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## *Early Trends of Anti-colonial Peasant Resistance in Bengal*

THE FORMAT of this paper is exploratory in nature. We would submit a tentative suggestion for explicating certain trends of anti-colonial peasant resistance in Bengal during the second half of the 18th century. The paper shall be divided into three sections : (i) the main character of early colonial impact under the English East India Company, (ii) a selective description of peasant insurgency from some well-known anti-colonial movements and (iii) complexities involved in formulation of general trends of early peasant resistance. Though the paper may inherently suffer from a number of shortcomings, we shall try to carve out a delimited theme for discussion rather than go out for more vulnerable generalisations on a massive and flamboyant scale.

(I)

Any formulation on the perspective of anti-colonial character of peasant resistance during the British rule should begin with a resume of the basic economic changes which started taking shape in Bengal and elsewhere after the introduction of colonial rule of the East India Company from 1757 onwards. There were different phases of colonial impact and the basic economic changes assumed various dimensions accordingly. Our discussion, as already mentioned, would be limited to the initial 'mercantilist' phase of the late 18th century when an increased revenue from new colonial acquisition was essentially considered as a larger mercantile capital. The first reaction of the Court of Directors to the news of assumption of *diwani* in 1765 was to ask the Company in Bengal "to enlarge every channel for conveying to us as early as possible the annual produce of our acquisitions" and "to increase the investment of your Company to the utmost extent you can".

It is now generally recognised that the main thrust of the East India Company, particularly after the assumption of *diwani* in 1765, was to enhance the land revenue of Bengal which was essential for financing one-way export trading and administrative expenses of the Company. Between 1765 and 1784, the collection of land revenue was increased from Rs. 6.5 million to Rs. 26 million.<sup>1</sup> Till 1757, the English traders were obliged to bring bullion to India, as Indian cotton and silk goods had a flourishing market in

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the West while the Indian demand for Western products was usually negligible. The import of bullion ceased after 1757. The problem was solved for the East India Company after the victory at Plassey. Now the surplus from land revenue and the plunder from Bengal were enough for the Company's 'investment' in India—a blatant process of drain, as the profits from new acquisitions in Bengal were being used to buy goods at arbitrary low rates for export from the province. The 'investment', which had already amounted to 6 million current rupees in 1767, rose to Rs. 10 million in 1777<sup>2</sup>. The drain of bullion along with one-way export of materials by the Company tended to affect severely the traditional world of trade and manufacture of silk, cotton and other items of commerce in Bengal.

Enhancement of land revenue was carried out by the colonial rulers through various administrative experiments which initially, encouraged replacement of the old zamindars by a new group of intermediaries who were allowed to indulge in public auction of land. As early as in 1775, the Court of Directors of the Company in their Minute 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".<sup>3</sup> With the help of these intermediaries who could be willingly ruthless, unhampered by 'roots that clutch', collection of land revenue increased four times between 1765 and 1784 and the burden of this phenomenal enhancement was ultimately placed on the ryots or the small peasants. Thus a crucial contradiction took shape and antagonism became acute between the ryots and the other discontented classes, on the one hand, and the colonial rulers and their new intermediaries, on the other. This was the nature of major contradiction in Bengal during the early colonial phase and we shall try to place the insurgent peasants and assess the anti-colonial character of their resistance in the context of unfolding of this contradiction. There might have been some differences among the discontented classes themselves as well as certain clash of interests between the colonial rulers and their new intermediaries. But these were minor contradictions which did not alter the essential positions of different classes in relation to basic economic forces unleashed by the colonial rule.

## (II)

Peasant resistance became particularly active after the devastating famine of 1769-70 which brought into sharp focus the contours of major contradiction and the inherent crisis came to a flash point. There was a partial failure of crops in December 1768 due to shortfall in rains. In the early months of 1769, prices soared high. The September crop, which used to be less important than the December harvest, was also scanty. There was not a drop of rain for six months, nor any supply of the inferior grain—*chaitali* harvest—

normally reaped in March-April. A total failure, therefore, of a third crop took place after the deficiency of the two preceding ones. Pestilence raged in almost every part of the province. "All through the stifling summer of 1770, the people went on dying. The husbandmen devoured their seed-grain....they ate the leaves of trees and the grass of the field; and in June 1770, the Resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead."<sup>1</sup> Warren Hastings, who toured the districts, admitted the loss as "at least one third of the inhabitants" of the province.<sup>5</sup>

