

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

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***Abstract:**The present paper seems to cover the role played by the armed warlike monks during the second half of eighteenth century Bengal and continued till the early decades of nineteenth century. The present day Haryana consists of a larger part of Bharatpur, Western Uttar Pradesh, Eastern Rajasthan and some portions of Punjab. The warlike activities of these armed monks is popularly known as Sannyasi Rebellion which 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 Haryana. In eighteenth century these areas were popularly known as Bharatpur. A close link between the activities of the rebel Sannyasis of Bengal with Haryana and its surrounding regions referred to the activities of Anup Giri alias Himmat Bahadur .*

Keywords: British, Fakir Rebellion, Jotedars Struggle, Sannyasi Rebellion ,Zamindars

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Introduction

The present paper seems to cover the role played by the armed warlike monks during the second half of eighteenth century Bengal and continued till the early decades of nineteenth century. The

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

present day Haryana consists of a larger part of Bharatpur, Western Uttar Pradesh, Eastern Rajasthan and some portions of Punjab. The warlike activities of these armed monks is popularly known as Sannyasi Rebellion which 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 Haryana. In eighteenth century these areas were popularly known as Bharatpur. . The geographical boundary of Bengal presidency during the second half of eighteenth century and early nineteenth centuries comprised among others the present West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Bangladesh, a larger part of present day north India, and a larger parts of present day north-east zone like Garo Hills, Jaintiya, Khashi and also some parts of Assam. There is a graphic description of geographical distribution of these areas of Bengal Presidency in the *Atlas* prepared by James Rennell¹ in the second half of the 18th century. This correction of Abul Fazl's geography is suggested by Irfan Habib in his work.² Since these groups of people were not the people of Bengal but came from outside to inhabit this part of eastern India, frequent references of their activities beyond Bengal will come in the course of my discussion.

Identity of the Rebels

The rebels were mainly the Shaiva *gossain* armed monks belonging to Dasanami³ order. Out of these ten sub-orders only the Giris and Puris plunged into revolt. The Dasanamis were also known as gossain and naga. Both of them possessed certain similarities like a common militant outlook that they frequently indulged in warlike activities and both of them were involved in economic and political activities. A naga's specific status depended on his *akhra* and had no reference whatever to the particular order of the Dasanamis he belonged to. But it is commonly known as Sannyasi Rebellion. Besides the Sannyasis, the Fakirs also participated in the form of resistance against the British which is known as Fakir Rebellion. The British used to club it as Sannyasi- Fakir Rebellion but a close look to the primary sources preserved both in the National Archives of India, West Bengal State Archives, Allahabad Regional Archives, U. P. state Archives, Lucknow clearly refutes the prevalent notion and to identify it as Sannyasi and fakir Rebellion separately. Both of them cannot be treated in a hyphenated form. The rebellion took place when the sun had set on the mighty Mughal Empire, the British had not struck roots deep in the Indian soil and the subcontinent was a battleground for the local chiefs, nawabs,

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

zamindars, the East India Company, and other groups. The Sannyasis make their appearance in this scenario. For about fifty years they kept the British on their toes.

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 Sannyasis of our study hardly conformed to this idea. The Sannyasis of Sannyasi rebellion owned land, carried on trade, engaged in civil administration and diplomatic negotiations, extracted money from the people and also fought as mercenary soldiers on behalf of the regional powers. Jamini Mohan Ghosh⁴ was the pioneer to research the Sannyasis on the basis of available documents. In the eighty years that has elapsed between the publication of Jamini Mohan's work and the present, some of the historical researches on that period have come out-out of which the works of Atis Dasgupta⁵ and William Pinch⁶ should be mentioned. The volume by Dasgupta suffers from the standard weakness of the Marxists- that of distorting facts to suit their thesis. The studies by Jamini Mohan are objective; they present events in chronological order and without bias. They are enough to expose the basic flaws in the Marxist analyses. Pinch on the other hand deals entirely with the martial character of the Dasanami Sannyasis and has nothing to say about their role in the rebellion. William Pinch had failed to retrieve the various sources of invaluable importance available in the Indian Archives⁷, the Persian Sources⁸ and Marathi sources⁹ On the basis of the available documents it appears that the Sannyasis belonging to Giri and Puri sub-orders participated in the rebellion. Similarly, the works of D. H. A. Kolff¹⁰ did not cover the wide range of archival and oral resources, while situating the Sannyasis' trading activities. They were not the people of Bengal but came from outside viz., north India, Bharatpur, Rajasthan and Punjab. Their principal centre is at Prayag but it has its branches at Benares, Hardwar and Udaipur. Persian and Marathi sources clearly indicate that they were quite active in those areas long before the beginning of the British rule.¹¹ The Persian sources may be corroborated with the primary sources of National Archives of India, New Delhi, and Allahabad Regional Archives. Their organizational activities were centered round the *akhras* situated in various parts of Allahabad, Benares and Hardwar. The purpose of the *akhras* was to uphold the ideas of Hinduism as well as to defend the faith from Muslim inroads. The Sannyasis who used to move from upper India and central India into the plains of Bengal kept a large armed force in their respective *akhras*.¹² The rebel Sannyasis of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Bengal was up-countrymen, mostly from Bharatpur, Bundelkhand, Awadh and Maratha countries.¹³ Their headquarters were at Bharatpur and Jhansi

