

The Cooch Behar Imbrogio in the Late Eighteenth Century: The Sannyasi Intrigue and the British Encounter

Tahiti Sarkar

Assistant Professor Department of History Raiganj University, West Bengal

ABSTRACT: The article attempts to explore the intricacies of the conflicts between the Sannyasis and the East India Company on the issue of succession to the throne of the Cooch Behar state- a tiny kingdom located at the far east of Bengal bordering Bhutan and Assam. It highlights a micro-specific event having organic significance for the writing of the macro history of the period that occurred in the early years of colonization. The specific event had taken place at such a historical juncture, when the EIC concluded two important Treaties in 1772 and 1773 with Cooch Behar and Bhutan respectively. The pre modern society, under the leadership of the tribal chieftain, was famine stricken, ridden by family feuds, and was witnessing the dwindling Mughal Empire and the initial rise of imperial expansion. The European notion of knowledge and wisdom, science and governance was just in its gestation. British administrative and legal encounters especially on the land revenues system made much headway in the Indian society and Cooch Behar was no exception. The role of the Sannyasis at a particular micro space has been reread in this article keeping in mind the evolving perspectives arising out of such politico-economic and social upheavals.

Key Words: Micro and Macro History, Sannyasis and Fakirs Rebellions; Colonial Encounters, Cooch Behar State, Governability Crisis; European Notion of Knowledge, Political Economy of Pre-Modern Society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The nature and character of the Sannyasis and Fakirs rebellions that took place in the latter half of the eighteenth century have been extensively spelt out by a good number of British officials of Indian origin, contemporary historians and seminal scholars through their painstaking research works having of course some subjective variations in their approaches and stances. Drawing primarily the principal insights from those scholarly works, this article is a humble attempt to deal with primarily two basic questions: (a) What role did the Sannyasis play in determining the succession to the throne of the principality of Cooch Behar in the latter half of the eighteenth century? (b) What was the objective ground of conflicts on the issue of succession to the throne between the Sannyasis and the East India Company? While unleashing the circumstantial eventualities and recorded facts, instead of finding out answers to the referred questions, this Article posits that there have been scores of questions need to be settled before attempting to customize the Sannyasis as the raiders or revolutionaries of the first wave anti-imperialist struggles in India.

Cooch Behar Principality

Lulled in the lap of the Eastern Himalayas, physically connected to the north and western parts either by rivers or through Himalayan foot-hills, the principality of Cooch Behar has had a protracted history of little more than four hundred years single dynastic rule. This tiny state was situated in the far east of the colonial Bengal province. Being a border state, having unique geo-political and strategic features, located in between Bengal and the Himalayan state Bhutan, Cooch Behar received adequate attention of the East India Company (EIC) since the early days of colonial expansion. The pre-colonial history of this region witnessed continuous incursions, raids and power rivalries between Bhutan and Cooch Behar followed by wars and occasional skirmishes. The EIC intended Bhutan to be restricted to the hilly zone and came forward to rescue Cooch Behar from Bhutanese intervention and concluded two Treaties with Cooch Behar and Bhutan respectively in 1772 and 1773. The geographical contiguity of Cooch Behar was strategically important for people coming from the North-West towards Bihar and Bengal by river routes. The Fakirs and Sannyasis used to operate their activities in Malda, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Cooch Behar or in other parts of eastern Bengal by using the rivers like

Ganga, Coosee [Kushi] and Gunduck [Gandak]. The river Brahmaputra, Teesta and Mahananda helped them to communicate with Assam and Bhutan.¹

Sannayasis in Bengal

J.M.Ghosh in his Book, depicted, “the Sannyasis were up-country people who were initiated as Sannyasis and migrated to Bengal in large bodies in search of adventure and livelihood”.²Being prejudice and bias as a British Government official, Jamini Mohan Ghosh depicted Sannyasis and Faqirs as “a set of lawless bandits annually passed through the districts, levying contribution by violence under the pretence of charity”.³The Sannyasis in northern part of Bengal belonged to the Giri and Puri orders of the Dasnami ascetics and owed their origin from Sankaracharya in the ninth century. In most of the cases Dasnamis were the resident Sannyasis occasionally roamed for pilgrimage throughout the northern and eastern part of country for taking sacred baths. They were mostly traders and moneylenders. The resident Sannyasis used to deploy the other warrior Sannyasis to ensure payment of their loans from Zamindars and others who were increasingly caught in the financial crisis stemming from the great famine of 1770. To the contrary, the Faqirs owed their origin to the Madari sect instituted by Shah Badiuddin. Madaris belonged to Bi-shar order who did not practice strictly the edicts of Islamic Shariah.⁴They were mostly plunderers and used to ravage the country by violent coercive means.

