Behind the Blackened Faces: The 19th Century Bengali Dacoits

The stereotype of the dacoit in colonial Bengal is that of a social deviant or popular protestor. With the help of little known official reports and the confessions of dacoits, this paper attempts to place dacoity in the context of the mid-19th century's exploitative rural structure, examine the reasons that led to a spurt in dacoity during that period, the intriguing rituals and organisational structure of the gangs and the nexus between the police and these violent men.

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> During the time about which I have been writing in almost all districts of Bengal dacoity was endemic, and although the practice of Raghunath, Baidyanath or Biswanath committing dacoities after giving prior notice had declined to some extent during the first part of English rule, dacoities committed with cruelty and inhuman actions were still common in Bengal... What had been earned or saved in a life's time could be looted in one night, but wealth or belonging was not the only casualty, the lives of the householder was also at stake.[1]
>
> – Girish Chandra Bose

That was how a 'daroga' (local police official) recounted the 19th century dacoities in Bengal in his reminiscences. Dacoity, a legal term used by colonial administration to categorise a system of robbery in India "by gangs, and (is) derived from daka parna, meaning 'plunder'",[2] was most rampant in Bengal between 1841 and 1857, especially in the districts of 24 Parganas, Barasat, Howrah, Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia, Murshidabad, Jessore and Midnapur. The dacoity curve in 19th century Bengal – reaching its peak in 1851 with 524 recorded cases – dwindled to 92 by 1856.[3]

Dacoity in colonial Bengal has certainly attracted the attention of contemporary observers and professional analysts. For, as G R Elton aptly remarked: "Crime and the criminal eternally fascinate; they rather than politics supply the journalist's daily bread, nor is this particularly modern order of preference".[4] We already have interesting insights on the social and political context of dacoity in colonial Bengal.[5] Many scholarly exercises have, however, tended to view dacoity in colonial Bengal as an element of popular protest or as a social aberration.[6] In popular vernacular literature dacoits have also been categorised into "noble" or 'ignoble".[7] The present essay, however, stresses the need to examine dacoity in 19th century Bengal in the backdrop of rural Bengal's exploitative social structure, the motivations behind joining dacoit groups, the social profile of those accused of committing dacoity, the typology and ritual of dacoity, the organisational structure of dacoit gangs and the nexus between the dacoits and police. Dacoity certainly constituted a particular form of deviance, usually associated with violence. But the nature of dacoity varied from time to time and from place to place. The specificities of dacoity, as I propose to suggest, were related to historical conjunctures of time, space and society.[8] The present essay seeks to recapture aspects of the world of mid-19th century Bengal dacoits through a reading of hitherto relatively unused official reports on dacoities and confessions of some of the accused. The current exercise intends to highlight the importance of a new database for reconstructing an interesting facet of the social history of colonial Bengal.

Why a Dacoit Became a Dacoit?

Some colonial observers nursed a stereotypical image of dacoity as arising

> out of hot blood, ungovernable temper, and the natural inclination of the villager, who is generally miles away from any police, to take the law into his own hands and to fight out his quarrel on the spot. There is nothing like this in the agricultural districts in England.[9]

But there were other perceptive colonial officials who realised that men were driven to commit dacoity by specific historical circumstances. None other than J R Ward, the commissioner for the suppression of dacoity, posed the question: "Is a man dacoit before or after he has committed dacoity"?[10] After all, an overwhelming number of accused were first generation dacoits. An analysis of the confessions of the accused throws interesting light on why one turned a dacoit.

The neighbourhood influence, or what has been called "the social ecology of a criminal area"[11] drove many to join dacoity. Local or family acquaintance had a considerable role to play in this context. Sunath Haree confessed:

> It so happened that Gosain Dass Haree Surdar and myself were residents of the same place, ...(His) nephew is married to my sister, and the surdar himself is my son-in-law. One day as we sat drinking (he)...through persuasions got me to consent to join him in a dacoity.[12]

Faquir Dutt recounted how two head dacoits of his village, who regularly purchased "treacle" from his sugar cane ground, told him how they had "got a great deal of property" and persuaded him to join them.[13] The following instance of Sonatun Mondil represented another process of induction into a dacoity. Once on his way to Santipoor, he fell in the hands of 'lattials' (specialists in wielding the lathi), who felt that the youth was 'khoob jawan' (young and strong), and took him to their master. For the next four years Sonatum committed several dacoities as a member of the group.[14]

