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# ORAL SOURCES FOR WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE SANNYASI AND FAQIR REBELLION (1763-1800)

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In an earlier publication<sup>1</sup> I have discussed various aspects of the Sannyasi and Faqir Rebellion which took place in the second half of the eighteenth-century Bengal. These were based on mainly the archival sources<sup>2</sup> available in different repositories in India and abroad, collectorate records, government publications, district gazetteers and other secondary sources, as well as Bengali, Marathi and Persian sources. The oral sources were incorporated in that paper only to the extent in which these supplemented the written ones. The large amount of oral sources I collected during my research on this theme, hence this paper, however, demanded a full-fledged paper based on these sources.

The Sannyasis belonged to the Saivaite Dasanami order and the faqirs were a group of heterodox Sufi orders commonly known as Madariya group of Sufis. The Dasanamis and the Madaris, though they did not traditionally belong to Bengal, had a lingering tradition of existence in various parts of this province. Apart from Bengal they had been living in different parts of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and the South India since the day of

their origin, as it will be evident from my later discussion. The Sannyasis used to visit different parts of Bengal either in connection with religious pilgrimage, or for the purchase of merchandise and to transact money lending. Simultaneously, some of them rendered their services as mercenary groups to the local powers. Their wonderful organisation and the wide communities were adopted in the Sannyasi order. Rajputs were also recruited even during the period of rebellion. Even the Sannyasis engaged in civil, military and economic activities used to recruit chelas (disciples) from among the Rajputs. It is also reasonable range of their activities, including their subsequent armed conflicts with the British Raj, could only be sustained by recruitment of followers on a large scale. Sometimes they were also deployed for the purpose of trade, or for the maintenance of their organisational strength and security. The recruited followers consisted of heterogeneous elements. The new recruits were mainly drawn from outside Bengal. Besides Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Sudras and the poorer classes of different communities were recruited in order to understand the rituals, customs religious practices and also other activities of various kinds of Sannyasis. As the followers of the Siva and Goddess Bhawani, they followed Hindu traditions in their religious observance. The Dasanami Sannyasis generally wore either orange coloured clothes or the kaupina with a short piece of ochre-coloured cloth and garland

1 Ananda Bhattacharyya "Reconsidering Sannyasi Rebellion" *Social Scientist*, Vol. 40, Nos. 3-4 March-April New Delhi, 2012 pp. 81-100. See also, Sannyasi O Fakir Bidroho: Itihaser Punarbibechna "(in Bengali), Gangchil, Kolkata, 2010.

2 The National Archives of India, New Delhi; West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata; Allahabad Regional Archives, Allahabad; U.P. State Archives, Lucknow and Bangladesh National Archives, Dhaka.

of rudraksha. They rubbed ash on their body, used to take bhang (intoxicated hemp) and wore iron chains round their neck. They carried an ochre-

Though the Sannyasis admitted the fact that they were not merely ascetics but performed pilgrimage in addition to their normal activities viz. mercenary, money-lending and trade. Their annual cycle of pilgrimage started with attending the Kumbha mela at Allahabad, Hardwar, Ujjain or Trimbak. In March, they attended a mela at Janakpur in Nepal and then moved to Bengal to finally take a holy bath at Sagar Island. Then they would either return to upper India via Bihar or move south-west to puri to offer their devotion to Lord Jagannath. It appeared from the discussion with the Mahants of Niranjani akhra that the Sannyasis used to compete with each other particularly during their bathing ceremony at Kumbha mela. The Sannyasis' centres of pilgrimage and maths also could be viewed as branches of a far-flung commercial and banking network which facilitated transmission of money and goods. The geographical location of Benares also helped it to serve as a link in the commerce with Bengal. The Sannyasi merchants of Benares who also held a large estate in Mymensingh had a trading connection with Malda. Thus it emerged from their activities that the pre-colonial Indian powers neither imposed any restrictions on their activities nor declared such activities as illegal. But the Company's government looked upon their activities including their religious pilgrimage with distrust and suspicion in such a way that a conflict became inevitable which spanned nearly the whole of the second half of the eighteenth century. The conflict between the Sannyasis and the Company was inevitable, because the state had undergone a radical change in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the existence of social groups like the Sannyasis and Faqirs and their erstwhile roles was a major stumbling block for establishing the kind of "order" envisaged by the Company. This statement implies two-fold task, viz. to analyse the role of the Sannyasis in the pre-colonial social policy, and then to proceed to the task of constructing the ground on which the conflicts with the Company was based.

coloured flag, popularly known as "Bhairo Prakash" and "Surya Prakash".

