

## **Fakir-Sannyasi Movement in Rajshahi: Regional Study of a Pioneer Peasant Resistance in Colonial Bengal**

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**Abstract:** Rajshahi region had many holy places that made it a domicile of the religious devotees, the Muslim fakirs, and the Hindu sannyasis. This area was protected from the company's power centers, Kolkata and Dhaka, by the rivers Padma and Brahmaputra, respectively, and became a safe asylum for the insurgents. It, consequently, formed an eminent ground of the movement and experienced most of the incidents of confrontation between the colonial power and the rebels. There was an immense impact of the Fakir-Sannyasi movement upon the socio-cultural life of this region. This micro-study attempts to analyze the subject using contemporary sources and the existing literature.

**Keywords:** Fakir-sannyasis; Chiattorer Mannantar; Folklore; Peasant Resistance; Bengali Literature.

### **Introduction**

In 1757, the British East India Company defeated Siraj-ud-Daullah, the Nawab of Bengal at Plassey, and with this, the journey under colonial rule began in South Asia. As a commercial organization, the Company anticipated making more profits at the expense of the interests of the colonized subjects (Chatterjee, 1984). It initiated various exploitative policies and imposed a monopoly over agriculture, industry, trade, and commerce. In addition, it increased the land revenue continually at an unjustifiable rate. The trend continued throughout the colonial age that affected all classes in general and the peasantry in particular. Indeed, the changes made by the colonial rulers led the cultivators to a devastating situation (Choudhury, 2001; Guha, 1983). However, they (cultivators) did not receive the oppression silently but moved against the colonial power. The history of colonial Bengal experienced a series of peasant movements that started with the Fakir-Sannyasi movement in the second half of the eighteenth century, just after the commencement of Company rule (Chakravarti, 1986; Roy, 1996).

The Fakir-Sannyasi movement draws the attention of scholars, and accordingly, styles itself as one of the most favorite areas to research. Many studies and voluminous literatures existed in this field (Ghosh, 1930; Guha, 1983; Chatterjee, 1984; Dasgupta, 1986; Umar, 1992; Chakravarti, 1986, 1993; Roy, 1996; Sarkar, 2017; and Sengupta, 2020). However, in most cases, the researchers do not have a consensus to determine various aspects of the movement and merely provide convincing answers to all questionable issues. Macro-studies deal with a broader

sphere of the problem and explain it within specific format. They, therefore, hardly go to every worthy aspect of the problem (Islam, 1979 and Ahmed, 1999). On the contrary, the micro-study can reach the depth of the problem and explain the issues of the subject worthy of consideration (Karim, 2010).

Studying local history helps to modify and evaluate the historical events and eventually reconstruct the national history by looking at the problems through a micro-magnifying glass. A question arises in the mind of a researcher often that which unit should be considered worthy? During the British period, district administrations conducted all the functionaries within their jurisdiction. They also preserved the reports in the *Mohafezkhana* (the record room), compiled from time to time, on various aspects (Ahmed, 1999). Making research on a district, thus, somehow easy in collecting data and explaining them in which jurisdiction they produced. However, this idea does not help the researcher interpreting the subject like peasant movements. These social phenomena could not be confined arbitrarily within district jurisdictions but generally in geographical boundaries. This article, therefore, attempts to study a peasant movement in a comparatively broader area, the Rajshahi region, a landscape distinct geographically from the other part of Bengal.

The movement spread over the provinces of Bengal and Bihar but concentrated solely within North Bengal (Chakravarti, 1986). It had an immense influence on the life of the inhabitant of this region. Why did the movement become concentrated in North Bengal? How did the people of this region look at the insurgents and became influenced thereof? A micro-study on the Rajshahi estate that includes North Bengal could provide the answers to these questions. This region was within the jurisdiction of Rajshahi district, one of the largest administrative units in colonial Bengal (O'Malley, 1916). The article, using contemporary sources, especially the official correspondences and reports, tries to investigate the Fakir-Sannyasi movement in the Rajshahi region that represents North Bengal indeed. However, for the time constraint, the researcher did not inspect all record rooms containing sources of the movement and failed to use data produced by the insurgents or their supporters which is the major shortcoming of this paper.

Rajshahi Zamindari was one of the largest estates in Bengal. In 1773, it was 13,000 square miles and spread, apart from the modern Rajshahi division, over Murshidabad, Nadia, Jessore, Birbhum, and Burdwan districts (O'Malley, 1916 and Miser, 1965). Mr. Whoal, a contemporary English writer, noted that it would have taken 35 days with horseback to travel the Rajshahi estate. Mr. Grant, another British writer, expressed a similar impression. Rajshahi zamindari is one of the largest estates, not only in Bengal but also in the whole of India, he observed. However, Warren Hastings, the Governor-General, referred to it (Rajshahi Zamindary) as the second-largest estate in Bengal. He wrote in 1786,

“The Zamindari of Rajshahi, the second in rank in Bengal and yielding (sic.) an annual revenue of about twenty-five lakhs of rupees, has risen to its present magnitude during the last eighty years by accumulating the property of a great number of disposed of zamindaries, although the ancestors of the present possessor had not, by inheritance a right to the property of a single village with the whole Zamindari” (Hunter, 1894, 43 and O’Malley, 1916, 38).