Interestingly, many of the accused were employed as lathials in the indigo plantations.[15] The sons of non-Indian indigo factory owners were charged with complicity with dacoit gangs.[16] Probably the indigo crisis of the period had made their employment

in plantations uncertain which drove them to opt for alternative occupations and turn to dacoity. The sirdars (chief of the group) would identify local 'barkandazes' (matchlockmen, footmen under direct order of 'sadar cutchery' – official establishments) who had lost their jobs, or neighbours, who were unable to maintain their family by their lawful occupations, to lure them to join their groups for ready money.[17] In Murshidabad those who once served as the nawab's sepoys (soldiers), but now rendered unemployed, joined dacoit gangs.[18] Peasants, driven to distress by failure of crops, were also induced by local sirdars to become their partners. There are examples of unsuccessful practitioners of indigenous medicine being drawn into local dacoit groups.[19]

Prospects of instant gains often attracted many to dacoity. One accused had a neighbour who used to bring to him ornaments, vessels and clothes for valuation. When he learnt that these acquisitions were the result of dacoities he, too, got enticed to join the profession.[20] Similarly, Dhamu Mundal had "dealings in silk" with his neighbour Prosad Ghoraut without knowing that he was a dacoit, but once he learnt Ghoraut's identity he also got lured into committing dacoities.[21] Again, there were instances of men like Babooram Bagdi of Burdwan who confessed, "I kept a mistress in those days, and she spent more than I could earn. I took to dacoity to enable me to support her".[22]

To silence the local persons who knew about a dacoit group, its sirdar would often use force to join him.[23] The sirdars maintained close touch with their neighbours who had knowledge about the local notables and gradually allured them to be their associates.[24] They also kept a watch on local youth adept in use of lathies (sticks), and used their local connections to recruit them in their groups.[25] The masters of households, themselves dacoits, often made their servants join their gangs.[26] The burkandaz Ubdool Faqueer, for instance, was induced to join a group by his employer Mundle Mahajan.[27]

Organisation of Dacoities

Dacoities were essentially a rural phenomenon. Based on colonial records one can identify three major forms of dacoities.[28] First, there were dacoities "committed by the immediate neighbours of the party robbed". Secondly, dacoities were committed by "bands of upcountrymen passing up and down the Ganges and Jamuna in boats". Besides, dacoities were related to clash of interests between local notables, cutting across religious lines. Ubdool Faquer deposed how the Hindu 'mahajans' (moneylenders) Ufzal Mundle and Choonee Mundle of Pasooree police station in Rajshahi district employed such well known Muslim dacoits of the locality as Shaik Guddaie, Shaik Jahan Buksh and Shaik Owjul to raid the establishment of their coreligionist Ubdool Kareem Khan.[29] At the same time a leading Muslim would organise dacoity in the establishment of another influential Muslim of the same locality due to personal rivalry.[30] On some occasions the mahajans themselves participated in dacoities that they organised in the establishments of their rivals.[31] Zamindars (landlords) like Ishan Baboo also organised dacoities to "teach lessons" to his rival zamindar Keshub baboo.[32] We have reference to an influential rich shikaree Muslim in Barasat district, who maintained in his estate a group of dacoits and himself received "a ten-anna share of the proceeds" from their ventures.[33] The zamindar of Nakaseepara appointed the "notorious sirdar" Golakata Hursha (nicknamed from having received a severe wound in the neck during a river dacoity) "to watch over the female apartments, thus officially (frustrating)...all attempts at arresting him".[34] Interestingly, Ward referred to a zamindar who publicly condemned the "insufficiency of chowkeedaree and police systems", but himself protected one accused of being a dacoit by appointing him as a 'gomashta' (officials in the zamindar's establishment).[35] Sreemanto Ghosh, a convict, thus sarcastically commented, "Were the zamindars transported, dacoity and theft would stop".[36] There are references of dacoit sirdars becoming mahajans after acquiring "considerable wealth".[37]