Mention may be made on the original homeland of the rebel Sannyasis and Fakirs of the eighteenth century Bengal. There are broadly two distinct views in this matter. J. M. Ghosh considered them as up-country Hindus and Muslim group of people who flocked in lower Bengal. As an official of the British Government, B.N.Badopadhyay identified the Sannyasis as “up-country Hindus” who took advantage of the weak administration in Bengal during the transitional phase from the Nawabi rule to the Company’s assumption of political power.⁵O’Mally identified them as a cast of up-country religious fanatics, who came from the North-West. Contemporary historians like Suprakash Roy, Atis Das Gupta and others considered them as a group of people long settled in Bengal. On the basis of the primary sources available in the West Bengal State Archives and National Archives of India, a conclusion is thus reached that the Sannyasis and the Fakirs were not the people of Bengal. They came from Northern, Western India and also from Deccan for the purpose of trade, money lending, mercenary and religious pilgrimage.⁶

As a mark of socio-religious respect, Sannyasis and Faqirs, in pre-colonial India, were accustomed to receive monetary support and land grants from the feudal rulers. Even in the initial years of Company rule, such grants were continued to prevail. However, when the Company withdrew such grants of land and other privileges of trade and insisted the local rulers not to provide such supports, the Sannyasis and Faqirs resorted to plundering impoverished peasants amidst a famine stricken socio-economic disorder. Importantly, colonial inroads into the economic base of Bengal coupled with disastrous famine dismantled the basic edifice of the

¹Ananda Bhattacharya, ‘Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bihar (1767-1800)’, *Journal on Islam and Muslim Societies : A Social Science Journal* Vol. 6, No. 2, (2013) pp. 28-44

² Jamini Mohan Ghosh, *Sannyasi and Fakir Raiders In Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1930. Reprint, PuthiPustak, Kolkata, 2010) p.6.

³ Ibid, p. 7

⁴ B.P Misra, ‘The Sannyasi Rebellion: the Sociology and Economics of a Conflict’, *Occasional Paper, Centre For Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal*, June, 1985, pp.1-75.

⁵ A Bhattacharya, ‘The Sannyasi and Fakir Uprising in Bengal: A Historiographical Study’, *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Nos. 1& 2, XLIII, April-September, 2003, pp.67-77

⁶ A Bhattacharya, *Opcit.Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion in Bihar (1767-1800)* , pp.28-44.

economy of Bengal.⁷The starving peasants too started expressing discontents against the Company collectors and the zamindars for raising high rate of taxes. The peasants joined hands with Sannyasis and faqirs and thus the ground of rebellion was prepared and the uprising began in a scattered manner in different parts from 1772-73 and continued for nearly thirty years till the EIC was able to suppress rebellions through continued military campaigns. The intensity of the rebellion was so serious that Hastings, the Governor General, had to send directives to the Zamindars that, “if they fail to inform punctually the movement of the rebel force, they would be dispossessed from their estates”.⁸

A contemporary historian, Lorenzen informs us that “in the latter half of the 18th century, large band of these soldier Sannyasis existed in northern India ready to fight as mercenaries for whoever would employ them. In the early 1770s some of these mercenaries engaged in freelance plundering in Bengal. Their most important involvement, however, was in the struggle for succession to the throne of Cooch-Behar”.⁹ Another important phenomenon was that the resident Sannyasis residing in local monasteries used to collect debts owed to them by many Zamindars. In this sense, the resident Sannyasis were mostly traders and moneylenders. Lorenzen writes, “the Sannyasis used the other Sannyasis to enforce payment of their loans from zamindars and others who were increasingly caught in the financial squeeze provoked by the depopulation stemming from the great famine of 1770 and the EIC’s insatiable demands for more revenue.”¹⁰ The zamindars and the local landlords were under dual pressure of taxation from the Company officials at the one end and the Sannyasis on the other. Out of desperation, they took resort to EIC to get rid of Sannyasis. The EIC responded positively by taking side of the zamindars and cancelled their debts and contributions to the Sannyasis. This was, in fact the root cause behind the growth of animosities between the Sannyasis, Faqirs and the EIC and the beginning of aggrandizement in the form of rebellions or sporadic uprisings.