The relief measures of the Company were inhumanly inadequate. "Utmost that the Council, when pressed by the Court of Directors as to Government relief efforts, could show was a distribution of £ 9000 among thirty millions of people, of whom six in every sixteen were officially admitted to have perished."<sup>6</sup> The whole colonial administration was accused of dealing in grain for its private advantage. The officials and the agents of the Company were charged with allegation of carrying off the peasant's scanty stock at arbitrary prices, stopping and emptying boats that were importing rice from other provinces, and compelling the poor ryots to sell even the seeds requisite for the next harvest.<sup>7</sup>

Though the Company faced "an aggregate of individual suffering which no European nation has been called upon to contemplate in historic times", the collection of revenue was violently kept up almost to its former standard.<sup>8</sup> In a year when almost 35 per cent of the whole population and 50 per cent of the cultivators perished, not even 5 per cent of the land revenue was remitted, and 10 per cent was added to it for the ensuing year.<sup>9</sup> The situation was made more unbearable by the imposition of additional burden of *najai* (access involving payments by villagers to compensate for the defaulters) on those ryots who had barely survived the famine.

The consequences with wider implications began to be felt when cultivation commenced in 1771. It was then discovered that the remnants of the population would not suffice to till the land. The Council admitted that there had been "such a mortality and desertion among the ryots as to deprive the revenue farmers of the possibility of receiving the rents in arrear."<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the abundant crops of 1771, the province continued to fall out of tillage. Gradually, a division of the strata appeared among the peasants : first, the so-called resident (*khud-kasht*) cultivators who, from attachment to their traditional moorings or, more specifically, by compulsions of indebtedness, continued on the same estate as before the famine; and, second, a more adventurous stratum, termed non-resident or migrant (*pahi-kasht*) cultivators, who now had no stakes preventing them from throwing up their previous holdings and going in search of new ones at the lower rates to which depopulation had reduced the market value of land. Within six years after the famine, this new form of the old stratification of resident and non-resident cultivators had distinctly taken place.<sup>11</sup> The non-resident ryots who had previously formed a subordinated group now came up to constitute, for the next thirty years, a prominent feature in agrarian structure of Bengal.

This desertion and new stratification among the peasantry significantly contributed to the consolidation of emerging insurgency. The increase of *pahi-kasht* ryots was a product of dislocation caused by the famine which had also profoundly disturbed the habitual tolerance of state power by the peasantry. Desertion itself signified a note of defiance and, therefore, it also signalled a corresponding change in the level of consciousness of the concerned *pahi-kasht*. Desertion or flight of the peasants, otherwise an unlawful act, was considered to be an initial gesture of resistance against excessive imposition of revenue demands, even during the late Mughal period.<sup>12</sup> Such a mood of despair and defiance of the ryots was observed by the contemporary officials of the Company in the post-famine years, though the 'prose of counter-insurgency' which they affected might have chosen different expressions. They were compelled to take notice of "the frequent firings of villages by the people, whose distress drives them to such acts of despair and villany. Number of ryots, who have hitherto borne the first of characters among their neighbours, pursue this last resource to procure themselves a subsistence."<sup>13</sup>

More significant was the convergence of the initial peasant violence with concerted insurgent activities on a broader scale. We shall take examples from two types of rebellions : first, the Fakir and Sannyasi (or the Fakir-Sannyasi) uprisings where the *pahi-kasht* ryots took active part immediately after the famine and, second, the Rangpur uprising of 1783 where the *khud-kasht* cultivators appeared to have participated significantly. We are leaving out the case studies of Chuar and other rebellions of that genre for want of space. The involvement of the peasantry in the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings would be initially treated separately in brief; and this would be followed up by an appraisal of broader similarities in *modus operandi* of the insurgents in two types of upsurge.