Similarly the customs and rituals observed by the Madari group of Faqirs were significant that they did not observe the rituals, neither engaged in prayers nor did they obey have any strict adherence to all the faiths, observances, daily prayers, the Meccan pilgrimages, rather publicly flouted those practices, drank wine. They did not settle themselves in any fixed place and used to extort contributions from the local powers and common people as charity. In course of their religious pilgrimage they used to collect contributions, if necessary, by force. Thus collection of contribution, in one hand, and their procession with large armed followers, on the other, created a suspicion to the newly formed East India Company that they were considered by the Company's Government as an enemy to the Government.

In order to arrive at a clear understanding about the ethnic roots of the Dasanamis and the Madaris, their social and cultural activities and their relations with the local powers vis-à-vis the Indian powers I visited different places, both in Bengal and outside, where the descendants of them had been living for a long time. A lot of information in the form of oral testimony was thus collected through the personal interviews with these people who have been incorporated with the official documents and hagiographic literature.

The north and eastern regions of Bengal were the major strongholds of the rebel Sannyasis and the faqirs. In north Bengal, particularly in Dinajpur, Rangpur (presently in Bangladesh), Malda and Cooch Behar and in eastern Bengal like Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong (Bangladesh) were the centres of operations of both the Sannyasis and the faqirs. With the financial assistance of Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), I visited those places which were largely associated with the said rebellion

and was able to gather information which is unique in nature.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Malda*<sup>4</sup>

The archival sources of the West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata and the National Archives, New Delhi, throw enough light on the operational activities of the Sannyasis in the Malda area.<sup>5</sup> It is learnt that the Malda was a centre of their trade but not for money lending operations.<sup>6</sup> Their trading capacities in those areas may be corroborated with the Duncan Proceedings<sup>7</sup> and it appears that the Sannyasis used to purchase silk and cocoons from the aurangs (silk factories) from Malda and used to sell that merchandise in Benares, Mirzapur and Allahabad.<sup>8</sup> The role of the Sannyasis of Malda as

traders may be corroborated with the oral interviews taken in 1998 from one Saivaite Dasanami living in Gosaintuli, adjacent to English Bazar locality of Malda. The name Gosaintuli clearly indicates that this area was highly dominated and influenced by the Gossains; the place was named after them. The present Mahant (Head of the Math or monastery) Manohar Giri, then aged about ninety years, frankly discussed the ancestry of the Gossains (gossains are familiar in North India, and they maintained family life) and their present-day activities. There is a difference between the nagas and gossains. Nagas had to maintain celibacy and their activities were akhra based, whereas, the gossains could marry and lived in maths and also in their respective residences. Manohar Giri belonged to the Giri suborder of the Dasanami Sannyasis and, according to him, his ancestors came from Benares. He also claimed that his ancestors Pratap Giri, Rudra Giri and Nanda Giri, resided in Makhdumpur (South of Malda) and Banshbari (North-West of Malda) and held a large tract of land and were wealthy. Pratap Giri died in 1909 while Rudra Giri died in 1940. They were celibates, as celibacy is a part of the Dasanami (ten names, viz. Giri, Puri, Bharati, Saraswati, Ban, Aranya, Parbat, Tirtha, Ashram and Sagar) culture. According to Manohar Giri, his brother Subhanarayan Giri, then aged eighty-five, was also a prominent Gossain of that area. The Gossains were then very proud of their ancestors who played a dominant role in the Sannyasi rebellion against the colonial rule. The sannyasis were very expert in the art of warfare as it is revealed both from the official documents as well as oral testimony. Their home was used as akhara (lit. gymnasium) where they were trained and drilled in the use of arms, particularly in swordsmanship, archery, use of matchlocks and shields. Some of the specimens of the arms and ammunitions could be seen in the residence of Manohar Giri and Subhonararayan Giri. According to them, these arms were used by their an-