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 which were affected by the colonial inroads. The warrior nature of both the Dasnamis and the Madaris was natural as they 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.¹¹ Thus, the Sannyasis were a social group which resisted the domination or hegemony of political powers that sought to restrict or suppress their social and economic privileges. The Sannyasis had no perception of foreign or colonial domination and were motivated by a natural desire to continue with the privileges enjoyed by them for centuries. Their history in the eighteenth century demonstrates that the nature of their loyalties and allegiances were shifting but they had continuously held on to alliances that had secured their privileges most.¹²

Professor Atis Dasgupta has put 1770s situation differently. To him, “the early phase of colonial rule of the EIC during the second half of the 18th century intensively damaged the interests of three major sections of the inhabitants of Bengal who, if grouped together, would have the potentialities to start insurrections—the peasants, the artisans and the disbanded soldiers. These groups could occasionally get support from the dispossessed old zamindars (like Maharani Bhawani of Natore and Asaduzzaman Khan, a Nawab of Birbhum) and semi-autonomous Chieftains like, the Rajbangshi Rajas of Cooch-behar and their relative Raikats of Baikunthapur or Jalpaiguri), though most of these feudal leaders often vacillated between submission and

⁷S Chatterjee, ‘New Reflections on the Sannyasis, Fakir and Peasant War’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Jan. 28, 1984), pp. PE2-PE13.

⁸ Controlling Council of Revenue at Patna, Letter to George Hurst, dated March 11, 1773, Proceeding dated March 22, 1773, Vol.7, Part I, p.256.

⁹David N. Lorenzen, ‘Warrior Ascetics in Indian History’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.98, No.1, 1978 cited in Misra B.P., 1985, p.14.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹Atis Dasgupta, ‘Variations in Perception of the Insurgent Peasants of Bengal in the Late Eighteenth Century’, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (Aug., 1988), pp. 30-43.

¹²Ananda Bhattacharya, ‘The Peripatetic Sannyasis: A Challenge to Peasant Stability and Colonial Rule?’ *Indian Historical Review* 41(1)pp 47–66, 2014.

defiance vis-à-vis the East India Company. The whole situation became acutely desperate and antagonistic after the unprecedented ravages of the famine of 1770-71."¹³

II. EIC ATTITUDE TO SANNYASIS

The British official records reveal that the EIC, since the acquisition of the Diwani in Bengal, took a stern attitude to Sannyasis and Fakirs whom they referred interchangeably. Such strong attitude has been well reflected in the Resolution adopted by the Council in 1773 which reads, "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." Warren Hastings branded them as "gypsies of Hindustan"- a roving banditti who annually infest and overrun the province in great numbers and committed great depredations".¹⁴ In the official documents and accounts, they have been identified variously as "lawless mendicants", "disorderly tribe of people", "trading pilgrims", "religious vagrants", "fanatics", "up-countrymen" and "gymnosophists". W. W. Hunter identified the Sannyasis as a 'set of lawless banditti'.¹⁵