The swift convergence of the initial peasant resistance with the on-going insurgency of the Madari Fakirs and the Dasnami Sannyasis did not fail to draw immediate attention of the contemporary officials of the Company. In fact, the new migratory behaviour of the peasants was viewed as identical and almost synonymous with the roving movements of the Sannyasis and the Fakirs. The ryots were reported to have "formed themselves into bands of so-called houseless devotees and roved about the country." The Council wrote in 1773 : "a set of lawless banditti, known under the name of Sannyasis or Fakirs, have long infested these countries; and, under pretence of religious pilgrimage, have been accustomed to traverse the chief part of Bengal, begging and plundering wherever they go, and as it best suits their convenience to practice."<sup>14</sup> In the crowd of starving peasants who had neither seed nor implements to recommence cultivation with, and the cold weather of 1772 brought them down upon the harvest fields of lower Bengal, burning, plundering, ravaging in bodies of fifty thousand men."<sup>15</sup> The early phase of sporadic resistance by the Fakir and the Sannyasis, who had been severely affected since 1757 by the Company's measures as regards resumption of rent free tenure, money-lending and trade and commerce, underwent

qualitative changes by the massive entry of the peasantry after the ravages of the famine.

While the uprising at Rangpur started in January 1783, its first rumblings could be heard a few months earlier. In November 1782, Richard Goodlad wrote to the authorities in Calcutta referring to the formidable combinations of the ryots in withholding payments for increased land revenue and illegal impositions like 'deerin-willah' and 'batta'. The immediate enemy against whom these combinations were formed was Debi Singh, the Farmer-in-Charge appointed by the Company for Rangpur. Goodlad suggested that the whole weight of the government should be brought on the side of the farmer and the collector be empowered to enforce the payment of all balances due to the farmer with "unrelenting vigour."<sup>11</sup> The collector, however miscalculated. It is true that, faced with unprecedented coercive measures adopted by Debi Singh and his agents, there was a large-scale desertion of the ryots, at the initial stage. But not all of them deserted, and some also came back after a while. Finally the *pabi-kasht* cultivators combined with the *khud-kasht* ryots and "the whole body of the people were in arms."<sup>17</sup> David Patterson, who was specially deputed by the Committee of Revenue in February 1783, suggested that the number of rebels could go upto 100,00<sup>18</sup>, and he made a remarkable submission that it would have been a wonder if the people had not risen.<sup>19</sup>

A major target of the rebels, both during the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings, was directed at intercepting and recapturing the enhanced revenue which was collected in cash and was kept either in the *kutchery* of the new intermediaries or at the disposal of the Company. Shortly after the famine, the Supervisor at Natore reported the following operation of the Fakirs under the leadership of Majnu Shah 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 by the officers on the approach of this banditti. It appears that they have with them a two camels, about 40 rockets, 400 matchlock men, a few swivels and altogether 1000 men who carry arms. Mudgenoon (Majnu) himself is mounted on a very good horse and several of his attendants also have horses." But it should be noted from the same letter that, so far as the ordinary villagers were concerned, "Mudgenoon (Majnu) has given injunctions to his own followers to avoid all kinds of oppression or severity and to take nothing but the voluntary contribution from the people by way of charity."<sup>20</sup> Writing 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."<sup>21</sup> Information on interception of the collected revenue can be available in abundance from the contemporary official records, though often loaded with 'prose of counter-insurgency'.

During the initial stage of the Rangpur uprising, a body of the peasant insurgents reached Dakhalyganj in pargana Kakina, at Salmari, and released such people as were confined there for non-payment of revenue. They seized

the amlahs of the kutchery and brought them to Balaganj in Kazirhat where the main group of the insurgents was assembled.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, the ryots had attacked the kutchery of Kishoreganj in the pargana of Kazirhat which had become one of their major targets because Sheik Mahomed Mollah, who set up his headquarters there, had earned considerable notoriety in the matter of revenue collection. Another farmer of disrepute was Gourmohan Choudhuri who was considered as the principal agent of Debi Singh. The ryots soon launched an attack on the Dimla kutchery, got hold of Gourmohan and clubbed him on the head. The insurgents entered the *tosha-khana* (store room), opened the chests, and plundered all the cash, papers and records they could find. Thereupon the rebels carried Gourmohan to Dirjinarain, their leader, to the south of Dimla where they finally killed Gourmohan mercilessly.<sup>23</sup>

The rebels then proceeded to Bhawoniganj and broke open the *golahs* in which the Company used to stock rice.<sup>24</sup> This kind of drive to recapture hoarded food materials by the unfed ryots had also been described vividly in a near-contemporary Bengali verse entitled *Majnu Shaher Hakikat*.<sup>25</sup>

Certain passages of the *Hakikat* (translated version) would run as :

“The Company’s agents and *paiks*  
tortured artisans and ryots  
for exorbitant revenue  
and people deserted villages.

