



Social Origin of Criminals: A Study of Nadia Dacoits in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: A study of crime as a social problem makes it necessary to focus the human element—the distinguishing characteristics of men and women who chose to resort to the legally prescribed codes of conduct. By and large people in general have very little or no sympathy for the criminals. This paper describes some relevant matters relating to the criminal. Who became criminal under which situation? What can we infer about the socio-economic background of the incarcerated? It tries to present a survey of Nadia district's dacoits by reviewing excerpts from confessional records of dacoits and from different police reports, all of which throw light on the criminal career of Nadia dacoits.

Key words: Nadia, dacoit, social Bandit, colonial, Bengal

It is well known that information about criminals is more difficult to come by than

about crimes. This was all the more true for the criminals of our period under review. The reason for this was the lack of systematic and uniform maintenance of dossiers of criminals. In the early decades of nineteenth century even dacoits were almost faceless in the official records. The period from 1852 to 1863 was an exception when the office of the commissioner for the suppression of *dacoity* in Bengal acted as the central crime control agency and left behind some valuable information about the dacoits of Nadia along with those of some of other districts of Bengal. Hunter's statistical account of Bengal and Garrett's Nadia district gazetteer contain only sporadic information on the dacoits. Contemporary indigenous news papers and periodicals provide even less satisfactory materials for building up socio-economic

profiles of the men behind the criminal activity.

Why people use to join criminal fraternity in spite of their awareness of punishment they were bound to incur? Uncertainty or evasion of punishment was an encouraging factor for someone joining in criminality. Confessions by numerous dacoits indicate that they used to go for the *dacoity* because they saw dacoits had been neither captured by the police nor punished by the court. Bad harvest tempted them to join in crime. Economic hardship led men to jump into the criminality. Sometimes sheer curiosity made one join the criminal gang. Low moral character, lack of education might play crucial role for one perpetrating crime. Initiation into the world of criminality, therefore, for would-be criminals was caused by several factors. Hereditary or born criminals, a popular subject of colonial discourse, had no existence in this district. Confessions of dacoits clearly suggest that almost all dacoits started their criminal career due to external influence or the effect of

neighborhood. They did not learn the art of crime from the members of family. They did not take any formal training for learning the act of crime. In this context the most glaring examples are the confessions of four sirdar dacoits of Nadia who had confessed their crime before the *dacoity* commissioners in 1850s'. Their revelations illustrated some interesting facts. All of them were driven into the world of criminality due to the inspiration and motivation of others. Without the encouragement and instigation of others no one could join in the criminality. The official stereotyping of low moral character, lack of education, criminal propensity of persons of lower order of natives could be added as the factor of their joining to *dacoity*. Nabai Ghose lost his parents in his tender age. Then he went to Parulpara to his nephew Hulludhar Ghose. Hulludhar was a dacoit. He taught him the skill of stick fighting and used to take him out as a '*teccalattiar*'. One day Hulludhar asked Nabai to join him in *dacoity* and he agreed. Later he committed at least 24 *dacoities*

on land and in river.¹ Manick Ghose was a victim of circumstances which made him join the *dacoity* gang. His father got converted to Christianity. The rest of members of his family, for avoiding conversion, ran away to Kidderpore. There were two notorious dacoits, Monohur and Kuber Ghose. Monohur was his relative and under his apprenticeship Manick joined the gang and embarked on a career of *dacoity*.² The situation in which Bishtu Ghose, the fourth leader of the Gawala gang became a dacoit was slightly different from those above two. Bishtu was the strongest of the three sons of his father. His father consequently appointed Bishtu to the take charge of his cattle as in that country strong and courageous men were required to watch cattle grazing due to perpetual rows and fights amongst the Gowalas or with other villagers. By making use of his lathi continually, he became expert and courageous. He, in leisure time, used to go to some of his friends houses' in the village to refresh himself. He used to go to Manick Ghose's house, who was famous as a dacoit. One day Manick offered Bishtu to

join him in *dacoity* as they would get a lot of money with very little trouble. He consented. After a few days Bishtu went with Manick for his first *dacoity* venture on a *sawaree* boat at Nawapara. On the first occasion he was frightened and did not go on the boat, but stood on the shore looking on. The first experience in terms of money was not satisfactory to Bishtu. He got only two old clothes as his share of the plundered booty. He was disappointed, frustrated and vexed and even decided to quit it altogether and told Manick that it was not worthwhile to undergo imprisonment for mere two old clothes. Manick still insisted and promised Bishtu that he would take care of and look after him in the next *dacoity*. Manick kept his word and gave Bishtu 100 rupees after the next *dacoity*. Bishtu exclaimed and wondered, "I had never seen so much money in my life. I left my father's cows to my brother. From that time...I have all along committed *dacoity*. I thus, become dacoit".³ They were the leaders. But about the large number of subordinate gang robbers we have no definite

information regarding their stimulus for joining robberies. They were temporary dacoits who joined robbery for some quick financial gains as *dacoity* was a never failing resource.⁴

