwalior, which helped the trading activities of the Sannyasis.

Although the *math* was originally a religious organization, subsequently they became centres of commercial and trading activities where goods could be stored and business

## Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond

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conducted. This closely interlinked *maths* in various regions played a crucial role in the development of the organization of the Sannyasis all over India. They used to assemble at their respective *maths* to take important administrative decisions, for example, the election to the *Panchayat* (Assembly).

Their activities covered a wide region from Awadh to the Deccan through this *math*. The branches of Juna *akhra* are situated in Gujarat, Nasik and Hardwar. They used to compete with each other particularly during their bathing ceremony at Kumbha *mela*.

### Social Life

There was a sharp distinction between the Resident Sannyasis and the *nagas* while the former were permitted to marry, but *nagas* were celibates. The married Sannyasi leading a settled life was known as *gossains*<sup>8</sup>. The *gossains* used to perform the *Vijaya* ceremony just after their initiation, implying that they must not be involved with their wives and families.<sup>9</sup> The *gossains* would also admit female in their orders in conformity with the males. They were neither selected nor purchased. They were included in the order by way of discretion<sup>10</sup>. In their dress they used turban and *dhuti*. As Shiva himself wears a rosary of *rudraksha* seeds every Sannyasi does the same. A *rudraksha* is said to have the greatest sanctity and mystic power. Besides Shiv, Hanuman also was one of the chief deities worshipped by the Dasanamis and Kanphata *Jogis*<sup>11</sup>. When a Dasanami settled down his life and maintain a life he generally was departed from the Sannyasi order “he remains therefore *gossains* by name and adds a new caste to the society”.<sup>12</sup> Some of them lived in small societies and possessed considerable wealth by enjoying a comfortable life. The *gossains* of Balarampur Pargana were the merchants of jewellery. The famous *gossain* merchant of this locality was Moti Giri who had a dwelling house in that region. They used to trade in jewels, spices, gold and asafetida. The chief trade was conducted between Nawabgang and Bengal. In central India the Sannyasis used to operate their trade since the pre-colonial period. The famous *gossain* Kaushal Giri was a money-lender who lends the amount of Rs. 42789 to Rana Sujan Singh, Daulat Singh and Bhao Singh of Gargunga in the year 1855 *sambat*. In spite of such differences both of them possessed a militant outlook, frequently indulged in warlike activities and involved in economic and political activities. Only those *naga* Sannyasis who were attached to particular *akhras* could be the inmates of their respective *akhras*. A *naga's* specific status depended on his *akhra* and was

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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not connected to the particular order of the Dasnamis he belonged to<sup>13</sup>. The Sannyasis deposited their cash and wealth with the common fund of the *maths*, from which the *gurus* and *mahanths* would advance money to the *chelas* (disciples) to carry on trade and other economic activities<sup>14</sup>. The *akhras* were the storehouses of arms and weapons and produced fighters to combat enemies. Even a majority of the insurgent Sannyasis belonged to the *akhras*<sup>15</sup>

The nature of their relations with various strata of the state and society developed in a two-way process. They rendered services to the regional powers of India; in return, they enjoyed the latter's respect and favours such as *jagirs* (large tracts of land) pensions, and titles. From the North-Western region they used to enter Bengal and Bihar for the purposes of pilgrimage, trade, money-lending and extorting contributions from the rural people and zamindars.<sup>16</sup> This explains why the Dasnamis performed activities as traders, money lenders and mercenary soldiers in those regions since the Mughal period. Though the Dasnamis were very much known as freewheeling foragers<sup>17</sup> in Bengal in the second half of the eighteenth century, they did not commit any violent activities in their places of residence.

In order to understand the Sannyasis' influence in an all-India perspective and to establish the credibility of my argument, it is essential to show how they were patronized by the Indian powers. Besides Rajendra Giri, the Sannyasis under Anup Giri were given an allowance for their subsistence. The Dasnamis continued their military activities unhindered by either the common people or the pre-colonial powers. But after the rise of the British power in Bengal, the Company's government began to view with disfavor and also to oppose some of their activities as objectionable. It was however not easy for the company's government to suppress the *Dasnamis* because they, equipped with military and political experience, proved to be redoubtable opponents.