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Thousands of Fakirs responded,  
and they stood behind Majnu, their leader.  
Also the Sannyasis assembled and fraternised.  
Jointly the rebels attacked the *kutchery*  
and ravaged the Company’s *kuthi*  
to recapture revenue, and provisions,  
The English were afraid and crestfallen.  
But they hoped  
that their suffering would  
come to an end.”

As a logical sequel to their total rejection of the Company’s authority to collect enhanced revenue through new intermediaries, the rebels—both in the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings—tried to improvise an alternative structure of revenue collection of their own. In case of the Fakirs and the Sannyasis, their approach to parallel revenue collection was not entirely new and they appeared to have extended their traditional system of collecting donations from the zamindars and the ryots a little further in order to challenge the Company’s right and authority in this regard. Thus, the *gomes-tas* to the new zamindars of Pargana Alapsingh reported to the Provincial Council at Dacca in 1780 that “last year Fakir Majnu Shah with a number of followers attacked and plundered several Mozahs under Purgunnah Alapsingh, levied money from them to a considerable amount and consequently

prejudiced the revenues of the Company.”<sup>30</sup> In October 1784, the Collector of Murshidabad reported. “Shaw Mujenoo (Majnu) a few days since made his appearance with about two hundred and fifty armed men.....and a crowd of followers. He crossed from Bettereah (Bhatariah) about three *cos*s from the Silberis Cutchery and began to collect immediately the assessment which he usually makes at every village. I am under some apprehension, lest he should plunder the House (the Collector’s house at Silberis).”<sup>31</sup> In January 1786, the Collector of Rangpur apprehended “great trouble to keep the ryots quiet and they most undoubtedly will take the first opportunity of absconding or pleading it as an excuse for not paying up their heavy *Kist of Pous* to the Company.” In March 1786, the same Collector informed Major Dunn that “a large body of Sannyasis numbering 1500 were at Dewangunge where they were levying contributions on the zamindars and ryots and would take the western route to Ghoraghat and Dinajpur.”<sup>32</sup>

Thrust towards parallel revenue collection became more prominent during the Rangpur uprising where the rebels attempted to form a rebel government, though for a very brief period. When the upsurge reached its peak during January-February 1783, the peasant insurgents appointed certain officers to run a regular government of their own, for example, nawab, dewan, bakshi, etc.<sup>33</sup> Below the high officers, there were quite a large number of local officials of a subordinate rank known as Sardars. Dirjinarain was elected the nawab. Baneswar, son of Basser Pramenik of the taluk of Salmari, was elected a dewan; Hari Das was also appointed as a dewan.<sup>34</sup> The rebel government issued proclamations forbidding all payments of revenue to the colonial government. Thus Hari Das, 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.” The rebels also levied a tax throughout the countryside under the head of *ding khurtcha* (‘insurrection charges’) to defray the expenses of the uprising.<sup>35</sup>

Along with multiple targets of the rebels as regards enhanced land-revenue exactions of the Company, they also directed their attacks, perhaps not so consistently, against the Company’s monopolistic privileges over the inland and export trading which was financed by the surplus generated from increased land revenue in Bengal. As we have noted earlier, the Company’s ‘investment’ amounted to a blatant process of drain, as the profits from new acquisitions in Bengal were being used to buy goods at arbitrary low rates for export from the province. The two principal articles of trade were raw silk and cotton piece goods. The Directors, for example, insisted that no Indian trader be permitted to purchase silk of any kind or quality whatever at any *aurang* from which the Company’s ‘investment’ was supplied.<sup>36</sup> Such overt use of political power by the Company to further its colonial control set in the decline of the indigenous merchants, including the Sannyasis, in raw silk trade. As regards the condition of the artisans—whether he was indentured *tanti* (weaver) or the *chassar* (silk-grower) or the *nakad* (silk winder), the concomitant of progress towards monopoly was the deterioration of their

income and living standards. In so far as these aggrieved interests were also connected with the deepening crisis in peasant economy, the rebels during the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings directed their offensive against the colonial network of unequal exchanges.