The dacoits were usually known in their locality as dacoits, a fact rather proudly admitted by a number of the accused.[38] We hardly have any reference to clashes between the dacoits and their villagers. Instead, they developed local networks with villagers, which helped them in carrying out their operations. There were local informers – mostly "husbandmen and patwaree men"[39] – who informed the sirdars about potential targets and received rewards upon the completion of raids.[40] Servants of local notables would also act as informers of sirdars.[41] Villagers, working as informers, kept a close watch on local businessmen if they changed bank notes of considerable value or kept a large stock of merchandise in their houses, and promptly informed the sirdars.[42] A sirdar and members of his group usually refrained from keeping the stolen goods in their possession and preferred to deposit them with their "receivers".[43] Local mahajans, gomasthas and 'amlas' (officials in the establishment of the landlords) of zamindars, small landowners, shopkeepers, distillers, dyers, coppersmiths, carpenters, goldsmiths, and merchants, irrespective of caste and creed, acted as such receivers of the plunder.[44] Normally after a raid the spoils were carried to the receiver or mahajan (moneylender) who bargained for a low price for it, and yet, kept a large share of the sale proceeds as his share.[45] Many of the receivers would carry on this business with local dacoit groups behind the façade of running a normal business, like grocery shops. Often the local informers were receivers of booty too.[46] Some of them were considerably wealthy.[47] One Ram Mokerjee was once a beggar, but made a fortune by becoming a receiver of dacoits.[48] Women also acted as receiver of looted property.[49]

A receiver or particular mahajan with whom a dacoit group had a regular business often provided his clients with monthly subsistence or loans in times of difficulties. Take for instance the following deposition, "Kamal Adhikari gives subsistence to me...and we always sell the plundered property to him, and when he pays us for it he subtracts what he had given us for maintenance...He has about 30 bighas of land".[50] Many of the accused, however, alleged that they were cheated by the receivers who would give them "Rs 6 for an article worth 10".[51] Aviram Doss thus complained, "I am an ignorant man, and know nothing about accounts. I conclude the mahajan has his own accounts. If we gave Rs 100 worth of property, we only got Rs 50".[52] Often a dacoit would hide a part of his booty from his traditional receiver or 'thangeeedar' (local village official) and sell it to another for a better price.[53]

The sirdars of dacoit groups also developed a cash nexus with the local police, which made them immune from arrests or prosecutions in courts. They would regularly advance money to darogas and chowkidars (subordinate police officials who acted as watchmen) to ensure their connivance at "our

(dacoits') non-apprehension".[54] Sirdars even provided advance notices of their operations to the local police.[55] At the same time chowkidars themselves would provide the sirdars with information about prospective victims in lieu of a share in the booty.[56] Even after an arrest the police would be bribed to write a report in favour of the arrested so that "he was not looked after again".[57] The police even ensured that no witnesses were present in court hearings.[58] We also have instances where in the event of a dispute between a daroga and sirdar about the quantum of bribe, the mater was settled by paying a higher amount to the 'nazir' (subordinate official in the establishment of the landlord).[59] Sreemonto Ghosh, an accused, confessed:

> We were all safe. If we got arrested, we paid to the Police, and if we were challenged, for twenty or twenty-five rupees, we could always get witnesses to say we were with them on the night in question. The Judge always believed them ....[60]

The local police usually had full knowledge of the links between the dacoits and the receivers.[61] One of the accused confessed:

> ... the darogah, mohurer and burkandazas apprehend them (dacoits) and on receiving a remuneration...release them again... All the Chowkidars of the village are in the confederacy of the sardars...[62].

A convict was not overstressing when he commented:

> I cannot say how many times I have been arrested and put on trial, but I have been only four times sentenced to any form of imprisonment.[63]

Some darogahs in 24 Parganas, Hooghly and Barasat reportedly "entered into agreements with some sirdars not to molest them provided their thannah jurisdictions were not disturbed".[64] Many of the accused remarked that in localities where there was no complicity between the police and sirdars dacoities were absent.

A perusal of the confessions of the accused reveals instances of chowkidars, jamadars and barkandazs themselves participating in dacoities.[65] Ubdool Faqueer testified how a chowkidar accompanied them in a dacoity, disguising himself "by rubbing blacking on his face, and afterwards washed it off and went to his duty".[66] We have the example of Yaroo chowkeedar who "went to commit dacoity. And receiving his share...(and) returned and equipped himself for duty as Chowkeedar".[67] A chowkidar even acted as a head dacoit.[68] Often a jamadar played the role of a mediator to decide the division of the spoils amongst the group. Not unnaturally, in a number of instances police jamadars were convicted for complicity with dacoits.[69]

Colonial officials like Ward themselves acknowledged the complicity of local police with dacoit groups. In his report to the commissioner of circuit, Burdwan division he admitted how he was "...distressed to see how little the Police exert themselves, and how indifferent the deputy magistrate continues. If there is one crime, in which the Police must be not only urged into activity, but helped in their difficulties, it is in that of dacoity".[70]

