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Variations in Perception of the Insurgent Peasants of Bengal in the Late Eighteenth Century

This paper shall deal with the problem of explicating certain stages in the realm of perception of the rebel peasants in the late eighteenth century Bengal. The purpose of this explication is to understand variations in the perception of such insurgents with regard to the early colonial domination as well as their own role against the domination. Our investigation, however, will be limited to two uprisings of the period—the Fakir-Sannyasi (1761-1800) and Rangpur (1783)—and the appraisals will be based on the data collected in this regard.

We are not repeating here the well-known set of information, available from contemporary official records, on the basic economic changes which started taking shape in Bengal, particularly after the East India Company's assumption of *diwani* in 1765, unleashing the crucial drive to enhance the land revenue of the province. It is now generally recognized that the collection of this enhanced revenue, which was essential for financing one-way export trading and the administrative expenses of the Company, was mostly carried out by a group of new intermediaries and that the ultimate burden was placed ruthlessly on the small peasants. It is also known that this increased revenue burden gave birth to a major contradiction in Bengal during the 'mercantile' colonial phase and formed, in a nutshell, the material basis of peasant resistance across the last four decades of the eighteenth century. We are skipping such official information and imputations therefore because, in spite of the importance of these structural data and quantitative details, the pivotal question remains almost unanswered: 'How did the peasants themselves look at the unprecedented domination of their village economy by the alien East India Company and its new intermediaries?' Furthermore it remains much less unanswered whether there was any variation in this perception of the peasantry.

We shall, therefore, have to begin with exploring a different category of source materials as well as reinterpreting the existing official data. In other words, we shall primarily locate and consider such records which are expected to reflect the viewpoint of the insur-

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gents. These are mostly non-official documents. The official sources (i.e., the records preserved by the English East India Company) can only be taken into account in so far as these may be reinterpreted and made amenable to provide certain information, albeit, indirectly, on the motivations of the rebel peasants. In the category of non-official documents, two near-contemporary Bengali verses have been located which sought to depict the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings, by and large, from the side of the insurgents: one is *Majnu Shaher Hakikat* and the other is known as *Rangpurer Jager Gan*. The *Hakikat* was composed by Jamiruddih Dafadar, a local poet of Birbhum, in 1873. The manuscript has been recently printed as an appendix to *Bidrohi Fakir Nayak Majnu Shah*, written by M. Abdur Rahman. The *Jager Gan* was composed by Ratiram Das soon after the Rangpur rising and was later published in *Rangpurer Sahitya Parishad Patrika* (1315 BS). The manuscript was reprinted in Narahari Kaviraj's work, *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal, 1783* (Delhi, 1972).

As an immediate reaction to the colonial inroads, the major perception of the peasants at the initial stage was focussed around the mounting burden of increased revenue and the severe methods introduced by the new intermediaries or the new zamindars of the East India Company. This perception comes out sharply from the passages of both the *Hakikat* and the *Jager Gan*.

The passages, after translation, would run as:

There was a *mazar* of Darvish Hamid
in the domain of Asaduzzaman
(the old zamindar of Birbhum).
There in the Khanqah of the old Pir Khadim
came Majnu Fakir to offer his *Salam*.
Khadim urged Majnu in despair:
'Lakhs of people are dying in famine,
try to save their lives!
The Company's agents and *picks*
torture tillers and ryots
for exorbitant revenue; and
people are deserting villages'.

The same resentment against the Company's imposition of exorbitant revenue and the merciless extraction by the agents can be heard from the following lines of *Rangpurer Jager Gan:*

Under the Company, the ruler was Debi Singh.
Because of his misdeeds, the country faced famine.
Revenue assessment was not fixed,
but the extraction from the peasants steadily increased.
His only aim was to demand more and more;
Under severe torture a wail of agony arose.