Since the Sannyasis were a very privileged community, they naturally enjoyed a large degree of freedom from interference either Free Movement by the Mughal Emperors or by regional powers in observance of their traditional rites and customs. The Mughal government allowed them to recruit armed followers for their order<sup>18</sup> and to levy contributions from the common people<sup>19</sup>. The Sannyasis were also frequently involved in conspiracies and intrigues hatched by the regional powers. After a 1786 armed uprising led by the Sannyasis against Mahadji Sindhia in the Doab was suppressed, the Sannyasis were asked only to mend their behaviour. Mahadji dissuaded his generals from taking any stern steps against the Sannyasis.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the Madariya Sufi order that originated in north India during the second half of the

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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fifteenth century was tolerated by the indigenous rulers, who gave the Madaris a free hand in their religious affairs and in performing their own religious rites and rituals. The stronghold of this order can be found in north India. In Mughal India, these celibate, fearless militant, partially naked Fakirs indulged in many sided warlike activities. They dragged iron chains and travelled with arms and *Jhanda*( banners), which they planted under the guidance of their leaders.<sup>21</sup> They looked like *dervishes* (Fakirs), roamed with disbanded troops, fought with others for the collection of religious donation from the villagers and created nuisance by blowing loud horns. They also inflicted deep wounds on their bodies when they were not satisfied with their demands. This practice may be considered as one of the social basis of the anti- colonial uprising. They were governed by some uncommon laws, used secret signs; and spoke in figurative and ambiguous language while leading a nomadic way of life.

*Urs* ( death anniversary of the *Pirs* ) was also an important occasion for congregation of the Madari groups of *be- Shar* Sufis which got a legal sanction during the Mughal period. It was on such occasion the madari groups of Fakirs carried Mahi-O- Muratib ( fish symbol inscribed on a pole / standard decorated with an insignia of fish and on the opposite five fingers of palms symbolising the portrait of Hajrat Ali, Prophet Muhammad, Bibi Fatima, Imam Hussain and imam Hasan ) . The carrying of such *jhanda* with a long procession was sanctioned by Shah Shuja, the Mughal Governor of Bengal (1659 A. D.). This sanction recognised their right to carry the standard and the Fakir's practice of going on a pilgrimage in various parts of Bengal. It was such an occasion which had given opportunities to renew their friendship, exchange thoughts, share religious beliefs with others and also chalk out future programmes by organizing meetings among themselves. The Madari Fakirs practiced the rite of fire-walking over burning coals imparted a strong sense of unity among the Fakirs by bringing them together from various regions of India ever since the medieval period , as Francisco Pelsaert <sup>22</sup> referred to such a gathering at Sikandra on their pilgrimage to Mackwanpore. On these occasions, the Fakirs collected cash contributions from the people including zamindars, which greatly helped in building the economic base of the organization. The cyclic pattern of pilgrimage started from Mackwanpore on 17 Jamadil- Awal and moved toward Akberpore in Gorakhpur district and other *dargahs* of north India. Thus their easy movement towards Bengal on the occasion of the *Urs* was highly opposed by the Company's forces that they had no alternative but to involve in armed risings. Being opposed the Fakirs had to retreat towards various places of North India which present day is included as a very

## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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much part of Haryana and its environs. Thus Jamini Mohan Ghosh is right to comment that these Sannyasis and Fakirs were the people of outside Bengal and who had no connection with the soil of Bengal.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Sannyasis and Fakirs were restricted not only to free movement but also were deprived from performance of religious rites this collapsed the economic resources to a large extent. In view of the above it may be concluded that the Social basis of anti-colonial uprising of Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion cannot be ignored. Simultaneously, their relations with Haryana and its environs cannot be ignored.

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## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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17. This term echoes Guha's explanation in his masterpiece (Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: Essays in Permanent Settlement*, Moulton and Co. 1984) but later on he was silent in his Subaltern thesis (*An Elementary Aspect of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford New Delhi:University Press, 1992). It is surprising to the social scientist why Guha was silent about portraying the characterization of the Sannyasi rebellion. The contradiction is found in his later work.
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## **Social Ideas and Background of Militant peripatetic Armed Resistance of the Sannyasis and Fakirs Against Early Colonial Rule: Its Links with Bengal and Beyond**

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