Collecting revenue of such a great Zamindari from a single controlling unit was complicated (O’Malley, 1816). The Company, therefore, decided to reduce its volume, and accordingly, divided it into two distinct estates, Bhushana and Bhaturia. Bhushana estate consisted of Jessore district, while the Bhaturia spread over North Bengal. Subsequently, Company established the Rajshahi district that included the Bhaturia estate while the other portion of the zamindari remained in its respective jurisdiction. Our discussion will be confined solely within the premises of Bhaturia Estate, and after the establishment of the district administration, within the jurisdiction of Rajshahi district. However, to make the discussion comprehensible, sometimes we will go beyond this area.

### **Identity of the Insurgents**

Who were the men, raised hands against the occupying power immediately after the commencement of the Company reign in 1757? The question sparks a wide-scale debate among scholars. According to imperial writers, Fakir-Sannyasis were the bandits involved in the illegal actions in the countryside. Colonial rulers looked at them similarly and called the insurgents dacoits or robbers (O’Malley, 1916; Chakravarti, 1986 and Sengupta, 2020). In the name of pilgrimage, they roamed around the country and looted it arbitrarily- a company official wrote in 1773 (O’Malley, 1916). Some native writers are convinced in the conception, follow the line that forms and strengthens a genre, the imperialist school of thought. Jamini Mohan Ghosh, for instance, referred to Fakir-Sannyasis as external bandits. According to him, they are not the residents of Bengal, but from other parts of India raid the country illegally and looted it. Suprakash Roy, on the other hand, portrayed fakir-sannyasis as the permanent inhabitants of Bengal. According to his view, they were the peasants, oppressed by the exploitive measures of the colonial power (Roy, 1996). A class of writers follows him, and a new genre emerged known as Marxists or Nationalists, who made a significant contribution to the histrography of the peasant movement.

Disagreeent among the scholars regarding the issue makes it difficult to determine the identity of the insurgents, whether they were permanent residents or outsiders in this country. However, many sources indicate them as the inhabitants of Bengal. Francis Buchanan Hamilton, a famous British civilian and orientalist, mentions that many *Madari* Sufis (Fakirs) lived in the Rangpur district. Most of them were married and enjoyed the ownership of *Lakheraj*<sup>1</sup> land (Sengupta, 2020). Thomas Broston, a military official, provided similar information. He

writes, Fakir-Sannyasins are the united groups consisting of men and women, both Hindus and Muslims. Glazier also describes them as the permanent residents and the general people of this country. Fakir-Sannyasins lived in the Rajshahi region also (O'Malley, 1916; Strong, 1912). Initially, they started their lives as religious sects or groups and subsequently became permanent citizens. They even had specific professions (Chakravarti, 1993).

Notwithstanding distinctions in beliefs, the fakirs were the devotees of Islam, while the Sannyasis belonged to Hinduism, they had similarities in their dress and lifestyle (Van-Schendel, 1985). Both of them wore saffron clothes and made pilgrimages in groups. Despite some dissimilarity in religious practices and conduct, the Company considered them the same groups and called them the Fakir-Sannyasins. The people also indicated insurgents jointly with great respect so that making a distinction between fakirs and sannyasis was difficult.

William Hunter, a British Civilian, observes that the soldiers deviated from the Mughal army and the landless cultivators joined the fakir-sannyasis. The change of power ruined the destiny of the men engaged in the Nawabi services, and therefore, they resented the new ruler. The mass people also begrudged the exploitive and oppressive measures of the company. All blamed the new authority for their plight and searched for a way to freedom from the distressing situation. They met together in a banner, increased the number of insurgents, and strengthened the movement. According to Hunter, once the number of the fakir-sannyasi reached up to fifty thousand (Roy, 1996).

Being the inhabitants of a neighboring district of the capital (Murshidabad), the people of Rajshahi served the Nawab. However, we can not determine their number for the lack of information in the contemporary sources but assume that the amount is not small. These people lost their jobs after Plassey, and accordingly, smooth life to what they used to. Accusing the company liable, they joined fakir-sannyasis and took an active part in the movement ensuring the insurgents a firm footed position in the district.