While establishing Company Raj through the colonial network of land revenue administration, imposing rules framed therein and bringing unequal exchanges in trade and business, the EIC viewed the Sannyasis/Fakirs as a prospective threat to the British interest. Although the Sannyasis were not that of a regimented political force aspiring for replacing the British ruler, but their continued presence felt for nearly thirty years as irritant militant force who opposed EIC's attempt of establishing new set of administrative orders, rules in land revenue system and trade and business. The contemporary official evidences approve that the Company, in its formative stage of activities, 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 the prime movers in opposing 'mercantile' colonialism in eastern India in its basic areas of operation during the second half of the 18th century.¹⁶ Thus from the very beginning, the EIC, by using the military might intended to suppress the unbending and aggressively roving Sannyasis. In fact, Sannyasis were a socio-religious group of pre-colonial origin whose mode of survival and existence violently clashed with the newly introduced colonial regulations and laws that were entirely derived from contemporary European notions. At the other end, the famine stricken, over taxed and exploited peasants in the crisis situation intended to explore methods of resistance against such exploitation. The peasants found the Sannyasis and the Fakirs, both armed and organised, with a traditional background of anchorage as dependable allies in face of common danger from alien forces. Warren Hastings identified an abiding understanding which "the religious bandits" were able to maintain with the local people. On March 31, 1773, Hastings reported, "in spite 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."¹⁷

The more important measures which the Company took against the Sannyasis were the reorganization and expansion of police and military forces, employment of spies in different parts of Bengal to gather information of the armed Sannyasi's and to check their free movement. The routes by which the Sannyasis usually entered Bengal in large numbers were northern and eastern Bengal. The British adopted their first counter-measures to seal those routes. In 1773 Captain Jones was stationed at Cooch Behar to intercept the routes between Tirhut, Purnea and Cooch Behar. In 1774, steps were taken to prevent the Sannyasis' depredation on the Bhutan frontier. Since there were close geographical links between Bengal on the one hand and Morung and northern India on the other through Rajmahal and Boglepur, the Council of Revenue

¹³ Atis Dasgupta, 'The Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Jan., 1982, pp. 44-55.

¹⁴ Misra, *Opcit.*, p.2.

¹⁵ W. W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, Calcutta: 1965 (reprint), p. 44.

¹⁶ S. Chatterjee, *Opcit.*, PE 3.

¹⁷ Ananda Bhattacharya, 'Reconsidering the Sannyasi Rebellion', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 40, No.3/4, March-April, 2012, pp. 81-100.

recommended in 1782 for the deployment of military corps in and around Rajmahal and Boglepur to close the routes to the neighbouring regions including Morung.¹⁸

Even the Sannyasis engaged in trading activities were also considered as the enemies to the eyes of EIC. In 1794, the restriction was imposed by the Commissioner of Cooch Behar to watch the activities of the Sannyasi merchants travelling between Bengal and Assam. The semi-independent, authoritative attitude of the Sannyasis coincided with a sense of insecurity that affected the interests of the *zamindars* to a certain extent. This situation forced them to involve into a conflict with the Sannyasi merchants of Northern and Eastern Bengal. It is evident that a sense of insecurity caused by the want of sufficient armed forces turned the *zamindars* to make an alliance with the British. The *zamindars* complied with the East India Company's instruction to oppose the free movements of the armed Sannyasis.

In general, Sannyasis' confrontation with the British power had provoked stern official reaction resulting armed conflicts to repress and rout the Sannyasis by means of military power play.¹⁹

III. COOCH BEHAR IMBROGLIO

Since the very inception of the EIC rule in Bengal, Cooch Behar was identified as a trading and commercial hub as well as an important route for trade and commerce in the eastern and north-eastern part of the country. It is known from records that at different phases of the Cooch Behar struggle, Nazirdeo (Commander in Chief) Rudranarayan and Khagendranarayan, respectively, had agreed to extend special privileges to the EIC for trade in Cooch Behar and beyond in lieu of British military support to get protected from external inroads. The EIC was equally eager to open a route across the Himalayas for the purposes of trade to Tibet and China. The famous Buxa route through the Himalayas had to be approached through Cooch Behar and accordingly the installation of an acquiescing ruler over the throne of Cooch Behar would have secured their access to the said route.²⁰ Neither the Bhutanese, nor the Tibetans, not to speak of the Chinese, were happy at the prospect of direct British participation in their trading requirements. Such a situation gave rise to natural collusion of interest between the Bhutanese and the resident Sannyasis in and around Cooch Behar who took EICs intervention and presence as a threat to their material interests. Sannyasis' discontent against the EIC was thus not far to seek.²¹