T E Ravenshaw, the commissioner for the suppression of dacoity, himself testified to cases where dacoities "had been planned and carried out with the full knowledge and assistance" of police jamadars.[71] The complicity between the police and sirdars becomes evident from cases where the accused after being released from bouts of imprisonment would rejoin dacoit groups without any impunity.[72] A question may pertinently be raised: if the police-dacoit nexus was so persistent how do we explain considerable success attained in the suppression of dacoity by 1856? The answer perhaps lies in the adoption of a new mechanism by the colonial government to meet the challenge of dacoity. Drawing lessons from Sleeman's operations against 'thugees' (highway robbers belonging to a particular religious community who were particularly active in upper India), the Bengal government also appointed the dacoity commission in Bengal that proved to be effective. Besides, the local police, especially the darogas, remained careful not to extend protection to the dacoits at the cost of their jobs. Once the government tightened its machinery – largely following the Sleeman model – the local police-dacoit link considerably weakened.

Social Profile of Dacoits

Writing about the Bengal dacoits, the colonial official C H Keighly wrote of "great difference between gangs of hereditary dacoits or thugs in other parts of India and the dacoits of Bengal".[73] While the former belonged to particular castes and operated in small groups, the latter comprised "every class and caste of the rural population of those districts in which the crime is rife".[74] Ward noted how in the dacoit groups were included, "every class of society, from the petty Jungle Rajah, ...to the lowest class, the khodma, the khaurah, the keechuck..."[75]

Those accused in dacoity cases were overwhelmingly from the subordinate social groups of both Hindu and Muslim communities, most of whom knew neither to read nor to write. But zamindars, gomasthas and other officials of cutcheries were also connected with dacoit groups, although they did not directly participate in the raids. Amongst the Hindus we have particular mention of bagdis, kayets, koibuts, telees, manjees, sadgopes, santals, brahmins, chamars, kaivartas, chandals, hajams, lohars, sonarpunth, dhobees, harees, domes, bustums, gosais, rajputs, tantis, napits, telis, koormees, majhis, and goalas. Railway coolies, Oriyas and upcountrymen were also prominent amongst the accused.[76] Many of those charged with dacoity were lathials or employees in the service of zamindars that made it difficult for the local police to arrest them. Ward thus noted "the impunity" with which landholders in Bengal defied the local authorities to protect "proclaimed criminals".[77] Gomasthas of leading zamindars were also convicted for being involved in dacoities.[78] The 'goalas' (milkmen) – who were adept in use of lathies and were employed as lathials by zamindars and indigo planters – were particularly active. Some goala sirdars like Gore Goala in Krishannagar or Satcowree Ghosh of Kalna or Sonatun Mundul of Santipur-Nadia area gained notoriety for their physical prowess and had become household names.[79] In Hooghly we have reference to Kenaram Goala, who was always well-armed and roamed about "unmolested". A reward was announced for his apprehension, but none dared to help the police.[80] In Howrah and Hooghly districts there were the prominent Rajapoor and Hurripaul gangs. There were instances of people from humble social background amassing economic fortune by turning dacoits.[81] Amongst the Muslims we have particular mention of sarkiwalas.[82] The average age of dacoits was between 30 and 45 years,[83] although there were some instances of men above 50 being convicted for committing dacoities.[84]

A reading of the confessions indicates the existence of a strong hierarchical order within a daocoit gang. Each group had a sirdar and between 50 and 80 subordinates.[85] Usually the sirdar and his associates belonged to the same locality, religion and caste. But there were instances of groups with mixed religion and caste where bagdis, brahmins, manjis, chamars, mandals and Muslims working or serving under a Muslim sirdar.[86] The composition of the group of Ram Coomar Chung of Hooghly – as reported by Ward – was an apt example of such a mixed grouping, "There were three Gwalas... two Chundals...a Kyburt...two Booyan Coolies, who worked on the Railway, ...a Mussulman...a Dhawa...a few Bagdes and Harees."[87]