*ChiattorerMannantar*<sup>2</sup> added a new dimension to the movement. The Company government acknowledged that after the famine of 1770, the peasants joined the fakir-sannyasis frequently (O'Malley, 1916 and Dasgupta, 1986). They increased the land revenue continuously and ensured its collection through oppressive measures since 1765 when they got the *Dewani*.<sup>3</sup> No natural calamities could prevent them from collecting revenue at an increased rate. After the catastrophe of the great famine (1770), after more than one-third of the total population engraved and half of the landed property became barren, the government continued to increase revenue collection (Roy, 1996 and Dasgupta, 1988). In 1768, they collected Rs. 1,52,04,856 from Bengal as the revenue, which followed a rapid augmentation, reached at Rs. 1,57,26,576 in 1771, the year just after the great

famine (Umar, 1992). Rajshahi zamindary also experienced the rack renting of the Company. Rani Bhavani, the zamindar of Rajshahi, credited Rs. 24,51,000 to the treasury in 1765-1766 (Firminger, 1918 and Mahmood, 1981). The government was not satisfied with the amount and tried to increase it, which materialized in the triennial settlement of 1769-1772. The amount was so big to realize, and accordingly, the government failed to collect it, trying their best. The following table exhibits the increasing trend of revenue collected from Rajshahi.

Table 1: Revenue assessment and collection from Rajshahi, 1769-'70 to 1771-'72.

Year	Revenue assessed (Rs)	Increase/decrease (amount)	Increase/decrease (%)	Revenue collected (Rs)	Increase/decrease (amount)	Increase/decrease (%)
1768-69	--	--	--	26,94,602	--	--
1769-70	26,01,000	--	--	24,38,342	2,56,260 (-)	9.51% (-)
1770-71	26,76,000	75,000 (+)	2.88% (+)	21,46,247	2,92,095 (-)	11.98% (-)
1771-72	27,51,000	75,000 (+)	2.80% (+)	26,12,391	4,66,144 (+)	21.72% (+)

N.B. '--' indicates, data is not available while '+' or '-' represent increase and decrease respectively.

Source: ABM Mahmood, "The Triennial Settlement of Rajshahi Zamindari & The Famine of 1770", in *Studies in Modern Bengal*, ed. by S.A. Akanda (Rajshahi: Institute of Bangladesh Studies, 1981), p. 63 & 78.

The famine-stricken cultivators of Rajshahi were unable to pay their *khazna* (rent of the land) to the landlords (Mohsin, 1983). The zamindars, thus, failed to meet the demand from the government. The company, consequently, was unsuccessful in collecting the expected amount. The decrease in population after the famine also made it impossible. In 1784, the number of inhabitants in Rajshahi was 19,97,763 that decreased repeatedly and came to 1,064,965 in 1834. No contemporary sources show the trend of augmentation in Rajshahi. However, a government report on the survey of some *Tarafs* of the zamindary provides information regarding this issue. The following table exhibits the figures.

Table 2: Population of Rajshahi district before and after the famine, 1770.

Division	1175 B. S.	1176 B. S.			1177 B. S.			1178 B. S.		
	Families	Decrease	Increase	Total	Decrease	increase	Total	Decrease	Increase	Total
Taraf Razedurpur	214	--	--	214	158	--	56	13	7	50
Taraf Panchkatia	114	--	--	114	78	--	36	--	18	54
Taraf Bhorla	364	45	--	319	188	--	131	6	32	157
Taraf Roypur	384	2	4	386	237	1	150	21	69	199
<b>Total</b>	<b>1076</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1033</b>	<b>661</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>460</b>

N.B. To simplify the table, fractions of the figures have been omitted.

Source: Government of Bengal, *Proceedings of the Committee of Circuit at Krishnagar and Kasimbazar*, Vols. I, II & III (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1926), p. 177.

Notwithstanding a detailed description, there is some information in other government sources about the decline of the population in Rajshahi. The Company's Committee of Circuits prepared a survey report in 1772 that depicts a tragic feature of four famine-stricken villages in Rajshahi zamindary. It shows that only 35% of the people in the four villages could survive during the famine. The catastrophe wiped out 660 families. More than five hundred people (507) had died, and 153 families deserted from their dwellings to escape the famine (Govt. of Bengal, 1926).

The Company revised the area of Rajshahi that reduced the population of the district. At its very inception, the volume of Rajshahi was 12,909 square miles, a large territory hard to supervise from a single administrative unit. The unit, thus, followed a serial rearrangement of the boundary to reduce its volume (Hunter, 1974). In 1801, some of its *Parganas*, containing 1.5 million inhabitants, were separated and connected to Murshidabad. Subsequently, some other portions were cut off from Rajshahi and added to Malda, Bogra, and Pabna districts (Hunter, 1974). The measures reduced the volume and decreased the population of Rajshahi, as well. However, death and desertion were the prime cause of this reduction.