The career of another dacoit of Nadia is quite interesting. Story of his life expressed many aspects of a dacoit. Sonatun Mandal, a strong, stout and fearless boy got himself admitted in a school as his father wanted him to rectifying his obstreperous behaviour. One day on his way to Santipore he fell in with a party of *Lathiials*. He joined them in conversation. He asked them if they could assist him in procuring a job. They agreed because Sonatun was '*khoob jowan*'. This expression indicates that a strong and fearless village boy had always a chance to fall in felony. He had at the same time an opportunity to get a job for his powerful physique. The party which Sonatun met took him because he was a strong and young man. The party saw in him the possibility of being a good fighter. So, the party took him with them to their master, an indigo planter. Here he got a job, but at

the same time gradually he fell in with people of criminal tendencies. He was engaged in affrays and *dacoities*. He got seven years' sentence of imprisonment for being involved in an affray with murder. He escaped from prison and fled to Assam. Three years after he was traced, captured and confined into Burdwan Jail with two years' additional imprisonment for escaping. After serving nine years' as a convict he was released and he returned to his native village where he found an old friend of his father Gour Seth, an oil presser. Sonatun sought his assistance. Gour received him kindly but advised him to take to *dacoity* for livelihood and promised to help him in selling of his plundered property.⁵ This incident is a proof that it was difficult for a convict to return to normal life. Mr. Redfearn, the first collector of this district wrote in 1789,⁶ "There is a great reason to believe that those who have been once guilty of *decoitee*, confined and corporally punished for it, seldom quit this course of life when they regain their liberty." He also explained the causes for

such belief. He wrote “if they [dacoits] are ryots, and paid a small revenue, on their return to their habitations they find what little property they left behind them consumed, their lands taken from them, and no one ready to afford them any assistance, and being destitute of the means of supporting themselves and, those who depend on them for a subsistence, they are in a manner obliged to have recourse to their former practices, nearly similar is the situation of every other person on his release from prison.” Sonatun followed Gour Seth’s advice and for several years carried on this trade with great success, not however without little inconvenience. He was arrested during this period nine times, although he was committed to the session judge five times, he was acquitted three times and convicted twice only, however on both occasion he was released after appeal to the *Nizamat Adalat*. One day Gour Seth died; Sonatun then gave up *dacoity* and lived on the proceeds of his life of crime. He built a comfortable two storied *Pucca* house and

became a leading man in his village. But he could not return to normal life. The Police arrested him for once being a dacoit, convicted and transported.⁷He complained to the Commissioner that he had been apprehended in spite of quitting robbery, but it was of no avail.

The general perception is that the criminals used to come from the lower order of the society. Some available data about dacoits helped us to guess at the social compositions of Nadia criminals. One of the earliest descriptions of convicted dacoits of this district is found in a list of 33 members of three different gangs. The sirdar of each gang was a *chowkidar*. The occupation of the 33 dacoits were as follows- 11 cultivators, 7 *chowkidar*, 4 peadas (peons), 3 laborers, 2 beggars, 2 betel sellers, 2 thatchers, 1 lime seller and 1 bearer.⁸ There are more detailed lists of prisoners who had failed to make the security deposits required by judicial authorities to guarantee their good behaviour. In other words the lists are not of convicts but of persons suspected of *dacoity*, and of other crimes.

Some of the persons detained were found to have been accused unjustly however the lists nevertheless seem to reflect in a general way the social composition of robber gangs. So far as the largest occupational categories of the suspected offenders in Nadia jail are concerned there prisoners also served as watchmen and that dacoits were often *chowkidars*. The Information of the castes of prisoners in the list confirms the official view that dacoits were generally recruited from the lowest castes. The list had 93 Muslims, 35 Bagdies, 21 Koras, 13 Gowalas, 12 Bouries and 11 Doms.¹⁰ The 93 Muslims represented 38.7 % of 240 Nadia prisoners, or roughly same proportion as they constituted in the district as a whole, according to an estimate.¹¹ Dom, Bagdis, Kaoras and Bouris were all among the lowest castes. Doms were basket makers and cultivators; Bagdis were labourers, fishermen, cultivators, palanquin bearers and village watchmen; Kaoras were swine-keepers; and Bouries were cultivators, labourers, fishermen and palanquin bearers. The trend of

forming robber gang from the lowest caste continued even in the 1850's and chowkidars held dominant positions in the gang formation. Haro Sirdar gang of Suksagar and Chakdah thanas included a large number of *chowkidars* in his gang.¹²