J.M.Ghosh informs us that Sannyasis settled in and around Cooch Behar were always available to play mercenary role to foment intrigues in the internal royal family feuds. The minor Maharaja Devendranarayan was killed in 1765 at the instigation of the royal family priest Ramananda Gosain. Internal dissents in the palace over the succession issue turned worst. From 1766 onwards, a band of Sannyasis in collaboration with the Bhutias was interested to install their own nominee to the Cooch Behar throne. They jointly provided support to the Dewan Deo (Chief of Revenue Administration) of Cooch Behar in installing his third brother Dhairyendranarayan to the throne. In 1769, Khagendranarayan succeeded as the Nazirdeo (Commander in Chief), but the actual power was left with the growingly powerful Dewan Deo who was backed by the Bhutan Raja. Such course of events was neither palatable to Nazir Deo nor to the Sannyasis. Despite being largely powerful, the Dewan Deo was treacherously murdered by the Sannyasis duly conspired by the Nazir Deo. The youngest brother of Maharaja was immediately appointed as the new Dewan Deo. On being heard the killing of his old ally Dewan Deo of Cooch Behar, the King of Bhutan sent army in 1770 to Cooch Behar, captured the palace and made the Maharaja, Rani and the new Dewan Deo prisoners. All of them were brought to Bhutan and were kept in captivity. The influential Nazir Deo, Khagendranarayan could escape himself from the wrath of Bhutan King and fled away from Cooch Behar for two years. From 1770, the imprisoned Maharaja's brother, Rajendranarayan, reined but died a natural death in 1772. Taking stock of the situation, Nazir Deo along with his hired Sannyasi aides returned back to Cooch Behar and installed imprisoned Maharaja's son, Dharendranarayan to the throne. Having heard of the incident, the king of Bhutan reacted strongly and sent army to Cooch Behar to install his nominated person identified from the family of his deceased friend Dewan Deo and ordered the Bhutan Army for immediate execution of such decision. Out of fear, the Nazir Deo, Khagendranarayan brought the young Maharaja, his mother and closed relatives of Cooch Behar royal family to Balarampur—a place duly guarded by the Sannyasis. The Nazir Deo along with his Sannyasi army could not withstand the Bhutanese army

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ananda Bhattacharya, *Opcit. Indian Historical Review*, 2014, pp.47-66.

²⁰ Misra, *Op cit.* pp.31-38.

²¹ Ibid, p.38.

and finding no other ways had to leave Balarampur along with the members of Cooch Behar royal family, and took refuge to Panga- a place in Rangpur district, a directly administered territory of the EIC Government.²²

At this juncture of political turmoil in Cooch Behar, the NazirDeo of Cooch Behar sought help of Mr. Purling, the Collector of Rangpur, to get rid of the aggressive intrusion of the Bhutanese force. The EIC Government made use of the situation. Deployment of British force caused the Bhutanese force to retreat from Cooch Behar. With immediate effect, two consecutive treaties were concluded by the EIC Government, one with Cooch Behar in 1772 and the other was with Bhutan in 1773. The Treaty of 1772 and 1773 put an end to the protracted rivalries between Bhutan and Cooch Behar. The occasional intrusion of Bhutan into the territory of Cooch Behar was thus prevented.²³

The Treaty of 1773 between the EIC and the Raja (King) of Cooch Behar is treated to be most important landmark in the history of Cooch Behar making the state a tributary to the British Government. The Treaty brought fundamental changes dismissing and routing all the Sannyasis so long hired by the NazirDeo of Cooch Behar. Sannyasi mercenaries had to withdraw themselves from Cooch Behar State, while their patron NazirDeo had to swallow this bitter British pill but continued maintaining a secret relation with the Sannyasis. On the other, the Treaty between Bhutan and the EIC put an end to the yearlong rivalry between Bhutan and Cooch Behar. The imprisoned King of Cooch Behar along with his officials and few relatives were released by the Bhutanese king at the instance of EIC as per provisions of the Treaty. The released Maharaja was reinstated at the instance of the EIC Government.²⁴ In fact, Bhutan was restrained not to intervene into the internal affairs of Cooch Behar especially on the succession issue to the throne as also not to allow Sannyasis to live in the territory of Bhutan or pass through the country.

