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Titumir

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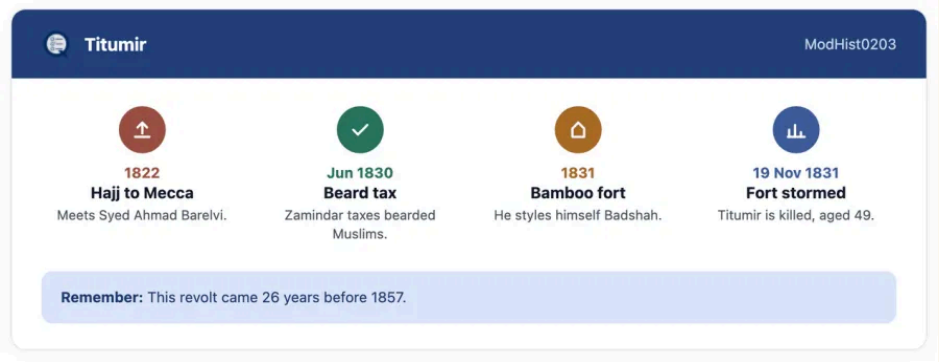
Titumir

In June 1830 a Bengal landlord named a tax on beards. The men who paid it were poor Muslim farmers.

Their teacher refused to pay and told them to do the same. That quarrel grew into a revolt, and a fort made of bamboo. The teacher was Titumir.



Titumir (Syed Mir Nisar Ali), a modern illustration from Bangladeshi textbooks. Author unknown. CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. It is an imagined likeness, not a portrait from life.



Turning points in the story of Titumir, from standard sources.

Who. Syed Mir Nisar Ali, called Titumir (1782-1831).
Place. Villages near Barasat, in North 24 Parganas, Bengal.
Teacher. He met the reformer Syed Ahmad Barelvi at Mecca in 1822.
Spark. A zamindar's tax on bearded Muslims, June 1830.
Fort. A bamboo and mud fort at Narkelbaria, 1831.
End. The fort fell on 19 November 1831. Titumir was killed.

Zamindar: a landlord who collected rent and taxes from farmers under the Company.

Badshah: the Persian word for king, a title Titumir took in 1831.

Subaltern history: history told from the side of ordinary and poor people.

1 Who was Titumir?

Syed Mir Nisar Ali was born on 27 January 1782. Sources name his village as Chandpur or Haidarpur, in rural Bengal. He studied at a local madrasa and became a hafiz, one who knows the Quran by heart.

He was also a good wrestler. For a time he worked as a bodyguard for a local zamindar. He was once jailed after a clash with zamindars over heavy taxes on farmers.

In 1822 he went on the Hajj to Mecca. There he met Syed Ahmad Barelvi. Barelvi was a revivalist who urged strict Islamic practice and jihad against Company rule.

Titumir came home and began to preach. He told poor Muslim farmers to give up customs he saw as un-Islamic. He also criticised zamindars as partners of the Company.

- Born **27 January 1782**, as **Syed Mir Nisar Ali**.
- A **hafiz**, wrestler and former bodyguard.
- Hajj in **1822**; met **Syed Ahmad Barelvi**.
- Preached to **poor Muslim peasants** of Bengal.

> **Quick check 1.** Titumir met the reformer Syed Ahmad Barelvi at Mecca in 1822. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 What was the beard tax quarrel?

In June 1830 a zamindar named Krishnadeva Rai put a yearly tax on Muslim tenants who wore beards. His aim was to check the spread of Titumir's preaching. Titumir told the farmers not to pay.

The zamindar answered with armed men, and a local mosque was burned. The Muslims hit back. Both sides complained to the police at Baduria. The magistrate at Barasat dropped the case.

That emboldened other zamindars. They set up similar taxes and jailed those who refused. The farmers went to court but got little help.

Titumir now urged armed resistance. The scholar Atis Dasgupta says a religious quarrel then turned into a class struggle against landlords and the Company. This is the key change to remember.

- **June 1830**: **Krishnadeva Rai** taxes bearded Muslims.
- Titumir tells farmers to **refuse** the tax.
- Other zamindars copy the tax; courts give **little relief**.
- Quarrel turns into a **class struggle** against **zamindars** and the **Company**.

3 How did Titumir build his power?

Titumir moved his base to Narkelbaria and gathered an armed band. In October 1830 he declared himself the rightful ruler. He said the revenue should go to him, not to the Company.

Violence followed. His men raided a zamindar's house and burned shops of moneylenders. The zamindars then joined hands with British indigo planters. The planters ran farms where many peasants were forced to grow indigo.

Titumir's men beat a planter's force at Mollahati. A zamindar's forces were beaten too. In November 1830 a police party of about 120 men marched out under a joint magistrate. A force of about 500 rebels defeated it.

By 1831 the district was in turmoil. Titumir styled himself Badshah. His nephew Ghulam Masum served as his Senapati, or commander. Zamindars had to submit or leave their lands.

Most of his followers were poor Muslim peasants. Accounts differ on how many Hindu peasants joined him. Most zamindars, whatever their religion, opposed him.

- Base: **Narkelbaria**, near Barasat.
- Allies against him: **zamindars** and **indigo planters**.
- Police party beaten, **November 1830**.
- Title: **Badshah**; commander: **Ghulam Masum**.

4 What happened at the bamboo fort?

Titumir's followers built a fort of bamboo and mud at Narkelbaria. It was meant to stand against attack. The British could no longer ignore the revolt.