- 3 The interviews taken by the present researcher with the pizadas of the darghas of Shah Madar at Mackwanpur in Kanpur district, khadims of the dargahs situated in Baliyadighi, Dinajpur and dargah of Shah Neckmard in West Dinajpur (now in Bangladesh) and also the Mahants of the various Dasanami akharas situated in Allahabad and Benares. The interviews had been conducted in 1998 with the financial assistance of ICHR and ICSSR, New Delhi, for which I am grateful to them.
- 4 This survey was conducted in 1998 with the local resident Sri Sudhir Kumar Chakraborty. He published a lot of books on the history of Malda.
- 5 Allahabad Regional Archives, Allahabad (hereafter ARA), Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares (hereafter CPRB) Report of the Resident: Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares 19 May 1791, pp. 119-129; A. Shakespeare ed. Selections from the Duncan Records, vol. 2, Benares 1873, pp. 16-17; Petition of Mahanth Man Giri, Subal Giri and others: Judicial (Criminal) Proceedings 14 September 1794, No. 13.
- 6 Petition of Sadananda Bandyopadhyay, a silk broker: Board of Trade (Commercial) 13 March 1789, No. 27; Collector, Government Customs House to Jonathan Duncan, Resident, and Benares dated 31 January 1791: Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares dated 7 February 1791 pp. 86-89.
- 7 Duncan Proceedings: Representation of Gyan Giri: Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares 9 September 1791, pp. 71-75; Proceedings of the Mirzapur Adawlat dated 24 May 1788: correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares 9 September 1791 pp. 71-75.
- 8 William Harwood, to the Committee of Circuit: Committee of Circuit, Rajmahal, 16 February 1773, pp. 182-183; Collector, Government Customs House to Jonathan Dun-

can, Resident Benares dated 31 January 1791: Correspondence and Proceedings and Resident at Benares 7 February 1791, pp. 86-89.

cestors in the said rebellion. They also used to worship these arms and ammunitions regularly and continued to pay homage to their ancestors for their rebellious characteristics. This information is not available either in the archival sources or in any government publication. These materials may be

Besides akharas, maths (monastery) also served as the residence of the Dasanamis who traced their descent from Sankaracharya, the great reformer of the tenth century. Math was also a centre from where they could transact money lending and trading activities. There were four maths viz. Sringeri, Joshi, Sarada and Gobardhan found in four parts of India. He had established the Saivabihars (monastery of the Saiva ascetics,) for fighting with the Buddhist tantriks (theosophists). The Dasanamis inherited this practice and established Saivabihars. Manohar Giri stated that in Malda the Dasnamis established many Saivabihars by destroying the Buddhist centres of residence and using them for the maintenance of their day-to-day religious activities and other affairs. The ruins of

#### *Dinajpur*

Dinajpur was a major stronghold of the faqirs (wandering Muslim ascetics). Baliyadighi and Neckmardan (now in Bangladesh) in Dinajpur district were the centres of activities of the Madariya faqirs since the Mughal period. This information may be found in the official correspondence of East India Company, district gazetteers and secondary sources.<sup>9</sup> I had the occasion to meet some of the faqirs of Baliyadighi and Neckmardan during my visit to those places in the 1990s. The local residents of that area are very much aware of the Madariya group of faqirs and their activities. The dargahs (tomb of the Sufi saint) and Mazars or Qabr (graveyard) of the Madari faqirs still exist, a fact confirmed by a local resident named Kalimuddin, who was appointed as khadim (caretaker of the dargah) for lighting the mazar and maintenance of

utilized as an important source material for reconstruction of history, particularly in the context of sannyasis and faqirs involvement in the military activities of the eighteenth-century Bengal.

these Saivabihars are still found in various parts of Gosaintuli, in Malda. Some Saiva temples are also in existence where Saivite priests are appointed for day-to-day worship. The gossains were so dominant in that region that they controlled large estate. My discussion with them revealed that their ancestors also took active part in the Swadeshi movement of 1905. Sudhir Kumar Chakraborty, a local resident of that area, who had wide contacts with the Dasanamis sannyasis of those regions, helped me in making contacts with the Dasanamis of Malda. He said that there was another prominent Gossain whose name was Hansa Giri and a locality, known as Hansa Giri Road, has been named after him.