Finally, according to the terms of the Treaty, Cooch Behar was brought under the subjugation of EIC and in return, was assured protection of Cooch Behar territory from external aggression. Cooch Behar had become a tributary state and was deemed to be annexed to the Bengal Provincial administration led by the EIC as per the provisions of the Treaty of 1772. The EIC charged half of the annual revenues of Cooch Behar. Apparently, all these suggest that a minimum order of governance in Cooch Behar was put in place by preventing Bhutan not to aggress Cooch Behar and Sannyasis not to intervene in Cooch Behar affairs. However, within a passage of a decade after the conclusion of the Treaty, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar died in 1783, his minor son Harendranarayan was succeeded to the throne in accordance with the natural principle of Inheritance. Things became unsettled again in Cooch Behar palace on the issue of such natural succession to the throne due to the unwillingness of Khagendranarayan, Nazirdeo of Cooch Behar to accept the minor Maharaja to the throne. At this political juncture, Khagendra Narayan aspiring for a larger stake in Cooch Behar administration assuring his considerable stake in revenue sharing of the state, provoked the resident Sannyasis stationed at Balarampur, a huge amount of bribes and a considerable share of revenue of the state and land grants in lieu of their support to realize NazirDeo's ambition.²⁵

In this second phase of political turmoil emerging out of internal power rivalry within the palace of Cooch Behar on the issue of succession to the throne, the neighbouring Bhutan remained silent, however, resident Sannyasis settled in Balarampur intervened actively by giving side to Khagendra Narayan in lieu of bribes of different sorts. With the assistance of the Sannyasis, the NazirDeo assumed overall charges of the State overriding the Minor Maharaja. On being concerned on the unauthorized usurpation of power by the NazirDeo, in 1784, Rani Kanteswari sent secret message to the Collector of Rangpur conveying the unwanted happenings in the palace at the instigation of the NazirDeo and sought for the intervention of the Collector. The British Collector, on receipt of such information, deployed force in Cooch Behar. Both Khagendranarayan and his Sannasi mercenaries were routed, threatened and were driven out of Cooch Behar. While remaining outside of Cooch Behar, Khagendranarayan mobilized his force by hiring Sannyasis in lieu of bribes in the form of bullion of gold, silver and assurances of land grants and share of revenue to attack the palace of Cooch Behar. Nearly seven hundred Sannyasis under the leadership of GunnishGheer (Ganesh Giri), stationed at Balarampur were hired by Khagendranarayan. Keeping money apart, the Sannyasis were inspired and motivated by the given understanding that if Khagendranarayan could capture the throne, nobody in Cooch Behar would transact

²² J.M Ghosh, *Opcit.* pp. 90-99.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*

business of the country under the English domination, and above all, Sannyasis would be given special privileges in Cooch Behar State.²⁶

By referring contemporary British official records based on the depositions of the arrested Sannyasis, J.M.Ghosh informs us about the plots of conspiracy engineered by Khagendranarayan along with mercenary Sannyasis to out lodge the minor King of Cooch Behar. By the documentation of J.M.Ghosh, it is revealed that the principal Sannyasi leader behind the conspiracy was Ganesh Giri under whom the other Sannyasi leaders like Hari Giri, AkhilGiri, Sadanund, BessenGiri, MohunGiri and KedorGiri were directly involved in the conspiracy. It has been further known that joining hands with the Sannyasis, few neighbouring zamindars supported the NazirDeo in his mission to become the king after killing/dislodging the minor king of Cooch Behar. Ghosh informs us that one Boolchand Bhuroowah, a zamindar of Kader and another zamindar of Karibari sent troops to Cooch Behar in aid of Khagendranarayan. Moreover, Danger Deo, the elder brother of Khagendranarayan, took active part in attacking Cooch Behar palace to over throne the minor king, the regent mother.

