Stability of merchants community in Banaras: sanyasi and gosain

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Banaras is a sacred city from the ancient time, and is still a more important center of religion, trade and commerce. While the Mughals ruled Banaras it was the hub of the commercial activities in India. Through the city went the trade of the empire. The inflow of pilgrims developed Banaras as trade center. Besides traders, crafts people settled in Banaras. Banaras lying along the river bank of the Ganges significantly has contributed towards the growth of commerce, production and concentration of population in the towns [1].

M.A Sherring has presented a complete account of the Merchant communities in Banaras. According to him the most of the merchants in Banaras came from other places lunch as Gujarat, Marwar, Awadh, Delhi, and Bikaner and settled in Banaras region considering vast potentials of trade in the region [2]. During eighteenth century Banaras region was inhabited by people of different profession and occupation. They equally contributed to the social and cultural prosperity of the region. Sanyasis initial a religious organization turned into the principal merchant community in eighteenth century in Banaras. In the eighteenth century with the gradual decline of their religious and social order, many remained wandering mendicants while some Sanyasis took to agriculture, other living in monasteries in the town come to combine trade with religion and some of them served as mercenaries in the various armies of Indian princes and chiefs [3].

The Sanyasi, also called Gosain, Atis or Nagas, were simply a class of mendicant belonging to the Shaitite sect of the Hindus [4]. The Sanyasis ascribe their origin to Sankara Acharya. The mantra, religious text, and the gayatri, or daily ceremonial prayer, are the same as those used by Gosains [5]. A constantly theme in the correspondence of the East India Company’s officials, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, is the incursions of the nomadic bodies known as the “Sannyasi fakirs”, who annually passed through districts, levying contribution by violence “under the pretence of charity.” Warren Hastings as President of the Council recorded the following minute in 1773 on the Sannyasis in Bengal:-

“He cannot learn that they have any fixed abode, but that they chiefly frequent lying at the foot the chain of mountains which separate Hindustan from Tibet, wandering continually from the Gogra River in the Domain of the Vizier (Oudh) to the Burrampooter and from this line occasionally penetrating into Euracpoor (Gorakhpur), Butea (Bettiah), Tirroot, Purnea, and Rungpur, he finds that except one sect among them called Hunjooghees who never mix with the hordes which infest their more civilized neighbors, they pass, that some among them carry on trade in Dimonds, Coral and other articles of the children which they steal from the countries through which they pass, that some among them carry on trade in Diamonds, Coral and other articles of great price and small compass and often travel great wealth. Some subsist by gratuitous alms and the others the far greater by plunder: that the various sects of them travel at fixed period on religious pilgrimages to the Burrumpooter, Byjenath (Baidyanath) and Ganga Saugore, besides those who in all dry months of the year pass through the provinces on their way to Juggernath (puri); that individuals afford them an access to their homes and every right of hospitality, which they are suspected of abusing in the most treacherous manner by reuniting with the Crops whenever they enter the country and giving information of the most substantial inhabitants and on the places where their wealth is deposited; that they are continually seen on the roads armed with swords, lances, matchlocks and generally loaded with heavy bundles. The castes of Ramanono and Goorea are excepted as they are neither vagabonds nor plunderers but have fixed place of abode…..”

Some Sannyasis in Tibet bring from the sea-coasts to the interior part pearls, corals, spices, and other precious articles of small bulk which they exchange for musk, gold-dust and other things of small bulk which they conceal in their cloths [6].

In 1763 (during Mir Qasim’s time) Gurgin Khan in his expedition to Nepal was supplied with information by Kashmiri, Sannyasis and Fakir who yearly frequently those parts [7]. “In the eighteenth century with the gradual decline of their religious and social order, many remained wandering mendicants while some Sannyasis took to agriculture,
Other living in monasteries in the town comes to combine trade with religion, and some of them served as mercenaries in the various armies of Indian princes and chiefs [8]. From the description of the Naga Sannyasis given above, it would appear that the cast system peculiar to the Hindu religion found a place even in the ascetic orders of religion and the fighting castes amongst the various orders of Sannyasis bore the common name of Naga although they set aside the surname of the order. Although originally the Dasnami Sannyasi kept them classified to ascetic life they were latterly forced by the state of affairs given in the traditional account, to affiliate a fighting caste to their order. It is probable that the “Giri” sub-order initiated most of the fighting element, for we find marauding Sannyasis, were sometime specifically described as Naga Sannyasis. Where any Sannyasi is found to be named, he usually bears the surname of “Giri” which is one of the sects of the Dasnami Sannyasis, while generally referred to by the generic.