Urs (death anniversary of the Pirs) of the dargah .During the seventeenth-century, the famous Madariya faqir, Hasan Muria Burhana, resided in Baliyadighi and in 1659 had obtained a sanad (charter) from Shah Shuja, the Mughal governor of Bengal. The original sanad is available in Rajshahi District Court and its copy has been appended by Maulavi Abdul Wali in 1903.<sup>10</sup> It appears from the sanad that Hasan Muria Burhana, the representative of the Madariya order was permitted to collect contributions from the local people during their religious pilgrimage and to go on processions with arms and banners. It is thus proved from that sanad that the Madari order gained Mughal patronage.

My interviews also revealed that in Baliyadighi there were tombs of six Madari faqirs viz., Zamat Ali Shah Burhana, Roshan Ali Shah Burhana (lit. naked, nude), Abdul Hamid Shah

9 J.L. Sherwill, A Geographical and Statistical Report of the Dinagepore District, Calcutta, 1865, p. 28; W.K. Firmin-ger ed. Bengal District Records, Dinajpur 1786-1788, (Letters Issued), Vol. 2, Calcutta, 1924, p. 160; J.C. Sen-gupta, West Bengal District Gazetteer, Dinajpur, Calcutta, 1973, p. 162.

10 Maulavi Abdul Wali, 'Note on the Faqirs of Baliyadighi in Dinajpur' Journal of the Asiatic Society Bengal, No. 2, Calcutta, 1903.

Burhana, Murshed Ali Shah Burhana, Farhad Ali Shah Burhana and Hasan Muria Burhana. They were the successive pirs (Sufi religious supremo) of Hasan Muria Burhana. It was learnt from the interviews with the local residents that Abdul Hamid Shah Burhana died in 1349 BS. His descendants have migrated to Bangladesh after 1971. The present khadim of that dargah also informed that an urs was observed every year on the seventh Baisakh (Bengal month). He also mentioned that these faqirs carry some insignia such as mahi-omarati (fish standard), kashkol, kisti (wallet made of coconut) and danka (drum), which form the cultural characteristics of every Madariya faqirs. Non-observance of Sharia (the Islamic scriptures) is also a trend of every Madari faqirs who are sometimes also referred to as Be-Shara (non observance of Islamic scriptures) faqirs. Abdul Hamid Shah Burhana, the last descendant of the Madariya faqirs, had seven hundred bighas (one bigha equal to 2025 yards) of rent-free land which was given for the maintenance of his religious worship and daily means of subsistence. Bisrail, an adjacent village of Baliyadighi, was also controlled by the Madari faqirs where an urs is observed on the fifth and sixth of Baisakh in the memory of panch pir (five pirs).

Neckmardan, which is now in Bangladesh, was situated under the police station of Rani Sankal. The place is named after the pir Neckmardan, whose original name was Shaikh Nasiruddin Neckmard. The interview taken by the present researcher with the present khadims of that dargah revealed that the urs was observed regularly till 1970 on the first Baisakh every year and a mela (fair) continued for a week. Nearly one lakh (hundred thousand) people used to attend the fair and five hundred wells were dug for the use of the visitors. Archival documents frequently refer about the attendance of the rebel faqirs like Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, Chiragh Ali and other in the fair of Neckmardan every year.<sup>11</sup> These faqirs not only ob-

served the urs but also collected contributions from the visitors on the pretext that this fair was held in the memory of their Pir Neckmard. The East India Company officials were very apprehensive about the contributions levied by the Madari faqirs as it created panic among the villagers, some of whom fled and migrated to other villages.<sup>12</sup> This explains why the East India Company government imposed various restrictions about the Madariya faqirs' attendance in that fair.<sup>13</sup>

### *Murshidabad*

Besides Dinajpur, Murshidabad was also a stronghold of the Madaris. The proceedings of Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad frequently refer to the Madaris' attendance in that region since the period of Bengal famine of 1769-70.<sup>14</sup> Even Majnu Shah's letter to Rani Bhavani is also recorded in the Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad.<sup>15</sup> This letter shows that the Madari Faquirs got special patronage and favour from the Mughal Government. But how and where the Madaris established their influence is still obscure. A detailed interview with Syed Mustafa Siraj, a renowned Bengali author, threw some light about the existence of some Madari khanqahs (Sufi hospice) in Kaliachak, near Gaur; Nemua and Berul under the Police Station Bamungola in the village Karaipur, formerly known as Amriti, and Ya-tradanga. In Murshidabad dargahs were also established in places, such as, Karnasubarna, Charalpara, Lagachhalpara, Madartola, Hariharpara, Dilalpur and Kanchanpur. Thus Murshidabad ap-

11 Governor General to the Collector, Dinajpur, dated nil, Revenue Department, Governor General in Council 29 January 1782, No. 2; William Wilkinson, Magistrate, Dinajpur to the Governor General, 12 December 1794: Judicial Proceedings (Criminal) 19 December 1794, No. 11.