This, then, was the general level of perception at the initial stage, shared by the aggrieved peasants during the formative period of both the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur risings. At the next stage of perception when the insurgents sought to articulate the causal factor for their recent sufferings, they inducted a sort of moral overtone. The functioning of the East India Company was, by and large, transmitted to them through the ruthless operations of a new group of zamindars or intermediaries who initially replaced the traditional zamindars. To the ryots and the traditional zamindars alike, the unjust method of revenue extraction by the alien intermediaries appeared as a sharp deviation from *rajdharma* or the traditional behaviour pattern which had so long been morally expected from the ruling class. The following passages of *Jager Gan* bring this out clearly:

> When the country was perishing in famine,
> Debi Singh, the arch villain,
> was busy plundering the people.
> . . .Sivchandra (the traditional zamindar),
> the pride of the Baidyas,
> could not bear the oppression any longer.
> He convened all zamindars of Rangpur
> and invited the cultivators as well.
> Sivchandra stood up to speak with folded hands,
> as he spoke he wept in anger.
> He pointed out the tillers to the zamindars,
> and said: 'how could you
> take food without caring
> for these starving subjects?
> Too often there were floods from the north,
> and the paddy fields were inundated.
> I had spent time, labour and money
> to dyke the bend of river Caroah.
> But, now, the subjects perish
> for the sins of the new king.
> There is no water for irrigation,
> paddy field is scorched down and
> nothing is left at home.
> . . . I went down to reason with
> the vicious Raja Debi Singh,
> but his hoodlums put me in fetters.
> Look at the condition of the cultivators,
> dear zamindars, and do,
> whatever you deem proper.
> Sivchandra lost his temper and spoke again:
> 'Since the Rajput robber is a scoundrel,
> you should all drive him out'.

The above lines have, by and large, projected a code of moral norms which used to be followed by the ruling class, in general, and the zamindars, in particular, before the introduction of British rule. Such norms included precautionary measures to be undertaken by the zamindars against flood and drought; similarly imposition of excessive burden of revenue on the ryots was discouraged at a time when agricultural production suffered natural disaster. A question was asked, in the above passages, which brings out the benevolent ethos rather poignantly: 'How could you (the zamindars) take food without caring for these starving subjects?' The colonial encroachment, which was spearheaded by the upstart intermediaries like Debi Singh who did not care to follow any of the above norms, shattered the pre-colonial paternalistic ethos completely. Debi Singh—the main target of the Rangpur rebels—appeared in the perception of both the ryots and the traditional zamindars as the symbol of negation and destruction of *rajdharma* so long cherished. The material loss and sufferings of the peasantry, according to this stage of perception, were closely interrelated with the moral degradation of the new ruling class. Thus 'now the subjects perish for the sins of the new king'. Therefore, when the insurgent mood gathered momentum, which was shared by the peasants and the traditional zamindars alike, it was loaded with moral overtones.

Confusion, however, tended to crop up at the next stage of perception when variations could be found as regards the ability of the rebels and the English East India Company. These intermediaries, as it is now well known, were directly encouraged by the officials of the East India Company to replace the old zamindars through the process of public auction of land. As early as in 1775, the Court of Directors of the Company in their minutes of 15th September remarked: 'We have reason to believe that not less than one-third of the Company's lands are or have lately been held by the Banians of English gentlemen. The Governor's Banian stands foremost by the enormous amount of his farms and contracts.' Between 1765 and 1777 'lands were let in general too high, and to find out the real value of the lands the most probable method was to let them to highest bidders and also to dispose of the farms by public auction.'[1] With the help of these intermediaries who could be willingly ruthless, unhampered by 'roots that clutch', collection of land revenue was increased more than four times (from Rs. 6.5 million to Rs. 26 million) between 1765 and 1784, and the burden of this phenomenal enhancement, as we have noted earlier, was ultimately placed on the small peasants.

As regards the perception of the peasants on the causal factor for this unprecedented revenue burden, it, however, tended to vary between the participants in the Rangpur rebellion and the insurgents of the Fakir-Sannyasi uprisings. In so far as the East India Company could use Debi Singh and his associates as a sort of effective buffer, the rebel peasants of Rangpur could not perceive beyond the new intermediaries. They missed the crucial connection of the intermediaries with the Company and placed the blame for their sufferings solely on the former. The Company had also used the tactical double standard—by projecting officers like Goodlad as,a kind of hard taskmaster, while allowing officials like David Paterson to assume the role of a benevolent problem-solver. In the event, the confused peasants drifted and finally sent their appeal to the authorities of the Company for undoing the misdeeds of Debi Singh and his associates. This confusion comes out distinctly from the concluding lines of *Jager Gan,* when,even after driving out Debi Singh by dint of their own collective resistance, the peasants sought and praised the judicial arbitration of the East India Company:

> Debi Singh escaped, under cover,
> either to Murshidabad or to Dacca.
> The Lord entrusted
> the English with the kingdom,
> and the Company carried out justice.
> The Englishmen held a trial,
> and Debi Singh's associates
> were put in prison, one after another.