The measures adopted by the Company doomed the interest of the artisans, fell them into the trap of the *Dadani* system, and confined them to supply their products to the Company agents at a nominal price. The weavers of the Rajshahi district, who lived at Boalia, Natore, and Sardah, and produced silk clothes, were subjected to inhumane exploitation and oppression (Mohsin, 1983). They cut their thumb to be free from the awful condition but could not set free from the unethical bonding of the Company (Roy, 1996 and Mohsin, 1983). The exploitation and oppression of the Company continued through various abusive ways. The company servants joined the exploitation and tortured the weavers to cheat (Mill, 1990).<sup>4</sup> The weavers found no way, fled from the locality, and took shelter in the forest (Reginald, 1937 and Roy, 1996).

The price of foodstuffs increased drastically in Rajshahi after the famine. During the time of Rani Bhavani, one can purchase five to six *mounds* of paddy by a rupee. Subsequently, the price raised, and in 1769-1770, the rupee yielded 18 *seers* of paddy only (Long, 1973 and Misher, 1965).<sup>5</sup> The famine-stricken people failed to collect foods for their survival and thus, took part in dacoity that deteriorated the law and order situation. The Supervisor of Rajshahi wrote in 1771, "...the frequent firing of villages by the people, whose distress drive them to such acts of despair and villainy. Numbers of ryots, who have hitherto borne the first of characters among their neighbors, pursue this last resource to procure themselves subsistence" (O'Malley, 1916). The distraught joined the movement, the last resort of their subsistence, increased the number of fakir-sannyasis, and eventually strengthened the movement.



### **Pilgrimage and the Roots of Confrontation**

Fakirs and sannyasis were distinct in faiths, and thus, there were different holy shrines to where they pilgrim. The sannyasis went to the *Kumbha Mela*, a religious fair, observed three yearly in Allahabad. They took baths in the rivers and attended the Baruni, a religious-cultural festival of the Hindu community, observed in Bogra. The *Holi* of Jagannath in Puri was the occasion at where the Sannyasis met together (Ghosh, 1930). Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita,<sup>6</sup> was another holy site where they used to go every year. Usually, they went there to celebrate Sita's birthday at the end of March. At this time, they crossed Mahananda and moved northwards to Rangpur. They divided themselves near the city into two groups. One went to Mohasthan to the west to perform holy bathe in the Kartowa while the other soaked themselves in the Brahmaputra at Chilmari (Ghosh, 1930). They performed baths at these places twice a year. The festival commenced at Mahasthan on the day of *Navachandra*, on Sunday in December or in January. The Sannyasis also took a holy bath at the Baruni festival, held on Chaitra Ashtami in March or April (Ghosh, 1930).

Makhanpur, a village 40 miles northwest of Kanpur, was an important site where the fakirs celebrated *Madar Utsab*, a religious fair of the followers of *Madar pir* (Ghosh, 1930). They also visited various shrines of the *pirs*, like the tombs of Makhdum Shah Jalal Tabrizi in Maldah, *pir* Badr Uddin's in Dinajpur, Mollah Alauddin near Damdama, Mahishawar at Mahasthan, and Shah Kamal in Garo Hills (Lambourn, 1918 and Ghosh, 1930). Adina Mosque in Pandua was another holy place where the fakirs used to go (Ghosh, 1930). After the *Madar Utsab*, they came to the Mohasthan in April, entered the Rajshahi zamindary from the west, and crossed it to the east (Ghosh, 1930). The location of many sanctuaries to pilgrims became the region a traveling territory of the insurgents and styled it a ground experienced the events of the movement staged therein.

Van Den Brook, the Dutch Governor at Chinsura, sketches the first map of Bengal in 1660, showing a great highway that connected Rajshahi with Pabna, Bogra, and Rangpur. A big north-facing road passes through North Bengal to Assam on the map, probably used by the fakir-sannyasis (Samad, 1999). The great rivers, Padma and Brahmaputra, protected the region from the power centers of the Company; Kolkata to the south-west and Dhaka to the east. It was hard to take immediate action towards the insurgents in this area that led Fakir-Sannyasins to choose the territory as a safe adobe. The area consequently became a sanctuary of the agitators and was infested heavily by the movement.

Fakir-Sannyasis walked together and pilgrimed in groups that produced a doubt in the mind of the Company government. These men, who helped to regain Meer Qasim in 1764, the defeated Nawab of Bengal, made some unsuccessful attacks in various factories of Bihar. The government, therefore, was committed to redress them and prohibited them from staying and moving in groups (Lorenzen, 1978).

The local administration impeded them from group pilgrimage. Majnu Shah,<sup>7</sup> the prominent leader of the fakirs, alleged that the Company was obstructing their traditional rights of pilgrimage (Chakravarti, 1993).