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

where they had at their command a large group of followers.¹⁴ Following the rituals and customs of the north Indian Sannyasis, the Giri Sannyasis who appeared as rebels were worshippers of God Shiva. Their gatherings at Allahabad and Hardwar on the occasion of Kumbha Mela were recorded by the foreign observers, like, Bernier¹⁵, Tavernier¹⁶, James Forbes¹⁷ and others. The religious motive was no doubt a factor for such assembly but there are evidences to show that in addition to their religious pilgrimage their ulterior motive was to fight on behalf of regional powers. Allahabad was an entry point to Bengal. A close link between the activities of the rebel Sannyasis of Bengal with Haryana and its surrounding regions referred to the activities of Anup Giri alias Himmat Bahadur . Himmat Bahadur and his brother Umrao Giri, the noted Sannyasis of the Sannyasi rebellion had not only armed contingents under their command but also were endowed with large tract of territory including *jagirs* and estates. Their involvement with the Nawabs of Awadh, Jat raja Surajmal of Bharatpur, Rajputs and Marathas may be mentioned in this context. The armed *nagas* and *gosains* had relations with the regional powers including the Raja of Bharatpur was largely economic but in few cases political issues were also involved. The armed Nagas also joined with with Jawhar Singh Jat of Bharatpur where they played a conspicuous role in the Jat-Rohilla contest over the possession of Delhi in the year 1764. When Jawahir's first attempt against the Rohillas fell due to the non-availability of necessary help from the Maratha Chief Malhar Rao Holkar the *gossain* brothers advanced towards Delhi on the 15th November 1764. It was the armed *nagas* under Umrao Giri changed the situation by their heroic attack on the Rohillas. It appears that Jawahir's troops crossed the River Jamuna with the heroic assistance and bloody sacrifice of the armed militant *nagas*. Jawahir Singh was so pleased with the desperate valour of the armed *nagas* that he honoured Umrao Giri by lifting him to the *howdah* of the own elephant. The armed ascetics under AnupGiri even occupied the residence of Hafizuddin, the Rohilla King.

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the Jats under Suraj Mal stepped into prominence as a leading power in north India. His son and successor Jawahir Singh tried to transform the tribal headship into the pattern of a full-fledged royalty and to plant the Jat standard in the imperial city of Delhi. Umrao Giri who had entered the service of Suraj Mal after resigning from Farrukhabad, and Anup from Oudh, rendered conspicuous work during this Jat-Ruhela contest. When Jawahir Singh's first offensive against Delhi city (15 November 1764) was rendered in fruitless by Malhar Rao's refusal of the necessary support, Jawahir planned an assault from the eastern bank of the Jamuna, but the indiscreet plunder of the Patparganj mart on the way, and the clouds of dust raised by the Jat cavalry on the other bank forewarned the wary Ruhela dictator Najib-ud-daula of the coming storm. He met the danger by a wise disposition of his troops and by the use of the art of ambuscade in which his clansmen were past-masters. As a consequence, not only did the expedition miscarry but the entire corps of Jat troops was threatened with annihilation. As Nuruddin Hasan, a contemporary chronicler and eye-witness of the battle, reports, "Sewairam, with 150 horsemen fell in a hand-to-hand fight who had run away (at the first shock), came back and joined in the pursuit. The Jats were placed between the galloping Ruhels in front and the water of the Jamuna behind, without any prospect of succor. Jawahir, mounted on horse-back, espied the scene from the *other* bank and was filled with alarm. He wanted to rush across the water forthwith to their rescue. It was a task involving risk to his life and he was prevented from executing it by Imad-ul-Mulk.

In this critical situation orders were issued to Umrao Giri to extricate the fleeing Jats from the jaws of the Ruhela horsemen. Racking little of the consequence, the intrepid warrior plunged his horse into the river with a band of followers numbering six to seven hundred men. By a lucky accident he discovered fleeing Jat troops; and under his inspiration they turned round and engaged. The struggle continued till nightfall, when the Ruhelas retired to the city; while the Jats got across the river between two rows of torch-bearers lining the Jamuna bed from one bank to the other. The Jat Raja's sense of relief was great; he appreciated the Gosain's devotion and bravery by lifting him to the howdah of his own elephant and riding round the camp to visit and comfort his wounded soldiers.

The Jat-Ruhela tussle was in full swing for more than a month after this event. Jawahir *replenished his strength during this interval* by summoning the Sikhs to his standard, yet he failed to win any decisive advantage over the enemy.