The rebels, or rather the composer of *Jager Gan,* could not perceive that a new group of intermediaries were soon despatched by the Company to Rangpur, after a 'show' of punishing the associates of Debi Singh, and that no worthwhile remission was made in respect of revenue collection for the subsequent years.

In striking contrast to the perception of the rebel peasants of Rangpur, the insurgents of the Fakir-Sannyasi uprisings could see through the vital linkage between the new intermediaries and the East India Company. The moral overtone, which we have already noted at the outset of the Rangpur rebellion, found a deeper expression in the case of the Fakir-Sannyasi uprisings. The mood was particularly captured in *Majnu Shaher Hakikat* where the old Pir extended a sort of religious sanction to Majnu Shah, the chief leader of the uprisings, to raise the banner of revolt against the Company in unison with the Hindu (Naga Dasnami) Sannyasis:

> Majnu came back,
> touring the districts widely.
> Along with him,
> also came his disciples.
> Majnu told the old Pir
> all his experience, vivid and traumatic.
> The Pir broke into tears in rage and anguish,
> and then gave an inspiring call:
> 'Take up arms,

unite with Naga Sannyasis,
raid the storage where rice was hoarded,
distribute all provisions among the starved,
and drive out the English,
as no alternative is left'.

Also the Company could not use their agents (the new zamindars or intermediaries) as a buffer for long and came out openly to 'give every assistance and support to the new zamindars against any attempt by the Sannyasis (and the Fakirs) to oppress or injure them.'[2] In the face of the stubborn resistance of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis who were functioning in close association with the peasantry, the officials of the Company did not have much room to manoeuvre any double standard. Consequently, Warren Hastings, one of the most prominent architects of British colonial rule in eastern India, had to issue a circular letter, on 21st January 1773, to the Collectors,

> to keep a particular eye over the motion of the people known by the name of Sannyasis (and Fakirs) whose incursions of late had been frequent and distressing to the country. . . They (the Collectors) were further directed . . . to give public notice that all such persons and bodies of men (the Fakirs and the Sannyasis) travelling armed through the country will be regarded as enemies of the Government and pursued accordingly.'[3]

The Fakirs and the Sannyasis are also known to have never opted for sending any form of appeal to the authorities of the East India Company. From the beginning their attitude was one of confrontation. The following communication from the Collector of Rajshahi brings this out unambiguously. On 26th June 1776, Gladwin reported from Bogra the arrival of Majnu Shah, the leader of the uprisings, along with other insurgents at Mahasthangarh: 'I sent the Cawzi (Kazi) to inquire from him (Majnu), in my name, what were his intentions. ... He (Majnu) said if I offered to attack him, he was not afraid but ready to oppose.'[4]

Depending on this variation in perception of the rebels as regards the crucial connection between the East India Company and the new zamindars or intermediaries, the targets of the insurgents in the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings tended to differ after following a similar course for some distance. To the extent the urgency to oppose the mounting burden of revenue remained the focal point of perception, the rebels in both the uprisings organized their thrusts in a fairly comparable manner—collective drive to forcefully intercept and recapture the increased revenue usually stored at the *kutchery* of the new zamindars or intermediaries, the subsequent call for non-payment of revenue, and the following attempt to evolve a parallel system of revenue collection and improvise a kind of rebel government machinery.

Certain concrete examples may be cited from the contemporary records relating to the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings. Thus, the Company's Supervisor at Natore reported the following operation of the Fakirs during January 1772: 'This morning . . . the Fakirs moved to Kolegong . . . in Silberis (Bogra) . . and they have taken Rs. 1690 from the *kutchery* of Jaysin which had been deserted . . . on the approach of this banditti.'[5] The *Hakikat* has described similar thrust of the insurgents in the following lines:

> Thousands of Fakirs responded to the call,
> and they stood behind Majnu, their leader.
> Also the Sannyasis assembled and fraternized.
> Jointly the rebels attacked the *kutcheries*
> and ravaged the Company's *kuthis*
> to recapture revenue and provisions.
> The English were afraid and crestfallen.
> But the ryots were encouraged,
> and they hoped
> that their sufferings would
> come to an end.