A sense of symbiotic relationship bound the sirdar and his followers. Members tended to serve the same sirdar;[88] the sirdar provided loans to members of his group, which they repaid by instalments from their share of the booty.[89] Cases of desertion from a group or intra-group clashes were virtually unheard of.[90] When a member of the group either died or was apprehended by the police, the sirdar looked for replacements. Even when four or five sirdars joined hands for an operation, members of a group remained accountable only to his own sirdar.[91] The division of the booty also followed a rule. A sirdar's entitlement was always higher, and other members of the group were paid in accordance to the work performed during the raid. But there were cases when members of the group displayed open discontent at the quantum of their share. One accused reported, "I received ten rupees as my portion and know nothing of what was shared to others. The ornaments all were retained in the custody of the sardars...".[92]

Again, after the raid on the establishment of Joynaroin Karmakar, a leading blacksmith of Char Burredee in Pabna district, the booty was handed over to the receiver and informer Nobo Sircar. But when subsequently the members of the group who conducted the dacoity went to reclaim their share Nobo Sircar "...came with a party of men, and pointing to the boat said 'this boat contains feraries (fugitives)' whereon we jumped out and showed them our heels, but the boat was secured and taken".[93] The situation turned so serious that the sirdar had to assuage a member of the group by forsaking his own share. Sometimes the sirdar paid the members of his group monthly salary, in which case they were not granted access to the booty at all.[94] One such member of a group complained, "I got nothing. I was told: 'You are my servant and have regular wages'. You get no share in this (plunder)."[95] Often the sirdar kept members of his group for some days in a place adjacent to the house proposed to be raided to acquaint them with the locality.[96]

Rites of Dacoities

> Robbers in India are remarkable for the dexterity with which they accomplish their schemes of plunder. They are certainly, in this particular, exceeded by those of no other nation in the world. They have been known to enter a bungalow and remove everything worth taking, leaving the party to whom it belonged and his wife upon the cane-work of the bedstead on which they slept, with no other covering except their nightclothes, and this without waking either...[97]

The above quote certainly betrayed a colonial preoccupation to portray Indian practices in terms of oriental uniqueness. Surely, robberies in England and Europe were not bereft of organised patterns. Nevertheless, an analysis of the depositions of the accused reveals not only traits of considerable planning behind each dacoity but also well-defined rites of dacoities. Each sirdar had an informer who kept him informed about prospective targets and received a share from the booty.[98] Interestingly, we have reference to one woman informer.[99] When a sirdar was informed of any establishment worth raiding, he personally made enquiries, and once convinced, he contacted his headmen to mobilise the required number of men along with necessary weapons and implements.[100] The headmen were also told of the 'khorakee' (daily allowance) that was to be paid to each of his men.[101] The dacoities were usually committed during midnight. Before setting off for the dacoity members of the group assembled to perform 'kalipuja' (offering prayers to the goddess Kali), dressed as 'pykes' (guards of houses of notables), coloured their faces black, red or white to disguise their identity, let their hair down over their faces, tied clothes over their heads, armed themselves with lathies, swords, shields, muskets, pistols, 'kodaleees' (shovels), 'saungs' (instruments), 'mashals' (torches), bows and arrows and then at a propitious moment selected by the sirdar proceeded in an orderly manner to the establishment that was to be pillaged. The performance of the kalipuja involved an elaborate ritual. The dacoits would sit in a line; a 'bhar' (a small earthen pot) of oil or liquor, torches and all weapons would be put on a cloth or a clear space; the sirdar would then dip his finger into the oil or liquor as the case may be, and touch the forehead of each member of the group with a shout of "kali", making them promise never to confess. Upon the completion of this process the sirdar would break the bhar of oil or liquor and then all would rush to the establishment which had been chosen as the target. On one occasion the sirdar even dressed himself as a female.[102] The accused Sadhu Charan Deb narrated his own experience during the pre-raid preparation:

> I started off...and arrived...where the other dacoits were assembled, it was then about three hours after sunset – we stayed there for about an hour and ate and drank and smoked our hookas; after 9 o'clock we left the house...taking swords and shields... axes...sticks and...torches, we then proceeded in a southern direction till we came to a tank...it was then about 11 o' clock – we performed our devotions to kali, and smearing our faces we again started; at midnight we reached the house (that was to be raided).[103]

To "test the mettle of his men" a sirdar would often apply a burning chillum to the thigh of each, and only those who could "go through the trial without wincing" were admitted into the group.[104] In cases of river dacoities there were, however, no regular kalipuja.