It is worthy to note the event of Sannyasi intrusion in Cooch Behar palace in the words of J.M.Ghosh, "In June, 1787, the Sannyasis raised by Ganesh Giri with Barkandazes headed by Danger Deo entered Cooch Behar and seized the Raja, the Rani and the grandmother in the palace. The properties of the palace were looted and the family of the Raja was subjected to personal violence".²⁷ Such intrusion went unopposed as the palace guards were adequately bribed. All the imprisoned palace people including the minor Raja were taken to Balarampur, the principal den of the Sannyasis, where Khagendranarayan took temporary resort, and put them under repressive house arrest. From Ghosh's Accounts, it is also known that in Balarampur both the Rani (the Queen Regent) and the minor King were attempted to murder by the Sannyasis stationed at Balarampur. In their desperation, Sannyasis provided physical threat to the mother of the minor king obliging her to officially apprise the British Officials at Rangpur that everything was running smoothly in Cooch Behar. However, due to strong position taken by Rani, their attempts to persuade the Rani, under duress, failed miserably. On the contrary, the message of Cooch Behar rampage and that the imprisoned Rani and the minor Raja seeking help to come out of the clutches of the Sannyasis reached Collector, Rangpur. The Collector consulted with the higher level British officials and was instructed to take action as per terms of the Treaty of 1772 concluded between the EIC Government and Cooch Behar State.²⁸

Accordingly, the Collector of Rangpur mobilized all possible military might to set free all the members of Cooch Behar royal family arrested and kept under captivity by the Sannyasis. The Collector of Rangpur deputed Roy Zubberdust Sing on behalf of the Company Government with armed battalion to move Cooch Behar. Instructions were issued on behalf of the Collector to the local zamindars to lent support to the British sent force under the leadership of Zubberdust Sing. The zamindars who lent their support to Khagendranarayan in the Cooch Behar skirmish were threatened and cautioned. They were ordered to withdraw troops from Cooch Behar. Lt. Hill, Commandant of a detachment of Sepoys, was requested to proceed Cooch Behar to strengthen the force of Zubberdust Sing. Major Dunn, Capt. Duncason, Capt. Rotton along with additional detachments encircled and intensified the attack against the Sannyasis. Out of fear of possible defeat and destruction, Sannyasis dispersed from Balarampur and Cooch Behar to the remote jungles with a motive to ambush the British force. There had been sporadic events of armed conflicts both on land and water. Several Sannyasis were killed in the armed battles and few were arrested and rest of them fled away. Ganesh Giri and some of his disciples were arrested.²⁹

On 27th August, 1787, the EIC force under the leadership of Capt. Rotton took possession of the palace of Cooch Behar. Both Maharani Kanteswari, minor king and the other members of the royal family were brought back to the palace from Balarampur. The minor King was reinstalled. Khagendranarayan's property was confiscated. Both the NazirDeo and DewanDeo were denied out rightly from all kinds of land rights. The Governor General directed that the arrested Sannyasis were to be tried by a criminal court. Ganesh Giri, the principal Sannyasi died under trial. The establishment of full right of the Raja over the State of Cooch Behar was recognized and ensured by the EIC Government. To retain peace and order in Cooch Behar, Mr. Douglas was appointed Commissioner.³⁰ Such appointment accomplished the British objective to bring Cooch Behar under protectorate State category. For the British force, as claimed by the official proceedings, due to inclement

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

monsoon and impassable roads, it took two months time to settle Sannyasi intrigue and to get out of Cooch Behar imbroglia.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Sannyasi intrigue in Cooch Behar was an internal power rivalry on succession issue to the throne among the royal relations wherein the Sannyasis as mercenaries took side to aspiring NazirDeo, while the EIC gave side to official beholder of the Cooch Behar throne. Ultimately, however, such involvement of the Sannyasis gave rise to direct armed conflicts with the theEast India Company force. Thus theSannyasi intrigue in Cooch Behar can well be termed as an action against the East India Company but not anti-colonial, on the objective ground that that Sannyasis, despite having a common attitude against foreign rule, had no intention or objective to destroy the British rule or restore the Mughal power. From the British records as provided by J.M.Ghosh, the Sannyasis in Cooch Behar fought against the EIC to uphold their interests particularly in lieu of bribes and assured land grants and shares of land revenue, prospective power and prestige.The violent encounters with the Company on the issue of succession to Cooch Behar throne must be seen therefore in the particular historical context of the nature of their prevailing livelihood as established in the previous centuries. Such a conclusion must inherently suffer from the limitation of prejudiced British official records and proceedings. There is hardly any contemporary social literature which approves the fact that the SannyasisandFaqirs in Cooch Behar had accrued people's legitimacy and support of the peasantry.