An earlier account of the modus operandi of Sannyasis is given in the latter of the Supervisor at Nattore to the Resident at the Durbar, dated 6th January, 1770. “They have their stationed over the country to give intelligence of those parts which will afford the richest booty and are most defenseless.” And a letter report notes that “these tribes seldom commence operation till the emissaries that inhabit the region join their standard and provide information” [9]. The term Gosain is so vaguely employed by Hindus generally, that it becomes necessary to explain its various significations, and also to show in what sense it furnishes the name to a distinctive cast. Commonly, any devotee is called a Gosain, whether he lives a life of celibacy or not, whether he roams about the country collection alms, or resides or a house like the rest of the people, whether he leads an idle way of life, or employs him in trade. The mark, however, that distinguishes all who bear this name is, that they are devoted to a religious life. They wander about the country in every direction, visiting especially spots of presumed holiness, and as a class are the pests of society and incorrigible rogues. They mutter sacred texts or mantras, and are notably fond of uttering the names of certain favorite deities. Some of them can read, and a few may be learned; but for the most part they are stolidly ignorant. Others, of a much higher grade, reside in maths or monasteries, where they lead a life of contemplation and asceticism. Yet they quit their homes occasionally, and, like the first named, undertake tours for the purpose of begging, and also proceed on pilgrimage to remote places.

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Sannyasi merchants organized as “a religious-commercial sect, militarized to some degree, and organized according to guru-chela principle” possessed a commercial edge over the other merchants [11]. The Sannyasi had what merchants lacked an institutional framework wider and stronger than their family and kin provided by the network of the monasteries and the constant movement on pilgrimage between them.

The Sanyasi merchants of Banaras and Awadh mostly belonged to the Giri section of the Gosains, and were chiefly settled in the town of Mirzapur and Banaras [12], Gayan Giri Shiv Ram Giri and Kashwai Giri the chief traders to Nepal, and Mihir Giri, Gulab Giri and Shamsher Giri the most noted dealer in silk from Murshidabad [13]. Although originally the Dasnami Sanyasis kept them restricted to ascetic life they were currently forced by the circumstances given in the traditional account, to affiliate a fighting caste to their order. It is probable that the “Giri” sub-order initiated most of the fighting element, for we find marauding Sannyasis, were sometime specifically described as Naga Sanyasis. Where any Sanyasi was found to be named, he usually bears the surname of “Giri” which was one of the sects of the Dasnami Sanyasis [14].

The Sanyasis merchants of Banaras carried on their mercantile transaction on all India level. They use their maths as trading house where goods could be lodged and business transacted. Jaynarayn Ghoshal, a resident of Bengal who lived for many years in the city of Banaras wrote an account of Banaras in Bengali in 1800, described about the existence of many maths or monasteries of the Dasnami sect of Sanyasi, who though outwardly professing self-restraint are in their minds of worldly things even then they had been carrying on the business of merchant and money lender [15]. Their Maths served as an important channel of commerce in the eighteenth century. Its tradition drawn on by M. A. Sherring, can be accepted that there were as many as fourteen hundred Maths in Banaras in 1770 A.D [16]. They were able to utilize their religious and pilgrimage network (maths) etc. for their trading purposes [17]. This combination of religion, trade and military power proved useful for mercantile activities. They collected capital require for trade through inheritance procedures that differed from Hindu inheritance in permitting them to pass on a larger share of the inheritance to one chela [18].

The internal organization of the math was as fallows; every math had a Mahant, a chief under whom there were a number of gurus or teachers, every guru had some chelas (disciples) who were ranked according to their duties. The Mahants was responsible for discipline and general administration and had the discretionary power of expelling any member from monastery. In those Maths which served the dual role of religion and commerce. The chief also had control over the math property, and financed the guru in their mercantile activities [19]. As a result of thus advantages they emerged as the chief merchants involved in mercantile activities at Banaras and leader among the merchant communities in Banaras in the late eighteenth century.