Contemporary official records indicate that the rebels intercepted and plundered the merchants who appeared to be carrying on the Company's trade. *Bhawani Pathak*, a close associate of Majnu Shah, took leadership in this kind of insurgent activities. His sphere of operations was spread over the parganas of Pratabbazu and Patiladaha in Bogra, Rangpur and Mymensingh districts. In 1787, some merchants carrying on the Company's trade complained to Williams, Superintendent of Government Customs at Dacca, of "Bhowanny Pathuck (Bhawani Pathak), a desperate man having taken and plundered their boats in their passage." Williams "gave the merchants some sepoy and a *parwana* to take Pathuck in custody. Pathuck refused to obey the sepoy or the *parwana*.... and he again plundered the boats of merchants and actually seized one and the property that was in it." Closely connected with these attacks on the merchants, pillage of the English factories and *aurang* was also carried on by the insurgents. As early as in 1763, the Dacca factory was temporarily captured by the Fakirs<sup>36</sup> and the Rampur Boalia factory in Rajshahi was plundered by the Sannyasis.<sup>37</sup> In March 1783, Grant, Agent at the Malda factory, reported to the Collector of Bhagalpur: "the country in the neighbourhood of Malda was being infested by several large bodies of Fakirs who have committed many depredations.... They are now near the Company's *aurang* at Nirschindpore"<sup>38</sup> In January 1792, a determined offensive was unleashed by the Fakirs on the Company's factory at Birtara in Mymensingh district.<sup>39</sup> Also in the district of Rangpur, the Collector, in an attempt to convey his observation on the violent temper of participants in the Rangpur uprising, noted in 1784: "I had reason to apprehend that the public treasury, the town of Rangpur and the Company's factory would be attacked and plundered."<sup>40</sup>

We shall now deal with the problems of approximating the general trends of early peasant resistance and its anti-colonial character from a study of the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings. A major question of general nature that calls for an answer is related to the composition of the leadership of the insurgency. It emerges from the source materials that the Madaris and the Dasnamis led the Fakir and Sannyasi uprisings while the leadership in the Rangpur resistance was largely provided by the Bosneahs. Though differentiation was taking shape within the ranks of Dasnamis and the Madaris, it cannot be denied that a sizeable section among the Dasnamis and, to a lesser extent, among the Madaris did represent landed, trading and, even, moneylending interests of the pre-colonial genre. In case of the Bosneahs, they were regarded as the village headmen. Though the Bosneahs did not have that much of landed and trading interests like the Sannyasis and the Fakirs, they did not also spring from the rank of the poor ryots. Then why did the poor peasantry who actively participated in both the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings accept the leadership of the Dasnamis, the Madaris



and the Bosneahs? The answer may not be found in the rarefied autonomous domain of the peasants but elsewhere. There were, no doubt, certain clashes of interests between the ryots and the associated artisans, on the one hand, and the Fakirs, the Sannyasis and Bosneahs, on the other. But faced with the major contradiction unleashed by the colonial exploitation in the field of land revenue and trade, the minor pre-colonial contradictions drifted to a subdued condition. Furthermore, the Madaris, the Dasnamis, the Bosneahs and all other related social groups with landed and trading interests, which had been protected in the Mughal period, were now themselves exposed to colonial exploitation of one kind or other. Placed in the midst of a qualitatively changed situation, the peasants must have perceived the unprecedented encroachments from the East India Company and its intermediaries as more formidable and urgent. Their initial reaction was large-scale desertion. The widespread migration of ryots led the British Parliament to order an enquiry into the reasons that led the ryots "to abandon and relinquish their lands."<sup>11</sup> Verelst also admitted the flight of producers from mulberry cultivation to the raising of other crops.<sup>12</sup> Gradually the peasants tended to explore other methods of resistance and there they might have found the Sannyasis and the Fakirs, both armed and organised, and the Bosneahs with a traditional background of anchorage as dependable allies in face of common danger from alien forces. Such dependence on religious groups as well as on classes with landed and money-lending interests were often found among the insurgent peasantry elsewhere in late Mughal period and during early colonial phase.<sup>13</sup> Besides, the Sannyasis and the Fakirs, in course of their proliferation across the earlier centuries, had come close to the rural life of Bengal through their regular tours and pilgrimage, discourses (*pravachana* and *sama*) and other religious activities. More fundamentally, in a backward feudal economy of Bengal which was rendered further vulnerable by the mercantile colonial thrusts, the objective situation did not encourage the peasants and the artisans to snap their traditional moorings of dependence. Nor did it necessarily sharpen their autonomous consciousness and enable them to assume an altogether independent position in organising protracted resistance. Such resistance, therefore, had to take the shape of an united front where the leadership might not necessarily rest with the most oppressed ones.