12 Broughton Rous to Alexander dated 25 January 1772: Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 27 January 1772.

13 Ananda Bhattacharyya, "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency of Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellion" Journal of Indian History, Vol.85.1-3 (2006) pp. 105-22.

14 Rous to Alexander dated 28 January 1772: Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 3 February 1772; John Grose to the Chief of the Council of Revenue at Murshidabad dated 28 February 1771: Charles Purling to James Alexander: Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad, 3 February 1772, p. 117.

15 Letter of Majnu Shah to Rani Bhavani: Controlling Council of Revenue at Murshidabad 27 January 1772.

perars to have received a large degree of Madariya influence. Syed Mustafa Siraj was of the opinion that Hindus also took part in the religious festivals of the Madariya community in that region. Even the discussion with the elderly persons of Murshidabad corroborate the reflections of official documents in the way that even the Sannyasis used to come and assemble there for the purchase of Murshidabad silk and from there they would import it to Nagpur and different parts of North India, especially Benares. The lingering tradition of existence of the Sannyasis and Faqirs in Murshidabad led the rural people to compose different types of songs in praise of Madari pir. Some folk songs were composed on the basis of Hindu mythological themes, particularly Radha-Krishna (Baishnav deities). These songs were popularly known as Madarer Gaan (songs in the praise of Shah Madar, the founder of Madari silsila or lineage). Recently, Bangla Academy of Dhaka has compiled a collection of folk songs on the basis of Madari pirs and their rituals.<sup>16</sup>

### *Bagura*

Bagura, in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) was also a centre of activities of the Madaris and the Sannyasis during the period of the rebellion. Archival documents frequently refer to the assemblies of the sannyasis and faqirs at Mahasthangarh on the banks of river Karatoya.<sup>17</sup> In this region the East India Company's official James Rennell was heavily wounded at the hands of the sannyasis.<sup>18</sup>

There are some mounds, (ruins) popularly known

as Madarer Than (the place of Madar) on a highland on the west bank of the Karatoya in north Bhagopara village (about one furlong southeast to the Maynamoti Mantrir Dhap), and the dargahs at Chingaspur village in Nanuja union close to the western rampart of Mahasthangarh and in Sherpur, all in the district of Bagura.

### *Uttar Pradesh: Benares*

As has already been said, the sannyasis and Madaris did not belong to Bengal but had come here from various parts of India, particularly north-west India. Uttar Pradesh was an important centre of the sannyasis and the faqirs. I had the occasion to interview the Mahant of the akharas of the Dasanami Nagas and the Pirzadas (descendant of pir) of the dargah of Shah Madar. In this context, my detailed interview with the Mahants of akharas situated in Benares, Allahabad and pirzadas of the dargah of Shah Madar at Mackawanpur may be mentioned. The Dasanamis were divided into gossains and nagas (naked sannyasis). The gossains used to live in math whereas the nagas used to live in akhara. The akharas were Niranjani, Juna, Mahanirvani, Atal, Avahan and Agni. The Mahants and the disciples of Juna and Atal akhara were very militant. Sir Jadunath has shown how the Atal akhara produced so many fighting mendicants who were expert in the art of warfare.<sup>19</sup> In Benares, the Niranjani akhara is situated at Sivala Ghat, Avahan akhara at Dasashwamedh Ghat, Agni akhara at Rajghat while Niranjani, Juna and Mahanirvani akharas are situated on the banks of river Varuna near Sivala Ghat and Hanuman Ghat. Anand akhara situated at Kapildhara at Varanasi is presently under the jurisdiction of Niranjani akhara, Atal is under the control of Mahanirvani whereas Avahan is under Juna. According to the Mahant of these akharas, Nirajani, Juna and Mahanirvani were the oldest akharas and had been established almost at the same time. The Niranjani akhara, however, pos-