One of the characteristics of dacoits in 1850-33 in this district was that they were lathial dacoits. All four dacoits of Nadia Gowala Gang, who confessed their crime before the commissioner of the suppression of *dacoity*, were *lathials*. Mr. J. Ward, the commissioner of the suppression of dacoity, remarked that in Nadia, *dacoity* had been committed by the *latials*.¹³ They were either Gawalas or Mussalmans.¹⁴ Although the Gowalas and Muslims dominated the criminal charts, yet there were many dacoits who came from other socio-economic back-ground. Johny Dick, a natural son of William Dick, a European indigo planter, was a sirdar of dacoits in this district.¹⁵ His friend in the gang of dacoits used to call him as Jhan Mahammad.¹⁶ Women criminals especially dacoits were almost absent in archival

documents. Direct involvement of women in robbery is not found in the police reports. Only one such instance is found in the report of the suppression of *dacoity*. This woman was Sona Dhopani, wife of Prem Sirdar, who used to go with the gang in the expedition of robbery. She was worshiped by the members of this gang as an incarnation of the Kali.¹⁷ Women, though indirectly, assisted dacoits more than one way. They used to play vital role as spies of the dacoits.

The general characters of Nadia dacoits were very violent and brutal according to district magistrate's report. The portrayal of characters of dacoits of Nadia is found in a letter sent by the magistrate of Nadia to the secretary of Judicial Department on 25 October, 1809 of Bengal Government. He narrated briefly the character of some members of famous Bishwanath gang. Many members of this gang had the ability to collect hundreds of men in emergency. Apart from Bishwanath, sirdars like Krishendhun Chaudry,

Buddhea and Docourie were able to raise three to four hundred men, whenever needed. The magistrate narrated that Buddhea was the most savage of the gang whose delight was to show his depredation. It was a common proverb that whenever "he was a party blood always followed with scenes of horror to the wound." He used to hang up the head of the persons he murdered.¹⁸ Docurie was equally as bad as Buddhea. Whenever he went, his first object was to get hold of the women.¹⁹ Titulyah, an adopted son of Buddhea, was a terror to every father of a family.²⁰ Sannyasee Bagdi was well known in the Nadia and Burdwan district. He was fond of carrying spear in both of his hands besides *sacre* on his shoulder, and the person who came within his reach was sure to suffer death.²¹ There was a dacoit about whom a little more information is available in the government documents. This man was Gangaram Sirdar. Ganga commenced *dacoity* at the age of 12 years and since then he had been the sirdar of his gang.²² The Magistrate described him as a complete savage. His

cruelty surpassed even Bishwanath and the person who resisted him was bound to die.²³He confessed that he had murdered 33 persons with his own hands.²⁴He was an intelligent and a fearless dacoit sirdar. When the magistrate asked if he had any intention to return to his district, he quickly replied, “would I not, I am a dacoit. It is my profession.” Again when the magistrate asked him if he was not afraid of the *sepoys*, his reply was ‘I can shoot where they are blind.’²⁵

The native ideas of criminality of people of lower castes in Bengal are strikingly similar to the colonial ideas regarding the same. For native ideas of lower caste criminality, we can review the writing of Girish Chandra Bose who was the *darogah* of police in this district in the 1850’s. According to Bose, all sorts of criminals came from the Muslim, Gowala, Bagdi and other low castes communities of this district.²⁶Despite his certain knowledge of the local *zamindars*’ complicity in robberies, he exhibited a cultivated blindness to their criminality. Instead, he recorded this as an aberration.

Anticipating shocked reactions from the readers to a dacoit’s true identity, he said that once Bamundasbaboo’s house was looted by dacoits. Readers will be astonished to hear that the dacoit was from a *bhadralok* family whose father held a high post in the Krishnagar district. Since his childhood he had kept bad company, and had finally left friends and family to join a group of dacoits as leader.²⁷In fact, Girish Chandra differentiated between active involvement in *dacoities*, planned by the people of the lower caste, and formation of a dacoit band for robberies masterminded by the *zamindars*. In this district, a couple of *zamindars* were openly involved in such *dacoities*, but they disdained the use of such hired bands and commandeered the loyal group of *lathials* and *sarkiwalas* themselves.