*Bhiksha* (begging), an optional contribution of the villagers, was the principal source on which the fakir-sannyasis earned their living. The cultivators were the sole contributors who experienced severe exploitation of the Company that made them incapable. The Fakir-Sannyasins, consequently, failed to collect *Bhiksha*, the source of their subsistence that led them to plunder the Company's factories and revenue collecting centers. The zamindars, the beneficiaries of colonial rule, extended hands to their master. They tried to subdue the movement by pressure and accordingly created resentment and hostility to the agitating force. The fakir-sannyasis turned their sights to the landed aristocrats, attacked them, and plunder their *Kacharis* (Chakravarti, 1993).

### **Events of the Movement**

The Fakir-Sannyasis began to demonstrate opposition to the Company rule immediately after the Battle of Plassey. The troops fought with a group of soldiers consisted of Misher Khan, the Raja of Burdwan, Durar Sinha, the Fakirs, and other groups from Birbhum - Captain Martin, a military officer of the Company states (Ghosh, 1930). This piece of information evidences the existence of fakirs in the early stages of the Company rule. Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal, was defeated in 1764 at Boxar and tried to regain his power by committing attacks on various factories of the Company in Bihar. Bandal Khan, the faujdar of Hooghly, informed the Governor that the Nawab of Oudh, Suja-Ud-Daulah, Raja Beni Bahadur, Samru Himmatgir, and others attacked Major Carneck's troops at Panchapahar. He noted that the company soldiers tackled the enemy from 8 am to 5 pm. and defeated them on the battle field, he claims (Arafat, 2014 and Ghosh, 1930). *Siyar-i-Mutakakhirin*, a contemporary work, mentions Himmatgir as a Gosai, the leader of the Fakirs. It also indicates 5,000 *Gentus* who participated in the attacks were the Fakirs (Tabatabai, 1832 and Ghosh, 1930). The fakirs, therefore, existed as an organized fighting group even during the Nawabi period and made unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the new colonial rule immediately after the battle of Plassey. They subsequently attacked and plundered the factories of the Company, the centers of exploitation and oppression of the colonial power.

In 1763, the Fakirs attacked the Bakerganj factory of the Company and captured Mr. Kelly, the agent of the Company was perhaps the first instance of the movement (Allen, 1912 and Ghosh, 1930). In the same year, they attacked the Dhaka factory, defeated Mr. Liester, Superintendent of the factory, and expelled him from there (Dasgupta, 1986). The fakirs plundered the factory and left it destroyed and exhausted, the superintendent alleged (Ghosh, 1930). Other sources provide no information regarding the issue so that we conclude whether the allegation was the truth.



The fakir-sannyasi movement infiltrated North Bengal by attacking the Rampur-Boalia factory in Rajshahi (Dasgupta, 1986). The fakirs seized the factory in 1763 and captured Mr. Bennett, the superintendent of the factory. They took him to Patna in confinement and killed him there (Long, 1973 and Roy, 1996). According to the official correspondences, they killed him in October 1763, a month before Mr. Thwet, the new supervisor, came to Rajshahi and took over the charge. The agitators attacked the Rampur-Boalia factory before few months, when Mr. Thwet joined, ascertains it the first incident in North Bengal. It was one of the initial incidents of Bengal in which the insurgents committed the attack on a factory of the colonial ruler (Chakravarti, 1986).

The Fakirs did not leave immediately after attacking the factory but establish their base in the Rajshahi region, only four miles from Rampur-Boalia, one of the power centers of the Company government (Ghosh, 1930). The Company authority tried to expel them from Rajshahi but failed continually until 1770 (Ghosh, 1930). It was simply tough for the strategic situation of the region that was separated and protected from the capital (Kolkata) by the Padma, a great stream, and from Dhaka by another, the Brahmaputra. The Company authority was unable to take prompt action to suppress the movement in this region. It was, indeed, a safe asylum for the agitators who stayed here for a long time and attacked serially many factories, Chowkies, and *Kacharies* (revenue collecting centers); the Company, on the other hand, tried its best to suppress them. The agitators performed many occurrences of attacking and plundering the establishments of the Company, and its aids, confronted with their troops, and, accordingly, the region experienced several instances of the movement (Ghosh, 1930).

Several sanctuaries to pilgrimage located in Rajshahi attracted the insurgents, the Muslim fakirs, and the Hindu Sannyasis. The tombs of *pirs* like Mahishawar in Bogra and Badar Uddin in Dinajpur attracted the Fakirs, while the holy streams of Karotoa and the Teesta led the sannnyasis to come here. The area was more affected by the famine of 1770 than the riverine districts of South Bengal that led the inhabitants to join the Fakir-Sannyasis (O'Malley, 1908 and Mitra, 1329). Many people of this region worked in the Nawabi government and faced the change of power that doomed their fortunes, attracted to the movement. They extended hands to the agitators, joined them, and strengthened the movement (Roy, 1996).