The sirdar normally stood as a sentry during the raid, encouraging and giving directions to the group. While the new members of the group were made to hold torches or "act as coolies in taking away the property", the experienced ones broke open boxes, chests and plundered all they could. With cries of "Kali, jai Kali" the group would break the door of the establishment with axes, seek to execute the operation systematically and retire in an orderly manner.[105] During a raid the dacoits used nicknames to call each other. Each group used particular words to imply specific items: a 'koorool' with which doors were broken was called 'kopa' or 'boidee', a torch was called 'phool', oil was called 'ross', a gun was called 'bheel', 'kodalee' was called 'kopah', a lathie was called 'koda' and

a dacoit was called 'rungermanush'. Once the operation was completed the men in the group who carried the plunder proceeded first, whilst others followed and those who had acted as sentries – the strongest in the group – guarded the rear. Boats were sometimes used to transport the spoils. If someone in the group was severely wounded he was killed and his body thrown into a river or a pond. The average size of a dacoit group ranged between 10 and 50.[106]

Although houses and establishments of local notables like zamindars, mahajans, rich peasants and businessmen were the usual targets of the dacoits, there are also instances of ordinary villagers becoming their victims. Sreenath Haree thus remembered instances where the booty could be only one bundle of new cloth worth Rs 30, two brass utensils, two 'lotas' (tumblers) and two dishes.[107] When the house of a village blacksmith Gunga Ram Isur was raided the booty was only Rs 50 in cash and some ordinary clothes and utensils.[108] Another accused narrated how during a dacoity in the house of an ordinary Muslim in Hooghly his share of the plunder was only a copper 'handee' (utensil), which so frustrated him that he threw it into a pond.[109] Houses of "local women of bad character", who had amassed a fortune, were also ransacked.[110] Dacoities were usually organised in the area "only so far as can be compassed in one day's journey"[111] from the village where the sirdar resided. But when two or three sirdars became partners a dacoity was committed far away from the place to which the group belonged.[112] Such raids – usually on big establishments – bore evidence of efficient organisation. The confession of Babooram Bagdi before the dacoity commissioner testified to the dacoity committed in the house of the Raja of Tamluk by a group consisting of men from Calcutta, Chandannagore and Burdwan.[113] We have reference to Calcutta groups committing dacoities in 24-Pargunnahs, Howrah, Baraset, Hooghly, and Burdwan.[114] Since in such cases the people of the locality where dacoities were committed did not know the dacoit groups, it was difficult for the police to produce witness, and hence prosecutions against the accused usually fell through. The Calcutta group of dacoits had a pre-eminence of hackney drivers.[115]

Usually, the villagers did not resist the dacoits, but if there was any such intervention the dacoits avoided confrontations and left the spot.[116] There is hardly any recorded instance of a household member losing his or her life in the hands of the dacoits. If resisted, the dacoits would tie them up or keep them locked in a room while they ransacked the house. There were, however, some exceptions, as in the case cited by Sreenath Haree when some household members on account of their resistance were killed and buried.[117] Women as a rule were not subjected to any physical assault. An accused thus stated that they looked upon a woman as a kali who could be made to take off her ornaments but was never to be touched. Those who injured women were categorised as "not good dacoits". During a raid all kinds of things were taken away – clothes, utensils, cash and jewellery.

We learn from the depositions that the dacoits, especially their sirdars, believed in "favourable and unfavourable" omens.[118] For instance, if during the performance of the kalipuja the sirdar broke the bhar with one blow it was believed to be a good sign for the proposed raid. But if the bhar was broken with two or three blows then it was suspected that either the raid would be unsuccessful or the group would be "discovered" or something ominous would happen. In fact, in the Belpookur and Deopara cases the bhars could not be broken with one blow, and the raids not only failed, but many in the groups were captured. Again, if while proceeding for a dacoity the group saw on the right hand a young girl or a woman with a 'kalshi' (earthen pot) filled with water, or if a jackal passed from the right to the left, it was considered an auspicious sign. But if a lizard's sound was heard, or a bull bellowed, or anyone in the group sneezed, before a raid was embarked upon, it was believed to be inauspicious. Besides, while Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday were considered as "good days", Thursday and Saturday were believed to be "unlucky days".