16 Muhammad Saidur Rahman, Lokosahitya Sankalan (in Bengali), Dhaka, 1995, Vol. 45, pp. 129-133; Ashraf Siddiqui, Lokosahitya Sankalan (in Bengali), Vol. II, Dhaka, 1977; Wakil Ahmad, Banglar Lokosanskriti (in Bengali) Dhaka 1974, pp. 304-306. For details see Ananda Bhattacharyya "Madariya Silsila in the Perspective of Folk-Culture of 18th and 19th Century Bengal", Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Vol. 87, (2006) pp. 241-258.

17 To Warren Hastings, Committee of Circuit, Dinajpur, 2 January 1773, pp. 59-60; Charles Purling to the President dated 29, 30 and 31 December 1772: Home (Public) 11 January 1773, No. 20.

18 W.K. Firminger 'Two Letters of James Renell' Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, No. 2, 1913.

19 Jadunath Sarkar, A History of the Dasanami Naga Sannyasis, (Allahabad, n.d.). Pp. 89-90. The fact may be corroborated with the akhra literature found in Allahabad

essed enormous wealth and prosperity, compared to others. It was learnt from the oral discussions with them that one Digambar Prasad Giri, who was attached to the Niranjani akhara, owned twenty thousand bighas of land in Varanasi. They had also established a market there from which they used to collect monthly rent. They used to offer hospitality, food and shelter to their brethren particularly during their pilgrimage which continued for more than seven days. They were of the opinion that their ancestors were permitted to keep revolvers, guns and offensive weapons for the safety of their treasure. This tradition is continued even today. They have even inherited the militant and fighting outlook of their ancestors. They were so infatuated with their arms that they brought out some weapons which, according to them, were used during the period of insurgency against the colonial rule in the second half of the eighteenth-century Bengal. Two types of flags, namely black and gerua (ochre) are flown on the roof of the akhara. This corroborates the opinion of Sir Jadunath regarding the Sannyasis' way of life.<sup>20</sup> Their tradition of leading celibate life is also corroborated by the account of Arthur Steale<sup>21</sup> and M.A. Sherring.<sup>22</sup> The Mahants admitted that celibacy is the primary concern for the akhara life, and a married person cannot stay in the akhara. These akharas also provided shelter to the wandering mendicants. The Sannyasis residing in the Juna akhara also wear rudraksha and coral beads. The Juna akhara has branches in Gujarat, Nasik and Hardwar. They claimed that they had no political involvement. Their habit of consuming bhang (hemp), ganja (opium) and liquor, as mentioned in the Mohsin Fani's account is noticeable still.<sup>23</sup>

The Dasanami Sannyasis of Niranjani akhara of Benares admitted that in order to keep their body fit they perform physical training. The present Mahants of Niranjani akhara were Hardeo Puri and

Sundar Giri. They had close links with the Niranjani and Juna akharas situated at Hardwar, which was controlled by Mahant Jogender Giri and Narayan Puri. In Hardwar, Mahant Sankar Bharati and Bhagirathi Giri also wielded a considerable influence over the akhara. It is noteworthy that the Niranjani akhara has established its branches in London, USA, Sri Lanka as well as in some Islamic country like Pakistan. Even today they recruit Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras in order to continue their traditional existence. Generally, the Mahant is the supreme head of the akharas and is appointed for six years. Presently, the office of the Mahant has been redesignated as 'Secretary'. The Secretary performs his duties with the help of an assembly popularly known as panchayat. It consists of no less than eleven members, who take decisions on disputes, particularly for determining the legal heirs and successors of the Mahant. All members of the Akhara must consent to the decisions made by the assembly. They (the Members of the akhara) admitted that this tradition was established during the time of great reformer Sankaracharya and is followed even today.

#### *Allahabad*

This survey was conducted on 11 December 1998 along with Uday Sankar Dubey and Kasi Prasad Tripathi of Allahabad Hindi Sahitya Sammelan. Besides Benares, Allahabad was also a major stronghold of the Dasanami Nagas. My discussion with the Mahants of the Dasanami akharas at Daraganj in Allahabad also suggested that the old records pertaining to their akhara might be available at Hardwar. In Hardwar the akhara is situated at Mayapuri, Kankhal whose Mahant was Brij Kisen Puri. They have enormous wealth and rent-free land, and they controlled the adjacent area of that locality. They have even established some shops and markets from where they collect rent.