On the evening of 18 November 1831 a British column marched on it. It had cavalry, infantry and two cannons. Sources differ on its exact size and its officers. One account gives about 300 armed men.

The real attack came the next morning, 19 November. Cannon fire broke the fort in about three hours. Titumir was killed in the assault, at the age of 49. Many of his men died with him.

About 800 others were arrested and tried at Alipur. Ghulam Masum was hanged in front of the fort ruins. About 140 got prison terms. The British commander noted Titumir's bravery in his dispatches. He also noted how long the bamboo walls had held.

- Fort of **bamboo and mud** at **Narkelbaria**.
- Stormed on **19 November 1831** with **cannons**.
- Titumir killed at **49**.
- About **800** tried at **Alipur**; **Ghulam Masum** hanged.

5 How is he remembered?

At the time, newspapers run by the English and by Bengali elites mostly called him a trouble-maker. Later writers saw him differently. Many now see him as an early rebel against both landlord and Company power.

The bamboo fort became a folk legend in Bengal. The novelist Mahasweta Devi wrote a novella called Titumir. In 1978 the playwright Utpal Dutt staged a play on him. Both tried to recover his story from the colonial record.

In 2004 a BBC poll ranked him eleventh among the greatest Bengalis of all time. Bangladesh issued a stamp for him in 1992. A naval base there bears his name. In India, a bus terminal at Barasat is named for him.

- Folk legend: the **bamboo fort**.
- Books and plays: **Mahasweta Devi**, **Utpal Dutt**.
- BBC poll **2004**: **11th** greatest Bengali.
- Honoured in both **India** and **Bangladesh**.

- Read about Tribal and Peasant Uprisings.

6 What are the exam traps?

Do not mix Titumir with other movements.

- Titumir's revolt was in **1831**, **26 years before 1857**.
- His movement is linked to **Syed Ahmad Barelvi**. It is not the **Faraizi** movement of Haji Shariatullah.
- The **beard tax** came from a **zamindar**, not from the Company.
- His title was **Badshah**, and his fort was of **bamboo**.
- Sources differ on **troop numbers** and **fort-building dates**.
- Compare him with Shah Mal.
- Compare him with Kittur Chennamma.

> **Quick check 2.** The tax on beards that sparked the 1830 quarrel was imposed by the East India Company. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: Titumir, born Syed Mir Nisar Ali. Met Barelvi at Mecca in 1822. Beard tax in June 1830. Bamboo fort at Narkelbaria stormed on 19 November 1831. Killed at 49.

> **Think it through:** Why did a local tax quarrel grow into a revolt against the Company?
>
> The farmers saw zamindars and the Company as partners. Courts and police gave them no relief. So a religious dispute became a fight over land, tax and power.

Quick check 3. Titumir revolted in 1831, about 26 years before the Revolt of 1857. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. What was Titumir's birth name, before he became known by his preaching name?

A. Krishnadeva Rai

B. Ghulam Masum

C. Syed Mir Nisar Ali

D. Ahmadullah Shah

See answer ↓

2. In June 1830, what did zamindar Krishnadeva Rai impose on Titumir's Muslim followers, sharpening the conflict?

A. A grain tax

B. A tax over their beards

C. A tax on mosque attendance

D. A tax on bamboo harvesting

See answer ↓

3. In 1822, Titumir made a pilgrimage to Mecca where he met a reformer who shaped his later preaching. Who was that reformer?

A. Haji Shariatullah

B. Titu Mir's own father

C. Syed Ahmad Barelvi

D. Shah Waliullah

See answer ↓

4. Who served as commander of Titumir's forces at the Bamboo Fort?

A. Krishnadeva Rai

B. Lieutenant Colonel Stewart

C. Mir Nisar Ali's own son

D. His nephew and disciple, Ghulam Masum

See answer ↓

5. At what age was Titumir killed when British forces stormed the Bamboo Fort on 19 November 1831?

A. 32

B. 49

C. 58

D. 65

See answer ↓

6. What happened to Ghulam Masum, Titumir's nephew and commander, after the Bamboo Fort fell in 1831?

A. He escaped to Mecca

B. He was hanged in front of the fort ruins

C. He was freed after a pardon

D. He was exiled to the Andamans

See answer ↓

7. Which writer published a novella called Titumir that tried to recover the story of the rural poor?

A. Mahasweta Devi

B. Premchand

C. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

D. Rabindranath Tagore

See answer ↓

8. After the 1831 siege, the British commander wrote in his dispatches about the surprising strength of which material?

A. Teak wood

B. Iron

C. Bamboo

D. Brick

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** He was born Syed Mir Nisar Ali, on 27 January 1782, later becoming known as Titumir. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** Krishnadeva Rai imposed a tax on Muslim tenants who followed Titumir, targeting their beards. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** In 1822, Titumir made a pilgrimage to Mecca and met the reformer Syed Ahmad Barelvi, returning to preach against practices he saw as un-Islamic. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** His nephew and disciple, Ghulam Masum, served as commander of his forces. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** Titumir, born 27 January 1782, was killed at age 49 when British forces stormed the Bamboo Fort on 19 November 1831. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** Hundreds of rebels were arrested and tried at Alipur. Ghulam Masum was hanged before the ruins of the fort, and about 140 others got prison terms. ↑ Q6
7. **A.** Mahasweta Devi wrote a novella on Titumir to bring back a subaltern history. Utpal Dutt also staged a play on him in 1978. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** The fort of bamboo and mud held out against artillery for a surprisingly long time. The commander also noted Titumir's courage. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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