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

In these circumstances he planned to mount a still greater offensive by taking into his pay the contingent of Anupgiri. This Naga leader had followed his master Shuja through all the vicissitudes from the battle of Buxar to his exile in the Ruhela country, but when he failed to feed his *risala* any longer for want of money and his stored up wealth (such as tents, carpets, camp-equipment and lakhs of coins) was taken away from the fort of Achalgarh by Najaf Khan¹⁸, he bade a reluctant adieu to his master and transferred his sword to the service of Jawahir Singh, end of December 1764. For some time after his junction the war did not undergo any material alteration in its fortunes.

Conclusion:

Jamini Mohan, like the Cambridge historians had been right about Governor- General Warren Hastings' attitude towards the armed Sannyasis . The year 1773 was the turning point and reached in its peak in the early nineteenth century. The Governor – General like Warren Hastings down to Lord Wellesley realized that unless they were suppressed it was not possible for the East India Company to establish their supremacy. Though the rebellion suppressed, the armed Sannyasis under the leadership of Gosain Himmat Bahadur and Umrao Giri rendered assistance to the Maratha and Bundela chiefs in establishing their supremacy over others. The Sannyasi rebellion was no doubt anti- East India Company and anti- colonial in the sense that these armed Sannyasis not only murdered the East India Company officials like Captain Thomas, Captain Keith but also attacked the trusted zamindars of various regions of Bengal. The fact is that the Sannyasis were very much transient and peripatetic political force in all- India perspective.

¹ *A Bengal Atlas: containing maps of the theatre of war and commerce on that side of Hindostan*, Delhi:Gyan Books Pvt. Limited, (reprint), 2000.

²Habib, Irfan, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, Delhi: Oxford University Press,p. 104.

³ The Dasanamis were ten sub-orders viz., Giri, Puri, Saraswati, Ashram, Ban, Parbat, Tirtha, Sagar, Bharati and Aranya. They are originated to the four disciples of Great Shankaracharya, the philosopher.

⁴ *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta:Bengal Secretariat Press, 1930.

⁵ *The Fakirs and Sannyasi Uprisings*, Calcutta: KP Bagchi & Co.,1992.

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

⁶ Pinch, William, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empire*, South Asian Edition, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁷ In Uttar Pradesh there are five Regional Archives, viz., Allahabad, Varanasi, Nainital, Agra and Dehradun and the State Archives of Uttar Pradesh is in Lucknow. The present researcher consulted the primary sources preserved in Allahabad, Varanasi (the Regional Archives) and also the State Archives at Lucknow.

⁸ *Tarikh-i-Ahmadshahi* (translated into English by Jadunath Sarkar, 1937), an unpublished manuscript written by an anonymous author, but, by far the fullest and most accurate history of the reign of the Mughal Emperor Ahmad Shah see Khairuddin Muhammad Allahabadi, *Ibratnama*, unpublished manuscript (in Persian); Hari Charan Das, *Chahar Gulzar Shujai* (in Persian), Lucknow: Newal Kishore Press, n.d.; Ghulam Ali Naqvi, *Imad-us-Sadat*, Lucknow: Newal Kishore Press, n.d.

⁹ Private Archives of Raghubir Singh, Sitamau, preserves a large number of *Akhbarats* which have been used in preparing this note. Jadunath Sarkar consulted the *Akhbarats* in writing his masterpiece on the history of the Dasnami Nagas (for details see J.N. Sarkar, *Persian Records of Maratha History, Parasnis Collection, Delhi Affairs (1761-1788)*, Bombay Printing Press, Bombay, 1953. *Readings in History of the Hindustan, 1732-1744*; Marathi Sources, Sitamau, 1941 (unpublished); and Hari Gir and Prithwi Gir, *Gosavi Vatyacha Sampradaya* (in Marathi), Yeotmal, Baroda Press, 1931; G.S. Sardesai, ed., *Selections from the Peshwa Daftar*, Bombay: Central Press 1930-4; and idem., *Historical Papers Relating to Mahadji Sindiā* (unpublished papers from Marathi to English). Alijah Darbar Press, Gwalior, 1937 with a Foreword by Jadunath Sarkar.

¹⁰ 'Sannyasi Trader- Soldiers' Indian Economic and Social History Review, vol. VIII, 1971:213-220; and Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: *The Ethno- History of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, Cambridge, 1990.

¹¹ *Tarikh i- Ahmadshahi*, pp. 16-17.

¹² G. S. Ghurye, , *Indian Sadhus*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964, pp.111-112.

¹³ Hari Gir and Prithwi Gir

¹⁴ W. G. Orr, ' Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India' , *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XXIV, Manchester, 1940; F. S. Growse, *Mathura: A District Memoir* (rpt). Ahmadabad, 1978, p. 308.

North Indian Warlike Monks Rise against the British Power in Bengal in the 18th Century

¹⁵ *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668, tr. I. Brock and A. Constable, 2nd edition., rev. and ed. V. a. Smith, London 1934.p. 168.*

¹⁶ Jean- Baptiste Tavernier,*Travels in India, New Dehli:Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1977.*

¹⁷ Forbes, James, *Oriental Memoirs*, vol. I, London:White Cochrane and Co., 1813.

¹⁸ *Ibratnama*, II, 150