In spite of this trend of mixed leadership, the peasant character and the popular content of the uprisings were not eroded. As regards the Fakir and Sannyasi rebellion, we have already noted the massive entry of ryots on the heels of the ravages of the famine. A scrutiny of official correspondence reveals how the peasants extended active support to the Sannyasis and the Fakirs during their actual confrontation with the Company's forces. Thus, in 1772, Charles Purling wrote to the President: "Captain Thomas...pursued them (the Sannyasis) in a jungle where the sepoys expended all their ammunitions without doing the least execution; when they perceived the ammunition spent, the Sinassies (Sannyasis) rushed in upon them in very large bodies from every quarter and surrounded them...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 Sinassies (Sannyasis) with lathis and showed the Sinassies (Sannyasis) those 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 Sinassies (Sannyasis) and they plundered the sepoys' firelocks."<sup>11</sup> Warren Hastings was surprised to find an abiding understanding which "the religious bandits" were able to maintain with the local people. On March 31, 1773, Hastings made his oft-quoted submission that, inspite of the combined operations of four battalions of the Company's army, "the revenue could not be collected, the inhabitants made common cause with the marauders, and the whole rural administration was unhinged."<sup>11</sup>

The peasant character of insurgency came into sharp focus in the Rangpur uprising. There used to be huge assemblage of peasants in times of action. At Kotalia near Saradhoby ten or twelve thousand rebels assembled.<sup>16</sup> At Kakina, ten thousand peasants got together near Hat Suteebaree.<sup>17</sup> The poorer ryots showed a distinct initiative throughout the course of the uprising. When the paiks sent by the zamindars of Kazirhat asked the members of a peasant assemblage as to who was their leader, they answered: "We are our own leaders and we are going to obtain justice".<sup>18</sup> This is also corroborated by the evidence of a chief leader of the rising, Dirjinarain, who was otherwise a Bosneah. When he was asked, "In what light did the ryots consider you?", Dirjinarain answered: "Like another ryot."<sup>19</sup> Involvement of the impoverished peasantry in the uprising was also eloquently captured in a contemporary song, *Rangpurer Jager Gan* written by Ratiram Das,<sup>50</sup>

The song (translated version) reads as follows:

"Under the Company, the ruler was Devi 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.  
...the subjects were enraged at last;  
in thousands 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 come from all quarters,  
they started throwing stones and brickbats,  
which kept falling with thud  
from all directions.  
In the fusillade of stones,

some suffered broken bones,  
and the palace of Devi Singh  
was reduced to a heap of bricks.”

The next important question of general nature was the anti-colonial character of the uprisings. We have already noted from contemporary official evidence that the Company in its crucial activities—enhancement of land revenue of Bengal and utilisation of that surplus for arbitrary purchase of goods for one-way export from the province—had suffered initial setbacks due to the Fakir-Sannyasi and the Rangpur uprisings. Though the insurgents did not finally succeed to thwart these major thrusts of the Company, they emerged as one of the prime movers in opposing ‘mercantile’ colonialism in eastern India in its basic areas of operation during the second half of the 18th century. In this sense, the early uprisings can be looked upon as one of the first organised efforts to perceive, from the view point of the discontented classes, the nature of major contradiction unleashed by the East India Company and to take a definite side in the midst of opposites in motion. Though the insurgents could not turn the tide, they did not fail—even with their elementary level of consciousness and multiple feudal moorings—to identify their main enemy and, consequently, they hardly made any major compromise with the colonial rulers. This combination of awareness and protest had few parallels in the contemporary society of Bengal and elsewhere, where a pervasive climate of collaboration and loyalty had already started striking its deep roots.