On 11 December 1998, along with Uday Sankar Dubey and Kasi Prasad Tripathi, another interview was conducted with the Mahants of

20 Sarkar, n.d. Pp. 91.

21 Arthur Steale, *The Law and Custom of Hindu Castes*, (London, 1866), pp. 321-324.

22 M. A. Sherring, *The Tribes and Castes as represented in Benares*, (Calcutta, 1876), pp. 49-52.

23 Muhammad Mahsin Fani, *The Dabistan or School of Manners* (tr.) David Shea and A. Troyer, London, 1901, pp. 223-224.



Mahanirvani akhara, also situated in Daraganj, Allahabad. From outside, the akhara looks like a fort. According to the Mahants it had an existence of over 300 years. According to the local tradition, the akhara came into existence during the Mughal period. The architectural pattern of the akhara building indicates the influence of the Mughal architecture and sculpture. There are nearly three to four hundred rooms along with a large courtyard where the disciples were taking physical training in the use of arms. From the discussion with Omkar Puri, the then Mahant, it was learnt (from the Mahant) that this akhara was a rent-free land up to 1947. They have also a panchayat or a Board of Trustees for taking decisions on several issues. The Mahants of the Mahanirvani akhara also asserted that their ancestors used to render services to the various Indian powers as hired soldiers. They also remembered the celebrated gossain brothers, Himmat Giri and Umarao Giri of the early eighteenth-century. Their photographs were hanging on the walls of the akhara and they used to pay their homage to these celebrated gossains for their warlike activities. It was revealed from the interviews that they used to attend religious fairs at Ganga Sagar and Kumbha mela on the fixed days and remained in contact with the other maths and akharas situated in various parts of India and abroad. According to the rule of the Dasanam [or Dasanami?] assembly and all members, particularly those who resided in the akhara, maintained celibacy. The married Sannyasis were generally not permitted to live in the akharas. The Mahant of that akhara also informed that their election for a new panchayat takes place every six months.

The Avahan akhara situated at Dasashwamedh Ghat, Varanasi, was controlled by the Mahants Brahma Puri and Badri Puri. At that moment, these two key persons had gone outside for collection of rent from the lands (forty to forty-five thousand bighas) which were given to different shopkeepers on a contractual basis. I was surprised to see a militant Naga sannyasi standing in front of the Avahan akhara whose physical features resembled the rebel sannyasis of the eighteenth-century Bengal. That Naga Sannyasis residing in akhara was kaupindhari

(wearing loin cloth) as I witnessed among the nagas of Avahan akhara situated at Dasashwamedh ghat in Benares. Though outwardly the akhara appeared very small, it had an underground structure which is generally used as their armoury. They admitted that even today they were engaged in trade, particularly in jewellery, which was their old profession. The available akhara literature also throws light on the past history as well as their present-day activities of the sannyasis.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Mackwanpur*

So far as the Madaris are concerned, their headquarters were at Mackwanpur in Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. It was nearly forty miles away from Kanpur and adjacent to the railway stations Araul and Billore. The earlier name of Mackwanpur was Khairabad and the name Mackwanpur derived from Macknadeo, a Hindu disciple of Syed Badiuddin, Qutb ul-Madar, the founder of this order. The present researcher had an occasion to meet the sajjada-nashins (descendants of Syed Badiuddin, alias Shah Madar) in 1998. This survey was conducted by Syed Aftabuddin Abbasi, another Madari residing at Satgachhia, South 24 Parganas. In this context it may be mentioned that the Madaris are divided into four groups viz., Khadiman (caretaker of the dargah), Ashiqan (lovers), Taliban (seeker of truth and knowledge) and Diwangan (wandering Dervish, in divine madness). The dargah at Mackwanpur was under the jurisdiction of Khadiman as they were the direct descendants of Syed Badiuddin alias Shah Madar. The interview with the pirzadas threw light on some significant aspects of the Madari silsila which are essential for understanding the origin and evolution of the said order. So many tazkirat (biographies of the Sufi saints) have been published by them.<sup>25</sup> The