Writings to the Court of Directors in October 1774, the Governor-General admitted that 'a considerable part of the deficiency (in the collection of revenue) may be attributed to the plunder, extortion and depredations occasioned by the continued incursions of the Sannyasis.'[6] Similarly, during the Rangpur uprisings, the ryots attacked the *kutchery* of Kishoreganj in the pargana of Kazirhat and, thereafter, directed their offensive towards the Dimla *kutchery*. There the insurgents entered the *tosha-khana* (store room), opened the chests, and plundered all the cash, papers and records they could find.[7] As regards the thrusts of the rebels to reject the payment of enhanced revenue and improvise an alternative structure of revenue collection of their own, the Collector of Murshidabad reported in October 1784: 'Shaw Mujenoo (Majnu) made his appearance with about two hundred and fifty armed men ... crossed from Bethoreah (Bhatariah) ... and began to collect immediately the assessment which he usually makes at every village.'[8] When the upsurge in Rangpur reached its peak during January-February 1783, the peasant insurgents appointed certain officers to run a sort of parallel government machinery to collect their own revenue; their officers were known as 'nawab', 'dewan', 'bakshi', etc.[9] Haridas, the dewan, wrote to the ryots of Sarkar Pinjirah in the following terms: 'We have made an insurrection . . . All Coochwanah (Rangpur) are come forth. You do the same and join us. You pay no more revenue.'[10] The rebels also levied a tax throughout the countryside under the head of *ding khurtcha* (insurrection charges) to defray the expenses of the uprising.[11]

So far the rebels, both in the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings, went along similar courses. Thereafter their targets, as we have indicated earlier, tended to vary. The Rangpur rebels concentrated their attacks on the new intermediaries like Debi Singh and his associates. While launching their offensive on the Dimla *kutchery* near Rangpur in early 1783, the peasants searched for Gourmohan (the principal associate of Debi Singh), got hold of him and carried him to Dirjinarain, the rebel leader, soon after the peasants killed Gourmohan mercilessly.[12] On the other hand, the Fakirs and the Sannyasis and their peasant associates, while dealing the new zamindars or intermediaries with no less vengeance, went beyond their immediate target and squarely confronted the English officials and sepoys of the East India Company. The well-known letter of Charles Purling, written to the President in 1772, had depicted a vivid picture of such confrontation:

> Captain Thomas pursued them (the Sannyasis) in a jungle where the sepoys expended all their ammunitions without doing the least executions; when they perceived the ammunition spent, the Sinnasies (the Sannyasis) rushed in upon them in very large bodies from every quarter and surrounded . . . . Captain Thomas ordered the sepoys to charge upon them with their bayonets which they refused to do . . . Captain received one wound by a ball (missile) through the head which he tied, and next he was cut down. The ryots gave no assistance but joined the Sinnasies (the Sannyasis) with lathis and showed the Sinnasies (the Sannyasis) whom they saw had concealed themselves in long grass and jungle and, if any of the sepoys attempted to go into their villages, they made a noise to bring the Sinnasies (the Sannyasis) and they plundered the sepoy's firelocks.[13]

What, then, are the basic reasons underlying the above variations in perception of the insurgents in the two contemporary uprisings and the consequent divergence as regards the targets of the rebels? The reasons may be sought in two interrelated spheres. The first and rather familiar one is the organizational aspect which brought together different categories of social groups adversely affected by the colonial inroads. The second and not much familiar one is the problem of ideological preparation of the insurgents.

