

A History of the Dasnami Naga Sannyasis Edited with an Introduction by Ananada Bhattacharya.

Jadunath Sarkar
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Ananda Bhattacharya can justly be credited with running a very useful scheme under which several rare texts from the colonial and pre-colonial periods are being reprinted with a contemporary introduction. For the colonial period itself, these include ethnographic and survey reports and several other monographs which remain invaluable as sources of historical information on select events and episodes from our history. The present work speaks of Dasnami Sannyasis, (the word "Dasnami" denoting 10 titles which later turned into different sub-orders) constituting the largest and most powerful monastic order in India who not only contributed to the anti-colonial resistance in the late eighteenth century but played an important part in the internal politics of the sub-continent going back by at least two centuries. The interesting quality about these Sannyasis is that they were able to reconcile two apparently contradictory pursuits: a pietistic religious life and a violent recourse to arms. The Dasnami Order, founded by Adi Sankaracharya, subsequently came to be divided between *shaastradhari*s, those specializing in scriptural knowledge and *astradhari*s, those who served as a militia and were regularly employed as mercenaries by warring states in late medieval India. Interestingly however, much less is known about the religious life of the Dasnamis, barring their sectarian identity as Saivites.

Jadunath Sarkar's classic study does not appear to carry a date of publication though the present edition puts this down as 1958. If accepted, this would place Sarkar in a long line of scholars who have critically

commented upon Sannyasi militias, starting perhaps with Jaminimohan Ghosh (1923, 1930), followed by Farquhar (1925) and Orr (1940). Major contributions to this line of work to succeed Sarkar are those by anthropologist G.S. Churye, in 1964, and historians Lorenzen and Pinch in 1978 and 1998 respectively.

Sarkar's work has 19 chapters in all. The first three chapters are devoted to the life and teachings of Adi Sankaracharya; chapters 4 to 8 are on the organization of the Dasnamis, the operative rules of conduct pertaining to the domesticated and sedentary *Gossains* and the warring Naga (literally, naked) militia who were recruited by *akharas* (literally, wrestling rings).¹ Chapters 10 to 17 are on prominent Naga leaders like Rajendra Giri and Anup Giri (alias Himmat Bahadur) and their successors. Chapter 18 is a useful account of the involvement of the Dasnami Gossains in trade, banking and civil administration while the concluding chapter, the work of an anonymous contributor, is a detailed description of one of the principal centres of Dasnami power and presence, the *Mahanirvani Akhara* near Allahabad.

I am not sure if the world of scholarship has taken adequate note of Bhattacharya's own researches in the field, beginning apparently in 2004-05. In 2014, he produced a full-length monograph on the subject (*Dasnami Sannyasis in Worldly and Soldierly Activities*) which does not appear to have received the attention that it deserved. In the work under review, Bhattacharya's lengthy introduction (backed by field-work) is not meticulously detailed but also clears certain commonplace misconceptions. First, he disabuses us of the notion that the well-known Sannyasi rebels of the eighteenth century Bengal were Bengalis in origin. In truth, as Bhattacharya alerts us, most of them

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were migrants from upper and central India. Their major field of activity too appears to be centred in the area now corresponding to Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Maharashtra. Only two districts in colonial Bengal reveal any significant presence of the Dasnami Sannyasis: Bagura and Mymensing and this presence too appears to have been dictated by trade, money-lending and revenue farming rather than military involvement, which relatively speaking, was far greater in north and central India (pp. 30-35). Bhattacharya also disagrees with the view originally expressed since the 1960s that in fighting the early colonial state, the Sannyasis had the backing of the peasants (p. 69). On the contrary, if Bhattacharya is to be believed, the Sannyasis, as revenue farmers are known to have mercilessly extorted the peasants (p. 54).

Bhattacharya's introduction also serves as a useful corrective on certain questions regarding historiography. For one, he reveals the methodological limitations in David Lorenzen who, allegedly, relies far too much on secondary sources and in Pinch, who excludes Marathi and Persian sources as sources of study. Sarkar himself is accused of doing just the opposite: focusing far too much on the Persian and Marathi sources to the exclusion of the British East Indian Company records. More importantly, Bhattacharya accuses Sarkar of deliberately playing an aggressive 'Hindutva' card by emphasizing their martial valour of the Naga Sannyasis and neglecting to pay adequate attention to their other secular activities (Preface).

I also noted, however, certain instances of oversight and carelessness on the part of the editor. On page 10, for instance, he puts Adi Shankaracharya as a tenth century figure, only to change it to the seventh century on page 25. He also needs to be reminded that contrary to his claim (p. 27), the *Dabistan* is no longer considered a work by Mohsin Fani. Moreover, on page 30, Dasnami Gossains are identified with settled and domesticated householders and on the next page with celibate ascetics. Finally, I was intrigued by his use of the expression "married sannyasis" (p. 10), which to me appeared as a contradiction in terms. On page 76, he calls *sannyasi* a 'socio-religious entity'. However, on one level, all historical existence is social and yet I was reminded of the fact that in the Hindu tradition, *sanyas* begins by acknowledging that one is dead to society.

I am happy to recommend this work to all students and scholars, interested in the rich, multi-dimensional and complexly ordered spiritual lineages of India. I have enjoyed reading this work and so, I trust, will many others.

Note

1. We are reliably informed by Bhattacharya that there are now 13 extant *akharas* in South Asia, seven of which are identifiable with the Saivite Dasnamis and three with the Vaishnava Ramanandis.