The main sources of income of a Maths, was lands, usually rent free, with which the math was endowed by local dignitaries or rulers for religious purposes [20]. Next the gifts, which Mahant and the gurus were presented with money jewels and other similar articles as gift on special occasions such as Shiva Ratri (a day of festivity for the Hindus celebrated in the honor of lord Shiva’s birth, and Kumbh Mela (a great fair held after every three year on the sacred place of Hindu). The Sanyasis who were higher ranks in the math hierarchy collected alms during the course of their visit to various villages and towns. The entire sources of income
were used as a combined collection, after meeting the permanent everyday expenditure of maintaining the math, the rest could be used for commercial purposes [21]. There now only one reported case of a disputed succession between the chelas of a Mahant of a leading math in the Mirzapur district, of property that every math had, and thus possibly it serve as an example of the commercial maths of comparable character [22]. The Sanyasis traveled in groups and especially the Nagas were prepared with arms to protect their merchandise. They were also accustomed to long journeys; they successively went on pilgrimage to Hardwar, Paryag, Nasik and Ujjain etc. [21].

They bought cotton and cotton piece goods in Poona, Ahmadabad, and Deccan, exported then to Bengal and purchased in return cargoes of row silk, broad cloth, copper and spices. From Nepal they brought gold dust, bullion and drugs in return for Bengal and Banaras piece goods, and from Kashmir they imported shawls, some of which were consumed in the city of Banaras some were exported to Bengal and other provinces [24]. Some Sanyasis in Tibet bring from the sea-costs to the interior part pearls, corals, spices, and other precious articles of small bulk which they exchange for musk, gold-dust and other things of small bulk which they conceal in their cloths [25].

The principle merchants who trade from Bengal to the Deccan are called Sannasses, a religious sect remarkable for their wealth and their integrity in all commercial activities. There who reside in Banaras and in company’s dominions purchase the goods in Bengal and transport them to Mirzapur where they sell or decliner them to the merchants of their own sect, who resort annually for this purpose from Deccan… the Sannasses carried a very considerable trade to Nepal in the picegoods of Bengal, in return for which they annually imported gold bullion to the amount of four and five laks of Rupees” [26].

The term Gosain is so vaguely employed by Hindus generally, that it becomes necessary to explain its various significations and also to show in what sense it furnishes the name to a distinct cast. Commonly, any devotee is called a Gosain, whether he lives a life of celibacy or not, whether he roams about the country collection alms, or resided in a house like the rest of the people, whether he leads an idle existence, or employed him in trade. The mark, however, that distinguishes all who bear this name is, that they are devoted to a religious life. They wander all over the country in every direction, visiting especially spots of reputed sanctity. They mutter sacred texts or mantras and are notably fond of uttering the names of certain favorite deities. Some of them can read and a few may be learned. But for the most part they were stolidly ignorant. Others, of a much higher grade, reside in maths or monasteries, where they lead a life of meditation and asceticism. Yet they quit their homes occasionally and like the first named undertake tours for the purpose of begging and also proceed on pilgrimage to remote places [27]. Gosains become the largest property owners in Banaras, Mirzapur, Nagpur and Ujjain by 1750 A.D and the Chaube Barahmins of Mathura, who officiated at the Vaishnavut Shrines, also become moneylender in the villages around the holy city [28].

Formerly, the number of maths, monasteries in Banaras was much larger than at the present day. A hundred years ago there were in the city, it is said, as many as fourteen hundred of these maths, while it is calculated that there are now not more than seven hundred. They are mostly to be found in the districts known as Lalghami Kund, Suraj Kund, Misr Pukhru, Terhi Nim, and Sakhki Binaik. Many families of Gosains, at one time resident in Banaras, have left for Hyderabad, where they are engaged in trade. They engaged them in money lending, banking and trading. In the city of Banaras alone more than forty leading business houses belonged to the Gosains, are listed in the late eighteenth century records [29].