The colonial rulers, on their part, did not also fail to assess their adversaries. During the Rangpur uprising, the Collector of the district asked the farmers to set fire to the houses of the recalcitrant ryots, to attach their crops and property, to seize their wives and children and to kill them in emergency. As a measure of severity, the Collector directed Lt. MacDonald that on apprehending the leaders of the rising, he should immediately hang up one or two of them as a public example. “It is with great concern”, he wrote, “I issue you an order of this kind, but the matters are now at such an alarming height that nothing but an uncommon act of authority can surmount it and I plainly see, unless you execute with vigour the order I now give you, every officer in the country belonging to the farmer will be murdered.”<sup>51</sup>

As regards the insurgents of the Fakir and Sannyasi uprisings, Warren Hastings issued a circular, on January 21, 1773, to the District Collectors “acquainting them that from this time they were 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 and they were to spare no pains to procure the most exact intelligence of them and require the assistance of the Zamindars, Dewans, etc., for obtaining it. They were further directed...to give public notice that all such persons and bodies of men travelling armed through the country will be regarded as enemies of the Government and pursued accordingly.”

This characterisation of the insurgents—as ‘enemies of the

Government'—by one of the most prominent architects of the British colonial rule in eastern India may help us understand the basic anti-colonial nature of the uprisings that took shape in Bengal across the second half of the 18th century.

- 1 Ashoke Mitra : 'Fifteen Decades of Agrarian Changes in Bengal' in Barun De *et al* (ed), *Essays in honour of Professor S.C. Sarkar*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 394-395.
- 2 N K Sinha : *The Economic History of Bengal*, vol. 1, Calcutta, 1961, p. 18.
- 3 *Minute of Warren Hastings in Council*, 8th March, 1775.
- 4 W W Hunter : *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (reprint of 6th edition), Calcutta, 1965, pp. 21-22.
- 5 Letter from the President and Council to the Court of Directors, dated 3rd November, 1772, para 6.
- 6 W W Hunter : *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (reprint of 6th edition), Calcutta, 1965, p. 26.
- 7 *Letters from the Court of Directors to the President and Council in Bengal, dated 10th April 1771 and 28th August 1771*.
- 8 W W Hunter : *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (reprint of 6th edition), Calcutta, 1965, p. 26.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 10 Letter from the President and Council to the Court of Directors, dated 12th February 1771, para 44.
- 11 For the traditional form of stratification between *khud-kasht* and *pahi-kasht* cultivators, see Satish Chandra : 'Some aspects of Indian, village society in Northern India during the 18th century, in Barun De *et al* (ed), *Essays in honour of Professor S C Sarkar*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 245-264.
- 12 Hidayatullah Bihari . *Hidayatu'l-Qawa'id, A.D. 1710* (India Office MS, I.O. 1286, f. 65 a), quoted, by Irfan Habib in 'Peasant and artisan resistance in Mughal India in *Colloquium on International Labour Issues*, May 1980, McGill University, Montreal pp. 12-14.
- 13 Letter from Boughton Rous, Supervisor of Rajshahi, dated 13th April, 1771, quoted in W W Hunter : *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (reprint of 6th edition), Calcutta, 1965, p. 44.
- 14 Letter from the President and Council to the Court of Directors dated 15th January 1773.
- 15 Letter from the President and Council to the Court of Directors, dated 1st March 1773.
- 16 Letter from Goodlad to the Committee of Revenue, dated 20th November 1782.
- 17 Letter from H Howorth, Agent of the Opium Contractor, to the Committee of Revenue dated 3rd March 1783.
- 18 Letter from Patterson to the Committee of Revenue, dated 3rd July 1783.
- 19 Letter from Patterson to the Committee of Revenue, dated 31st March 1783.
- 20 Letter from the Supervisor of Rajshahi to the Controlling Council.
- 21 Extract from Revenue General Letter to the Court, dated 18th October 1774.
- 22 *Zabanbandi* of Dirjinarain, a chief leader of the uprising, enclosed in a letter of Patterson. Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 29 December 1783.
- 23 Report of the Rangpur Commission, Proceedings of Revenue Department, dated 29th March 1787.
- 24 Letter from Goodlad to Committee of Revenue dated 27th January 1783.
- 25 *Majnu Shaher Hakikat*, a long Bengali verse on Majnu Shah and the uprisings, was composed by Jamiruddin Dafadar, a local poet of Birbhum, in 1873. The manuscript has been recently printed as an appendix to *Bidrohi Fakir Nayak Majnu Shah* (in Bengali) written by M Abdur