Some logical points seem discernable from Cooch Behar episode. First, Cooch Behar principality since late sixties of the eighteenth century could have gone under the control of Bhutan had the EIC not intervened in its affairs. Second, Sannyasis attempted to play crucial role at a time in the midst of anarchy/internal power rivalry that fell over Cooch Behar. Third, Sannyasis and Faqirs were the professional mercenaries available for hire by anyone- Hindus or Non-Hindus whoever could satisfy their lust for wealth and power. The objective reasons of the Sannyasis for giving side to Khagendranarayan was not for any patriotic cause to fight against imperialism but they were provided with bribes and assurances. They were actuated by neither love of religion nor patriotism. Fourth,Sannyasis' plan to overpower the minor King and the regent mother and to install Khagendranarayan was miscarried. They were repressed by the British military might, arrested, convicted, and ultimately alienated. Fifth, Sannyasis could have been successful to place Khagendranarayan to the throne, had the EIC not deployed force against the Sannyasis and freed both the regent mother and the minor king from captivity and reinstalled them to power.

Sixth, with the new form of political control and the new form of economic exploitation, the EIC Government restored to violence as a principal means to control and repress the disgruntled and contending Sannyasis in Cooch Behar.Seventh, by repressing Sannyasi intrigue, reinstalling minor King to the throne, and appointing permanent Resident Commissioner in Cooch Behar, the EIC could accomplish their larger power project of imperialist expansion.Eighth, while dissecting the role of both Sannyasis and the EIC in the affairs of Cooch Behar, Professor B.P.Misra termed both of their roles as rational actions directed to definite goals.³¹ The role of the Sannyasis was little larger than the role of mercenaries. They attacked arbitrarily EICs assets and personnel with arms. Their rational actions were directed to the goal of reasserting their privileges which were restricted by the imposing new rules of the British. On the other, the EIC's Cooch Behar encounter was also a rational action directed to the goal of expanding facilities for trade and commerce in Cooch Behar and using Buxa route approached through Cooch Behar. Accordingly, the installation of an acquiescing ruler over the throne of Cooch Behar by encountering and repressingSannyasis was a rational action directing to the goal of expanding colonialism.

To adumbrate, it isoften described that such colonial encounter at the regional level may be viewed as a clash of irreconcilable cultures which may be seen as armed conflict between the essentially unbounded fluidity of pre-colonial Indian society and the rigid, absolute categories that Britons drew fromtheir own culture.³² Thus the Sannyasi intrigue in Cooch Behar and the reciprocal colonial encounter cannot simply be adjudged as a disjointed event of history, rather it was integrally connected with the larger colonial project.The colonial encounters in Cooch Behar, at the latter half of eighteenth century represented a radically new phenomenon unleashing colonial military might of vivid description and directions. **First**, it was a miniature form of the larger colonial encounter on the world scale, corresponding to the gradual phase of expansion of western merchant and industrial capitalism. **Second**, the colonizers had means of conquest at their control which

³¹Misra, Op.cit. pp.22-23.

³² Jon E. Wilson, A Thousand Countries to Go to': Peasants and Rulers in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal, Past & Present, No. 189 (Nov., 2005), pp. 81-109

was generally out of all proportion to those of the local dormant society of Cooch Behar, a tiny principality located at the foot hills of the Eastern Himalayas. **Third**, the offensive was battered by overwhelming modern ideology of governance and technology according to which the then existing primordial natural society moved by Sannyasis had to be ceased. Cooch Behar principality, thus, had become an object to be mastered, exploited, a means of speculation, merchandise, a space for resource extraction under veil and abode of profit maximization. **Fourth**, the colonizers carried with them techniques and tools, opened up routes for diffusion and exchange, which irreversibly altered the local socio-political configurations.

Finally, The colonial encounters were not by any means the first event of their kind in the colonies, but for Cooch Behar, such encounters were altogether unprecedented which had fundamentally altered the nature and character of the rules of governance of this native state positing for a continuous rereading in history to understand the present from the perspective of its colonial past

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