The religious beliefs and mindset of the people led the movement to intensify in this region. The inhabitants respected the Muslim fakirs and Hindu monks irrespective of their faiths, extend hands to them in need. For example, the Company soldiers defeated Majnu Shah and his followers in a surprise attack at Kazipara near Govindganj. The leader (Majnu Shah) was injured and fled towards Mohasthan, while his followers mingled with the people, and the soldiers, despite many attempts, could not arrest anyone. There are many such examples in

government correspondence that indicate the sympathy of the people towards the rebels. 'The people of Rajshahi were helping the rebels', a commander of the Company alleged in a letter (Chakravarti, 1986).

Fakir-Sannyasins sought help from influential zamindars. Majnu Shah wrote a letter in 1772 to Rani Bhavani seeking her help against the tyrannical authority, the Company government (Ghosh, 1930 and Roy, 1996).<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the zamindars were not sympathetic to the insurgents and played a vital role as an accomplice of the colonizers. Doyaram Roy, the zamindar of Dighapotya, for example, employed paramilitary forces against the insurgents. They patrolled in the rivers with gunboats (O'Malley, 1916). The fakirs, consequently, extended their antagonism to the zamindars and attacked their *Kacharies*. An officer of the Khatta *Pargana* in Rajshahi informed that about two thousand fakirs, along with their leader Majnu Shah entered the zamindary and plundered thereof (Ghosh, 1930). According to his word, "Shew Mudjenoo, the Burranna Fakeer being arrived with a numerous body in the Pargana plundered all the goods and effects and carried away one of the principal men in the district under confinement" (Ghosh, 1930). The contemporary sources have not borne any information to identify the victim. He, presumably, was a rich and influential man among the inhabitants, amicable to the company and antagonist to the fakirs. However, the rebels entered and established a firm footed possession in the Pargana as the officer acknowledges, "at present, some of these Fakirs have taken up their residence here (Ghosh, 1930)." They came from the village of Gheejen, nearby the Pargana, who had been staying there for quite some time. The officer anxiously wrote to the supervisor, "there is some treasure, and what will be the result I know not" (Ghosh, 1930).

### **Tumbling the Movement**

The company addressed the insurgents as 'muggers and robbers' and tried to suppress them by force (Chakravarti, 1986). The *Mufasil* officers played a significant role in this regard, giving information of the movement of the rebels to the higher authority and taking part in attacking them with their forces to arrest or expel (Roy, 1996). Boughton Rous, the supervisor (of Rajshahi) claimed that the fakirs, being informed of the news of his arrival, fled away from the territory (Govt. of Bengal, 1925 and Ghosh, 1930).<sup>9</sup> The fakirs, making the boasting futile, appeared immediately in the nearest place of his headquarter. James Rennel, a foremost British officer involved in the revenue survey at Belkuchi in Sirajgonj, informed the authority that the fakirs had been 'plundering' there (Ghosh, 1930).<sup>10</sup> The authority sent two companies of military police to Rennel to demolish the fakirs. Lieutenant Taylor was the leader of this troop, while Lieutenant Feltham joined in the mission from Ghoraghat with a folk of soldiers (Chakravarti, 1986). The company troops attacked fakirs and defeated Mojnu Shah at Kazipara near Gobindagonj with the help of the zamindars (Ghosh, 1930). The fakirs' leader

(Majnu Shah) was injured and fled quickly with 150 followers to Mohasthan. The company soldiers followed but failed to capture him. The rest of the followers of Majnu Shah, about 2,500 in number, had been mixed with the local inhabitants, and the soldiers could not detect them. The local people articulated sympathy and extended their help to the insurgents (Sarkar, 2017). They were also oppressed and exploited by the colonizers that led them to hostile the Company (Chakravarti, 1986). Moreover, they considered the fakirs as religious preachers and helped them for saving from the catastrophe.

After a successful operation at Gobindagonj company established a permanent army camp at Mohasthan to prevent further upheaval of the fakirs in this region and circulated orders to the local authorities to suppress the fakirs (Roy, 1996). The Company thought that the fakirs would not be able to enter this region. However, Majnu came to Rajshahi back in 1772 with many of his followers, sought sympathy from Rani Bhobani but failed again, turned to Mesidah Pargana, a territory lied both sides of Atrai, started from the west bank of the river at Mahisantosh in Dinajpur and reached to the Jungeepur (Blochmann, 1875 and Ghosh, 1930). Majnu stayed here for some days, evidence of his strengthened possession in this area and frightened the supervisor who sought assistance from the authority (Govt. of Bengal, 1925). Mr. Alexander, the commanding officer at Murshidabad, sent a company of soldiers to Rajshahi and ordered the supervisor of Dinajpur to send another two companies. It was, however, not easy to drive the insurgents out of the territory. The fakirs attacked the *Jaysin Pargana* of Doyaram Roy took some 1,690 Rupees from the *Kachari* and another five hundred Rupees from Nurpur, a village in his zamindary (Roy, 1996). The officer of the *Pargana* informed the authority that about 300 fakirs, armed with swords, spears, matchlocks, and rockets, took part in the operation. He predicted that the fakirs would turn to Natore, headquarter of Rajshahi division (Ghosh, 1930). However, they went another way to Kuigonj and established their camp at Silbery, a village in Bogra. According to the supervisor's letter written on 25 January 1772, the fakirs left this place after some days and went northward (Ghosh, 1930). They collected some 500 Rupees, at this time, from Nurnagar, a village of Doyaram Roy. Meanwhile, a *pargana* officer, to appropriate the money, charged false blame that fakirs plundered the government *Kachary* under him and took Rs 1,690 from there (O'Malley, 1916).