24 Akhara Literature is found in different Akharas.

25 Syed Khidmatul Madar Nazam Jafar Jahur, Harim Me Samdhiyat (in Urdu) Rampur, n.d; Details of such Tazkirats have been mentioned in Ananda Bhattacharyya, Madari Silsila, (in Bengali). See also Ananda Bhattacharyya, Understanding Madari Silsila, Journal of The Muslim Minority Affairs, Vol. 32, No.3, September 2012, pp.384-399

details of the day-to-day activities of the Khadiman, the basic features of their annual urs which generally takes place on every 17 Jamadi I of the Hijri calendar, various courts of the dargah viz., Sankar Durbar, Pakur Durbar, Langarkhana, Jamatkhana and Dhamalkhana were also learnt through my personal interviews. The detailed account of these courts is not found in any published book. How the Madariya faqirs perform their annual rituals in the urs by fire-lighting ceremony (Dhamalkudna) was also learnt from them. In their annual urs the four groups of the Madaris sit in the enclosure attached to the dargah. The significant aspect of the urs was the preparation of cakes, sweets and simi. It was also learnt from their discussions that a gigantic deg (cooking vessel) is kept in Mackwanpur for preparation of khichri for the pilgrims. Two kettle-drums namely, Dal-Badal and Karakbijli, are kept there, which according to them, were donated by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and the Prince of Gwalior respectively on two different occasions. The discussion with the pirzadas revealed that the Mughal Emperors Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb were great patrons of Shah Madar and that a large portion of the dargah and mosques was renovated during their reigns. The Mughal monarchs even sanctioned large tracts of rent-free land for their daily means of subsistence, for construction of dargahs of the successors of Shah Madar, for digging up wells and also for holing urs. It was learnt that there were five thousand wells in and around Mackwanpur though most of these are today unusable. So far as the Diwangan are concerned, the present researcher had an occasion to meet Bulbul Shah, a Diwangan faqir at Mackwanpur during that time. The Diwangan faqirs are popularly known as Madariya faqirs. The Madariya faqirs are known to have fought against the British East India Company during the second half of the eighteenth-century Bengal. The physical appearance of the Madariya faqirs, such as keeping of matted hair (jatā) wearing of rudraksha and corals, carrying of insignias like mahi-o-maratib, panjtan (five holy personages, namely Prophet Muhammad, Hazrat Ali, Imam Hussain, Imam Hasan and Fatima), kashkol and kisti clearly resembles the physical attributes of the rebel faqirs like Majnu

Shah, Musa Shah, Chiragh Ali and others. Their habit of speaking in ambiguous and figurative language was also followed by Bulbul Shah. He clearly admitted that the Pir and the dargah were more important to him than the external rituals of Islam which constitute the basic characteristic of every Madariya faqir. Bulbul Shah kept long matted hair. The keeping of long matted hair has also been recorded by Buchanan-Hamilton, who has seen some Madariya faqirs in the early nineteenth century in Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bihar, Bhagalpur and Purnea.<sup>26</sup> There is no difference between the Madariya faqirs of the early nineteenth-century and Bulbul Shah. Even the lifestyle followed by the rebel faqirs is also evident in the present day.

It is commonly known that the Madaris owned enormous portion of land. Due to the non-availability of documents, it is difficult to describe with precision, the exact nature of lands held by the faqirs outside Bengal. The present author's interviews with the pirzadas attached to the dargah of Shah Madar at Mackwanpur, however, throw some light on their land holding in Nainital, Badayun, Barielly, Etawah and other places of Uttar Pradesh, as well as in Parbat Sawar in Jaipur and also in Nepal.

Thus, it may be concluded that the oral sources appear to be an important source material for understanding the ethnic roots, activities and their ways of life. Even their rebellious activity against the British Raj is also understood from their oral testimonials. The lacunae found in the archival sources and government publications may be supplemented with oral evidences and interviews taken on different occasions for understanding the actual history of the Dasanami Sannyasis and Madari faqirs and their relations with the East India Company.

26 Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account of the District of Bhagalpur in 1810-11* Patna 1939, pp. 79-81; *An Account of the District of Sahabad in 1812-1813*, Patna, 1934, pp. 52-53, 78, 131, 140.