- Rahman. The booklet has been published by Bulbul Prakashani, Calcutta, in 1971.
- 26 Proceeding of the Provincial Council of Revenue at Purnea. dated 14th March 1780.
  - 27 Letter from J Champion, Collector of Murshidabad, to the Collector of Silberis, dated 14th October 1784. Committee of Revenue proceedings, dated 18th October 1784.
  - 28 Letter from the Collector of Rangpur to the Committee of Revenue, dated 18th January 1786. *MSS. Rangpur District Records*, vol. 23, pp. 20-22.
  - 29 Letter fro D H McDowall, Collector of Rangpur, to Major Dunn, dated 19th March 1786. *Mss Rangpur District Records*, vol. 23 p. 75.
  - 30 Letter from Goodlad to Committee of Revenue—Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 24th March 1783.
  - 31 *Zabanbandi* of Manickchand—enclosed in Paterson s Report, Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 29th December 1783
  - 32 Enclosed in Goodlad's letter—Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 17th February 1783.
  - 33 Letter from Goodlad—Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, 24th March 1783.
  - 34 Letter from the Court of Directors, dated 3rd April 1760
  - 35 Letter from Lient. Brennan, commanding a detachment of the 29th Battalion, to the Collector of Rangpur, dated 28th June 1787.
  - 36 Long, James (ed.) :*Selections from the Unpublished Records of Government, 1748-49*, Calcutta, 1869, p. 342.
  - 37 Letter from the Collector of Laskarpur to the President of the Council, dated 4th March 1773.
  - 38 Letter from Charles Grant, Resident at Malda Factory, to Augustus Cleveland, Collector of Bhagalpur, dared 6th March 1783.
  - 39 Revenue Department, Original Consultation, No. 28, dated 17th February 1792.
  - 40 Letter from Goodlad to Committee of Revenue, dated 29th November 1784.
  - 41 B Chaudhuri : 'Regional Economy—India' in Dharma Kumar (ed.). *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 2, pp. 300-301.
  - 42 Vere;st tp Aldersey, May 18, 1769. Bengal Public Consultation, June 19, 1769.
  - 43 Irfan Habib : 'Peasant and artisan resistance in Mughal India', in *Colloquium on International Labour Issues*, May 1980, McGill University, Montreal, pp. 21-22; and B Chaudhuri : 'Transformation of rural protest in Eastern India, 1757-1930', in *Presidential Address, Modern History Section, Proceedings of the 40th session of Indian History Congress*, Waltair, 1979, pp. 503-541.
  - 44 Letter from Purling to the President of the Council, dated 31st December 1772.
  - 45 W W Hunter : *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (reprint of 6th ed.) Calcutta, 1965, p. 44.
  - 46 *Zabanbandi* of Jaguissar Das Tekedar of the taluk of Dimla—enclosed in Paterson's letter to Committee of Revenue, dated 29th December 1783.
  - 47 *Zabanbandi* of Manickchand. *ibid.*
  - 48 *Zabanbandi* of Baghil Sardar. *ibid.*
  - 49 Maharaja Deby Sinha—a selection from the proceedings of the Supreme Council (published by Nashipur Raj Estate), 1914, pp. 450-451.
  - 50 RAngpurer Jager Gan, written by Ratiram Das, was later published in *Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika* (1315 B.S.). The manuscript was reprinted in Narahari Kaviraj : *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal, 1783*. Delhi 1972, pp. 97-102.
  - 51 Instructions to Lt. MacDonald—enclosed in a letter from Goodlad. Proceedings of Committee of Revenue, dated 24th March 1783.
  - 52 *Bengal District Records, Chittagong*. vol.1, pp. 71-72.