The official correspondences evidence the strength of the fakirs involved in this movement. The supervisor states that about a thousand fakirs along with 400 matchlock men participated in the action. Besides this, they had 40 rockets, some swivels, and two camels. Majnu Shah used a fine horse, while many of his followers ride tattoos (O'Malley, 1916). The fakirs, meanwhile, left Kuigonj and arrived at Kusambi *pargana* in Bogra and collected *Bhikshas* (contributions) from the villagers. The inhabitants of this *pargana*, like other parts of the country,

contributed them voluntarily. Subsequently, the fakirs went to the Barobazar pargana, lying down both sides of the Yamuna extended over the modern districts of Bogra, Pabna, and Mymensingh (O'Malley, 1916).

In 1773, Majnu came to the Mesidah pargana and claimed from the zamindar some 1500 rupees as an arrear and detained him for being unable to collect the money (Ghosh, 1930). He brought the zamindar thirty miles distant from his *Kachery* at Limbuberia. The fakirs stuck his treasury up and mugged Rs 1057 and another Rs 1500 from the villagers (Ghosh, 1930). The sannyasis, along with the fakirs, took part in the operation that styled it a joint venture of the agitator and evidenced the collaboration of the two groups (Ghosh, 1930). The Company sent Lieutenant William, who attacked and defeated Majnu Shah and his followers (Ghosh, 1930). A rumor spread over the country that Majnu died in the battle whereas Majnu appeared in Kutch Behar and entered Rangpur only after few days in the same year (1773), left Rangpur, and advanced southward by seeing a large troop waiting to be faced (Ghosh, 1930).

Majnu no longer appeared active, died in 1786 (Ghosh, 1930; Chakravarti, 1986 and Roy, 1996). The relatives and followers of the leader tried to maintain the movement but failed to take it to the fruitful finishing (Roy, 1996). They, unlike Majnu Shah, were not able to control the followers, splited into several groups, and weakened gradually (Roy, 1996). Nevertheless, the movement continued for quite some time, the last decade of the eighteenth century.

### Aftermaths of the Movement

Fakir-sannyasis attacked government revenue collection centers and the *Kacharies* of the zamindars, plundered them to a great extent, eventually affected the fiscal management, and reduced the amount of collection of revenue (Roy, 1996). The government reports anxiously exhibit the shrinking trend of revenue yielded from Rajshahi and acknowledge the effectiveness of the measures adopted by the insurgents from the very initial stage of the movement. The following figures in the table represent the declining trend of revenue collected from Rajshahi.

Table 4: The collection of revenue from Rajshahi, 1175-1178 B.S.

Year	Amount of revenue				Increase/decreas (approximate)	Increase/decrease (%)
	Rupees	Ana	Pai	Gonda		
1175 (1768-69)	8,880	9	14	3	--	--
1176 (1769-70)	8,944	5	16	1	Rs 64 (+)	0.72% (+)
1177 (1770-71)	3,928	3	1	--	Rs5016 (-)	56.08% (-)
1178 (1771-72)	4,843	14	5	2	Rs916 (+)	18.91% (+)

Note: The numbers within the bracket represent Gregorian (Christian) years, while outside them are the Bengali *Sals* (years).

Although the rate and percentage show an increase in the table, they are still plummeting as started from Rs. 8,880 in 1175 and reached at Rs. 4,843, near the half in 1178.

Source: *Proceedings of the Committee of Circuit at Krishnagar and Kasimbazar*, Vols. I, II & III (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1926), p. 177.

The ventures, what the fakir-sannyasis adopted, broke the law and orders up in the countryside and threatened the company's interest by reducing the revenue collection followed by the tumbling of the inland trade and making the commodity collection uncertain for the foreign market (Roy, 1996). The situation led the government to reduce the jurisdiction of the existing administrative units and set up new subdivisions and police stations in various parts of the country, especially in the places infested by the movement (Bhowmik, 1979). This measure contributed to the urbanization in the *mufasils* of North Bengal, and the new cities and towns emerged thereof.