At the organizational level the Rangpur rebels could group together such social groups who were primarily affected by the increased burden of land revenue: the small peasants, the *bosneahs* or the village headmen and the dispossessed petty zamindars of the Mughal era. The small peasants formed the mainstay of the combination, though they chose certain *bosneahs* like Dirjinarain to function as their leader. The traditional zamindars of modest means, like the archetype Sivchandra as described in *Jager Gan*, extended their support to the aggrieved peasants. In spite of the large number of followers which the insurgents commanded (for example, at Kotalia near Saradhoby almost twelve thousand peasants assembled within short notice)[14], their preparation for armed confrontation was, however, elemental in nature. The peasants opted for direct assault on the *kutchery* and fortifications of the intermediaries like Debi Singh. They could not gather weapons beyond the rudimentary ones and were not prepared for a long-drawn resistance when the forces of the East India Company ultimately intervened to ensure smooth flow of revenue collection. The elemental aggressive onslaught of the peasants on the intermediaries like Debi Singh, which was successful in the short-range perspective, has been described in the following lines of *Jager Gan*:

> . . . the peasants were encouraged at last;
> in thousand they rushed together.
> They took sticks, spears, sickles and choppers,
> For Children, there was none to look after.
> The peasants carried their plough
> on their shoulders;
> they ran like savages as they were made beggars.
> To Rangpur peasants came from all quarters,
> they started throwing stones and brickbats,
> which kept falling with thud
> from all directions.
> In the shower of stones,
> some suffered broken bones,
> and the palace of Debi Singh
> was reduced to a heap of bricks.

The organizational character of the Fakir-Sannaysi uprisings, however, took a different shape. The insurgents consisted of a varied group of participants with deeper economic interests and wider experience in combat tactics. In addition to the small peasants (who, again, were particularly desperate due to their *rahi-kasht* or roving movements), the village artisans and the petty dispossessed zamindars were included in the combination which enjoyed the support of the big traditional zamindars of the Mughal times (like Rani Bhavani of Rajshahi and Raja Assaduzzaman Khan of Birbhum) as well as the disbanded mercenaries of the dispossessed landed gentry. Over and above these participants and supporters, the leadership of the uprisings was shared by the Madari Fakirs and the Dasnami Sannyasis who had deep-rooted trading, moneylending and landed interests of the pre-colonial genre in Bengal and elsewhere under the Mughals. Along with the question of these vital interests which were affected by the colonial inroads of the East India Company in the relevant spheres, both the Dasnamis and the Madaris had a long tradition of bearing arms and they used to participate considerably in the internal warfare of the princely magnates in different parts of the country throughout the 18th century. Furthermore, the Dasnamis and the Madaris had already struck deep roots in the rural life of Bengal in the course of their religious tours and discourses which used to be well organised through the *maths* and *khanghas*. Thus the participants and the leaders of the Fakir-Sannyasi uprisings were prepared and organized enough to confront the agents as well as the authorities of the East India Company for a long stretch of time.

Normally the combat techniques of these insurgents, unlike those of the Rangpur rebellion, appear to be closer to guerilla tactics. In the language of their adversaries (which can be easily reinterpreted): 'the followers' of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis 'were taught to disperse when pursued and unite again at appointed stations so that it seldom happens that they can be apprehended.'[15] On the appearance of a force of sepoys which the Fakirs and the Sannyasis were unable to cope with, 'they either retire rapidly to their fastness in the hills or separate to elude observation and again assemble and ravage a more defenceless quarter of the country. The Battalion stationed at Taugepore has been found by experience insufficient to protect so extensive a country. It has neither been able effectually to prevent their incursions nor intercept their return.'[16] However, when a situation demanded a frontal confrontation with the force of the Company, the Fakirs and the Sannyasis did not escape and sometimes fought it well. In early 1773, a large group of armed Sannyasis, numbering about 3000, were assembled in the Pargana Barabazu within the district of Dacca. A telling account of the confrontation has been given by Captain Williams: 'Capt. Edwards described the Sannyasis about two miles in front of him. He immediately formed his detachment into a column by subdivisions from the right and marched on towards the enemy who, as soon as he came near enough, saluted him with a few rockets. When Captain Edwards thought himself with a proper distance for engaging, he rode to the head of the column and beat to arms intending that the divisions should double upon the left of the leading division as they came up; but the men mistaking the orders wheeled to the left and formed in battalion which laid their right flank open to the enemy. He galloped to the left in order to draw them into line fronting the Sannyasis whilst Douglas exerted himself on the right for the same purpose. But it was too late; for the enemy, perceiving the confusion, rushed in upon them with swords and spears and dispatched a few (missiles) and put the rest (of the sepoys) to flight. Douglas was the first that fell. But the fate of Captain Edwards was not known; his hat was found in the *nulla* (rivulet), but the body has never been discovered.'[17]

However, the *Hakikat* has pointed out a crucial deficiency in the armoury of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis and a corresponding advantage scored by the English. This was the effective use of cannon which turned the scale in favour of the Company. Nonetheless, the rebels tried their best to carry on a determined resistance:

> At last they (the English) came
> reinforced with cannon;
> the Fakirs had to retreat,
> but they came back again,
> attacked the enemy in ambush,
> and caught them unawares.
> Thus the resistance went on,
> and the English got no respite.
> The battles continued for long,
> with ups and downs,
> and the results inconclusive.