Gosains Rudra Rai and Mahant Fakir Giri were the principle shawl importers from Kashmir [30]. As merchants, bankers, traders, Gosains hold a very respectable position. Some carry on their transaction on a large scale. One of the principal bankers in the city of Mirzapur is a Mahant or high-priest of Gosains, a celibate of great wealth and influence [31].

The Gosain was the largest owners of urban property in Banaras in the late eighteenth century have been identified as possessing several important characteristics [32]. Because of the high religious position they held, they emerged as according to C. A. Bayly, A body of brokers between different social groups. They attracted veneration from the mass of people and also had a close hand in the running of the merchant communities” [33].

By 1780 A.D, the Sanyasis seem to have been the central money lending and property holding group in Banaras, Allahabad and Mirzapur. Their networks were connected to other parts of the country like Nagpur, Ujjain, and Poona where they had begun to buy property and build house and established merchant house. Generally the trade was much in luxury items such as silk, which was controlled by the great Nagpuri Math of Dasnami, Nagas, Sanyasis of Banaras [34].

Their social status in Hindu society presented the Sanyasis with unique advantages. They received special consideration from full customs rates in some kingdoms. Gosains were often regarded as suitable people for witnessing commercial documents [35].

The Sanyasi and other ascetic orders also acted as a body of brokers between different social groups. They attracted veneration from the mass of people and also had a close hand in the running of the merchant communities. Gosains had recognized a powerful hold on the trade in silk from the Ganges into the Maratha regions [36]. A major part of these commodities passed through Banaras on way to Nepal and their trade was mainly controlled by Sanyasi merchants [37].

Their returns from Nagpur and the Deccan also comprised of gold coin and bullion etc. They were adapted to sell to Banaras bankers, taking in return bill upon Murshidabad to buy row silk, piece goods brocade cloth and copper, and though under a system established by Balwant Singh the Sanyasis were not allowed to sell or negotiate for bills directly with the Sarrafs and had to get bills through the
Sona Mahal, an office for collecting duty on imported gold with changed a small tax of one per cent as brokerage, a system from which all other merchant were exempt [38]. The Sanyasis appear to have retained their position as the leading merchants of upper India in the letter half of eighteenth century [39]. The total values of then exports and import of the Sanyasis which passed though the custom house of Banaras and which was then re-exported to Deccan and western India [40].

After Balwant Singh, Duncan took measures to correct the wrongdoing and oppressions under which the Sanyasis suffered. He passed a number of orders in their support. He freed them from the oppression of being subject to one Dalal (broker) appointed over them by the authority of Raja, and the duty exact from them on their allowances. They were given freedom to buy and sell through and with whomsoever they liked. They could buy cotton from any class of merchant instead of from the Deccan merchants only. They were also permitted to provide their own boats without the intervention of Government [41]. The sanyasis organization on improvement at a premium in the eighteenth century they were capable to present their own safeguard of established political authority.

This come in two forms, first there was the Gosains sheer military power which they sold to other magnets such as the Nawab of Awadh, and used to protect their own trade route and revenue grants. Secondly their capacity to protect, in part derived from their status as holy men ‘divorced from the world’ [42]. The Atul Nagar Akhara alone was supposed to have had 3,00,000 members during the time of the Delhi Badshah (Emperors), and Gosain armies of men such as Giri and Himmat Bahadur sometime reached 50,000 or more [43]. In Banaras take up the role of negotiation and defense which had formerly been the preserve of King and establish of Government [41]. The sanyasis organization on improvement at a premium in the eighteenth century they were capable to present their own safeguard of established political authority.

The Nawab provided rank of four hundred Hazara a high order of Mughal chivalry of one Gosain leader with the and also with right to raise troops without reference to him [47]. In 1781 A.D Hastings had ordered that all chaukies for the collection of customs were to be abolished other than those at Banaras, Ghazipur and Mirzapur, but in spite of such orders the number of petty chaukies (custom station) increased as an alternative of withdrawing. Only the Sanyasis had been given the freedom of the reduction in 1784 A.D as a result of their request to Jagardeva Singh, the Raja’s deputy [48].

1. References
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