Another vital question is whether there was the social bandit in Nadia district. Social banditry is a form of preindustrial social protest.²⁸The history of social banditry deals with a form of individual or minority protest within peasant societies. Social bandits are mainly peasants’ outlaws whom the state refers to as dangerous elements, but who remain within the peasant

society and are looked upon by their co-villagers as heroes. They shall never harm any of their neighbours. The peasant would evaluate such bandits with their own perception of justice. Social banditry constitutes an extremely backward and primitive form of social movement lacking consistent ideology and organization. Social bandits, according to Eric Hobsbawm, “are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.”²⁹On the mission of the social bandits, Hobsbawm further wrote, “they rights wrongs, they correct and avenge cases of injustice, and in doing so apply a more general criterion of just and fair relations between men in general, and especially between the rich and the poor, the strong and weak.”³⁰They have no ideological and philosophical visions. They are mere activists in the midst of the poor peasants. It would be naïve therefore to search any noble or farsighted plans or programmes in their functions. As Hobsbawm puts it,

“they are activists and not ideologists or prophets from whom novel visions or plans of social and political organization are to be expected.”³¹The distinction between a social bandit and a criminal bandit, as emphasized by Hobsbawm, theoretically sounds well, but in concrete terms it is extremely difficult to locate such bandits who are in tune with Hobsbawm’s model.

Bishwanath sirdar, the famous Nadia dacoit of the first decade of nineteenth century, has been designated by many scholars as a social bandit. He was a low caste Hindu by birth, but for his achievement he came to be known as Bishwanath Babu (gentleman). He was the friend of the poor and enemy to the rich. He was against any attack on the women during the dacoity. He distributed plundered goods among the poor.³²He enjoyed good support among the poor villagers in his locality. Once police was surrounded him in a village, but the women of that village gave a shout to warn him and Bishwanath on that occasion escaped apprehension.³³His attack on the indigo planter has been seen by many as a protest against the oppression of the indigo planters.³⁴He modified the

mode of *dacoity* and modified its cruelty. Before his arrival at the stage of robbery this sort of crime practised by the different gangs was very oppressive and torturous.³⁵ He always stood by the causes of the poor. Dacoits of the time of Bishwanath used to attack the rich men. As observed by a news paper “those who refused to pay, and all travelers, all traders on the river, and, generally speaking, all notoriously rich men, were mercilessly attacked”³⁶ There are many examples of his charity in the vernacular books and articles.³⁷

In official records Bishwanath was regarded as a notorious dacoit. He was once banished from this district to Dinajpore from where he escaped by breaking jail with some of his fellow comrades. Even his fellow dacoits did not regard him as a great dacoit leader. Gangaram, a contemporary sirdar, commented on Bishwanath while communicating with the magistrate in the following manner “you (magistrate) call Biswanath sirdar dacoit. Do you know he was my pupil and acted as a *coolie*”?³⁸ Gangaram also said that his only achievement was an attack on Mr. Faddy, a European planter. There is a clear clue to the intention of Bishwanath’s attack on Faddy in the original report sent on 29 September, 1808, by the then acting magistrate of Nadia, Mr. H. Shakespeare.³⁹ According to this report,

Bishwanath attacked Faddy’s house because he was very active and co-operated with the magistrates for apprehending dacoits. Bishwanath became famous for this attack as it had been made on a European. Certainly it was a remarkable venture of Bishwanath, but it could not be equated with any type of peasant rebellion against the indigo planter. The origin of Bishwanath’s legend is the writings of official historians like Hunter and Garrett. Kumudnath mullick has been recorded the bravery of Bishwanath and his associates which resembles hunter’s description of the ‘Statistical Account of Bengal’.⁴⁰ Gangaram also blamed Bishwanath’s action for his arrest by the police. However Gangaram’s deposition gives clear indication that the colonial officers of the criminal department regarded Biswanath as a sirdar dacoit. But there is hardly any hint in official records to the fact that Biswanath used to distribute his plundered property among the poor. On the other hand, the record is full of the account of his gang’s cruelty. Bishwanath and his gang, for example, once murdered four persons including an elderly woman who was the mother of a sirdar *dacoit* at a village. That village was the residence of a sirdar *dacoit* named Thakur Das who was earlier an associate of the Bishwanath Gang.⁴¹ This attack was conducted due to his quarrel with Thakur Das on the sharing of robbed booty. In another incident Bishwanath’s gang carried away a woman and ravished her for one day and

night and she returned home little better than being dead.⁴² There is, therefore, not even a single argument that can help to conclude that Bishwanath was a social bandit.

Criminals were essentially the products of society. There was no existence of *janam* chore or born criminals in Nadia. The band of dacoits was not a homogenous constituent; rather it consisted of heterogeneous band of persons. The dacoits of Nadia used to follow certain code of their own, peculiar vocabulary and precautionary word. Dacoits came from Muslim and Gowala community and they were also employed by the *zamindars* as *lathials*. They played as tools by and large in the hands of landholders. Nothing great was found in their confession other than their own activities. Therefore it would not be wise to equate them with the social bandits as found in the vernacular fictions.

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