Let us now compare the ideological preparation of the Rangpur rebels with that of the Fakir-Sannyasi insurgents. In both the uprisings the major ideological thrust which permeated the perception of the peasants and the other aggrieved social groups was directed to obtain 'justice'—'justice' which was denied to them because of the serious departure of the East India Company and its new intermediaries from the *rajdharma* or the traditional norms of the ruling class which we had mentioned earlier. When the *paiks*, sent by the new intermediaries of Kazirhat, asked the members of a peasant assemblage as to what was their objective, they answered: 'We are going to obtain justice.'[18] But for whom were they asking justice? The peasants and the related groups were asking justice not only for themselves but also for the whole village community whose traditional leadership was provided by the village headmen and, above them, the old zamindars of the Mughal period. Thus, in 1772, Majnu Shah, the chief leader of the Fakir-Sannyasi uprisings, was eloquent in reiterating his traditional loyalty to Rani Bhavani in the face of the Company's offensive:

> We have for a long time begged and been entertained in Bengal and we have long continued to worship God at the several shrines and altars without ever once abusing or oppressing any one. Nevertheless last year (1771) 150 Fakirs were without cause put to death . . . The merit which is derived . . . from the murder of the helpless and indigent need not be declared. Formerly the Fakirs begged in separate and detached parties, but now we are all collected and beg together. Displeased at this method they (the English) obstruct us in visiting shrines and other places—this is unreasonable. You are the ruler of the country. We are Fakirs who pray always for your welfare. We are full of hopes.[19]

But, the traditional zamindars like Rani Bhavani, who symbolised *rajdharma* in the perception of the rebels, were now themselves threatened of being dislodged by the new intermediaries of the East India Company. Therefore, the search of the insurgents for 'justice' included their urge to the lost *'rajdharma'* could be regained that way and, in the process, the recent hardship of the peasants, the artisans and other members of the village community could also be mitigated. It was, thus, a moral assertion for common justice.

The above description of perception of the insurgents correspond, by and large, to a kind of 'mixed' ideology which has been explicated by George Rude elsewhere.[20] This type of ideology, according to Rude, happens to be a combination of (a) the inherent' traditional element, less tangible, based on direct popular experience and oral tradition, such as what Leroy Laduri and Vovelle have called the *mentalites* and *sensibilite collective* of the common people and (b) the 'derived' element which appears to be a stock of a more structured system of ideas and beliefs, political or religious, which the common people received from more articulate social groups. There has been, however, a constant interaction between the two elements. It has often been found that the 'derived' or structured ideas of an era are sometimes a more sophisticated distillation of the people's 'inherent' beliefs across the earlier periods. This general interaction notwithstanding, a delineation can be made in the specific context of explication of certain elements in the perception of the rebel peasants of Bengal, such as their attachment for *rajdharma* and the search for 'justice'. The attachment of the insurgents for restoration of *rajdharma* may be included in the category of 'derived' ideas, while their thrusts for 'justice' to mitigate the severe hardship of the colonial regime can be considered as an offshoot of their 'inherent' beliefs.

Variation, however, tends to emerge between the Fakir-Sannyasis and the Rangpur rebels as regards permeation of these 'inherent' and 'derived' elements in their realm of perception. While the Rangpur peasants were quite forthright in their demand for 'justice' and that, too, by establishing *rajdharma*, they were not, in fact, deeply attached to the erstwhile ruling classes of the Mughal period, excepting their formal support for the dispossessed petty zamindars and the *bosneahs* like Dirjinarain. Consequently, when the East India Company employed the tactics of 'velvet gloves' through the mediational efforts of officials like Paterson, the rebels availed themselves of the opportunity to punish their immediate enemies like Debi Singh by appealing to a sort of 'reformed' *rajdharma* of the Company; they did not particularly insisted the restoration of *rajdharma* of the erstwhile Mughal type.