Many tales and fables based on the movement that prevailed in North Bengal enrich Bengali literature. The bards compose various lyrics on the subject. Ratiram Roy, a rural poet, writes songs on the legendary characters of the movement (Das, 2018). Even though, the movement influences modern writers to compose works on the subject. Akhtaruzzaman Ilias, for example, writes *Khoabnama*, a classic novel on the character of a descendant of the fakir who resided at Akkelpur in Jaipurhat district and belonged to the tradition of his ancestors, the insurgents (Ilias, 1997). In addition, the people nomenclature their locality and the holy places like temples, marts etcetera. after the insurgents or the events of the movement. The Raktodaha *Beel* (Vomra *Beel*) in Bogra, for example, derives from the existence of Fakirs-Sannyasis in the locality who resisted the company army in the marshy land (Ali, 2021). Similarly, Chawdhurani in Rangpur district and Fakirganj and Sannyasikata in Jalpaiguri named after Devi Chowdhurani, an eminent Sannyasi leader, and the insurgents respectively, who confronted the colonial power in North Bengal (Das, 2018). The Sashan Kali Mondir nearby Goshala, and Bhabani Pathak and Devi Cowdhurani Mondirs at Shikarpur tea garden in Jalpaiguri, evidence insurgents' influence in this region. These temples bear the idol of these leaders to whom the inhabitants worship (Das, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Rajshahi region had many shrines of the Muslim Fakirs and the Hindu Sannyasins at where they pilgrimed. The people in this region respect the insurgents equally who came to perform the holy festivity. In addition, the area was geographically safe to agitate against the colonial power and accordingly became the principal ground of the movement and observed most of its scenes staged. The rebellion had an immense impact on the socio-economic and cultural lives of the people. It impacted the literature and folklore in this region, and therefore, several lyrics and poems existed in the locality. The people even named their locality after the events of the confrontation and the persons involved therein.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>. *Lakheraz* is a Persian word, means free of land revenue.

<sup>2</sup>. The famine of 1770.

<sup>3</sup>. Revenue collecting power of Bengal.

<sup>4</sup>. James Mill, the British historian, states that "The great corruption, which they represented as prevailing in the government, and tainting to a prodigious degree the conduct of the Company's servants, was the foundation on which they placed the necessity for the establishment of the committee. The picture which they drew of these corruptions exhibited, it is true, the most hideous and the most disgusting features."

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<sup>5</sup>. One could purchase a mound and 32 seers and one mound and 16 seers of paddy by a Ruppe in 1751 and 1752, respectively. However, the sources provide no information about the period of famine.

<sup>6</sup>. According to the mythological stories of the Hindus, Sita was the wife of Rama, one of the incarnations of God.

<sup>7</sup>. Majnu Shah was a resident of Makhanpur, a village bordering Bihar and Oudh. He moved subsequently to Bengal and settled in Mahasthangarh in Bogra.

<sup>8</sup>. Majnu wrote in the letter, "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 anyone. Nevertheless last year 150 Fakirs were without cause put to death. They have begged in defferent countries and the cloaths and victuals which they had with them were lost. The merit which is derived and the reputation which is procure from the murder of the helpless and indigent need not be declared. Formarely the Fakir 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 the 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."

<sup>9</sup>. C.W. Boughton Rous, the newly appointed supervisor of Rajshahi wrote in 1769, "The reinforcement of the sepoys will be sufficient force to deter the Sonassees from moving this way. I have advice that a party had lately advanced as far as nine *coss* on this site of Sheebgunge; but upon hearing of my arrival at Natore, desisted from plundering the villages and separated into different bodies one of which went toward the *Barampooter* and the other consisting of about 1500 took the Rangpur route.... I have dispatched letters to all the officers in the parganahs directing them to send immediate advice of every intelligence they receive and have dispersed my own Hircarrahs for the same purpose. I will not fail to transmit you the most early information concerning the motions of these pernicious tribes. I have examined the state of the Rajas house here which is surrounded by two wet ditches and should my advices give me reason to apprehend that the Sonasses will make a second attempt to penetrate into this quarter; I will publish an order to the inhabitant to secure their persons and effects within the enclosure."

<sup>10</sup>. James Rennel wrote, "There is now in this part of the country a large body of fakirs who are laying all the principal towns under contribution. They were yesterday at Luthinupur 4 *coss* from this place and after receiving two hundred rupees from the Gunge Daroga marched northward to Pucharya district (Pakhuria parganah of present Mymensing district) .... They about a thousand in number and tolerable well armed.... I have met several of their detached parties which are indeed scattered over the whole provinces of Radshy (Rajshahi) and Ghoraghat (Dinajpur)."