In striking contrast the Fakirs and the Sannyasis strove to explore 'justice' by replacing the rule of the English East India Company altogether by the *rajdharma* of the pre-colonial Mughal genre. This absorption and articulation of the 'derived' element in the perception of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis has come out clearly in the telling letter of Majnu Shah, addressed to Rani Bhavani, which we have mentioned earlier. Their deep-rooted loyalty to the Mughal authorities took shape throughout the 18th century when they consistently stood by the side of the traditional ruling class whenever there was any threat from outside. Thus, in the battle of Buxar (1764) which considerably changed the course of political affairs in eastern and northern India, the armed Dasnami (Naga) Sannyasis and the Madari Fakirs played an important role. The author of *Sivar-ul-Mutakhkherin* described the battle of Buxar: '. . . at the elbow of (Prince Shuja-ud-daulah) was Ghossain (Himmat Giri) and Fakir with five thousand gentoos. . . . The Ghossain with his . . . soldiers advanced to the charge . . . .[21] A vast army consisting of Turani Mughals, Pathans and Rajputs fought on the side of Shuja-ud-daulah and Mir Kasim, but none responded with so much enthusiasm to the Wazir's call as the Nagas.[22] It is further significant to note that the Fakirs refused to accept the authority of the East India Company to question their rent-free land tenure and free movement with armed followers and that their refusal was based on their age-old rights which were conferred on them by a Mughal *sanad* issued by Shah Shuja (a son of Shahjahan), Governor of Bengal, as early as in 1659.[23]

Such perception of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis as expressed in their emphasis on the 'derived' need for restoration of Mughal authority was not, however, forward-looking. Nevertheless, coupled with their thrust for 'inherent' justice which they shared with the Rangpur rebels to some extent, the so-called 'religious bandits' (as the Fakirs and the Sannyasis were frequently dubbed in the 'prose of counter-insurgency' of the English East India Company) were ideologically equipped in a down-to-earth manner to organize a large section of the peasantry in Bengal to wage a war of resistance for almost forty years at a stretch. Though ultimately defeated by the Company, this long-drawn confrontation led by the Fakirs and the Sannyasis stood out with few parallels in the contemporary society of the late 18th century Bengal, where a pervasive climate of collaboration with the colonial rulers had already started striking its early roots.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Minute of Warren Hastings-in-Council, 8 March 1775.
2. Proceedings of the Committee of Revenue, dated 17 April 1783.
3. *Bengal District Records*, Chittagong, Vol. I, pp. 71-72.
4. Proceedings of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Dinajpur, dated 2 July 1776.
5. Letter from the Supervisor of Rajshahi to the Controlling Council of Revenue, dated 25 January 1772.
6. Extract from Revenue General Letter to the Court, dated 18 October 1774.
7. Report of the Rangpur Commission, Proceedings of Revenue Department, dated 29 March 1787.
8. Letter from J. Champion, Collector of Murshidabad, to the Collector of Bogra, dated 14 October 1774. Committee of Revenue Proceedings, dated 18 October 1784.

9. Letter from Goodlad to Committee of Revenue— Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 29 December 1783.
10. Enclosed in Goodlad's letter—Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 17 February 1783.
11. Letter from Goodlad—Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 24 March 1783.
12. Report of the Rangpur Commission, Proceedings of Revenue Department, 29 March 1787.
13. Letter from Charles Purling to the President of the Council, dated 31 December 1772.
14. *Zabanbandi* of Jaguissan Das Takedar of the taluk of Dimla, enclosed in Paterson's letter to Committee of Revenue, dated 29 December 1783.
15. Letter from the Committee of Revenue to the Governor-General-in-Council, dated 18 October 1784.
16. Judicial Department (Criminal), Original Consultation, No. 14, dated 31 October 1794.
17. Captain Williams, *Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Native Infantry*, 1817, pp. 132-34.
18. *Zabandbandi* of Baghil Sardar, enclosed in Paterson's letter to the Committee of Revenue, dated 29 December 1783.
19. J.M. Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1930, p. 47.
20. George Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest*, London, 1980, pp. 27-37.
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