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has hopefully demonstrated how some little used documents concerning a particular type of "crime" in colonial, rural Bengal may be used for addressing such issues as crime as a social phenomenon, the social profile of those committing the crime, typology of the crime, the rites of violence associated with the perpetration of that crime, and the contemporary attitudes to that crime. Karl Marx had perceptively remarked, "Crime, i e, the struggle of the single individual against the dominant conditions, is as little the product of simple caprice as the law itself. It is rather conditioned in the same way as the latter. The same 'visionaries' who see in law the rule of an independent and general will, see in crime a simple breaking of the law."[119]

Dacoity in colonial Bengal was certainly a form of social deviance. But, as the present submission has shown, the dacoits did not belong to identifiable ethnic categories whose traditional profession was dacoity. None other than the governor-general Warren Hastings himself acknowledged this as early as 1770s.[120] On the other hand, as has been indicated above, the spurt in the incidence of dacoity during the period under present consideration was casually related to the disruptive effects of colonial rule in rural Bengal. At the same time the rise in dacoities provided the colonial administration with a pretext for strengthening its instruments of control. Studies have shown how widespread fear following "the garrotting panic" in 19th century London presaged "a considerable extension of police powers, and, indeed, effectively silenced any lingering opposition within the middle class to the whole idea of an English police force".[121] It has also been demonstrated how the ruling authority in England labelled recalcitrant social groups as "outcastes" or "dangerous" as a strategy of cooption.[122] Studies need to be undertaken if such processes were at work in colonial Bengal in the context of "the dacoity fear". But that demands a separate enquiry. EPW

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Notes

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1 Girish Chandra Bose, *Sekaler Darogar Kahini* (in Bengali Calcutta: reprint 1983). English translation mine.

2 S M Edwards, *Crime In India: A Brief Review of the More Important Offences Included in the Annual Criminal Returns with Chapters on Prostitution and Miscellaneous Matters*, London, 1924, p 40.

3 See Appendix C in the Report by J R Ward, Commissioner for the

Suppression of *Dacoity* of January 31, 1856, p xvi, *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal, No XXVI, Reports on the Suppression of Dacoity in Bengal for 1855-56*, Calcutta Gazette Office, Calcutta, 1857/hereafter RSD 1855-56/; *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, No XXXI, Reports Relating To the Suppression of Dacoity in Bengal for 1856-57 and 1857-58*, General Printing Department, Calcutta, 1859/hereafter RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58/ Appendix K. The spellings of Indian names used in this article are as found in the two documents.

4 See the Introduction by G R Elton to J S Cockburn (eds), *Crime in England 1550-1800*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1977, p 1.

5 See for example Basudeb Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal 1770-1860*, K P Bagchi, Calcutta 2000; Arun Mukherjee, *Crime and Public Disorder in Colonial Bengal 1861-1912*, K P Bagchi, 1995. David Arnold has effectively demonstrated a correlation between dacoity and food prices at the all-India level. See his *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988. Also see Anand A Yang (ed), *Crime and Criminality in British India*, University of Arizona Press, Arizona, 1985 for an honest effort to sample research interests of some historians interested in the social history of crime.

6 See for example Ranjit Sen, *Social Banditry in Bengal: A Study in Primary Resistance 1757-1793*, Ratna Prakashan, Calcutta, 1988; Ranjan Chakrabarti, *Authority and Violence in Colonial Bengal 1800-1860*, Bookland, Calcutta, 1997.

7 A similar categorisation has also been made for west European bandits. See Florike Egmond, 'The Noble and the Ignoble Bandit: Changing Literary Representations of West European Robbers', *Ethnologia Europea*, XVII: 139-56.

8 Historical reconstructions of crime in England along these lines have already yielded fruits. See the section on Problems, sources and methods in J A Sharpe (ed), *Crime in Seventeenth-Century England: A County Study*, CUP, London and MSH, Paris, 1983.

9 Sir Cecil Walsh, *Indian Village Crimes With an Introduction on Police Investigation and Confession*, London, 1929, pp 10-11.

10 J R Ward, Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity, to A R Young, Offg Secy, to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, March 5, 1857, para 20, p 13, RSD 1855-56.

11 Terence Morris/Foreword by Hermann Mannheim, *The Criminal Area: A Study in Social Ecology*, Routeledge, London, 1966 ed.

12 This and other confessions of those accused for dacoities were made before W Riddell, Assistant General Superintendent. They were incorporated in a printed volume, a copy of which is available in the Library of the History Department of Calcutta University. Also see Serial Nos 8, 12, 14, 27 of the digitised versions of Selections from *The Records of The Government of Bengal* (Hereafter Selections). The particular confession of Sunath Haree was on January 17, 1845, see Selections, p 47.

13 Ibid, pp 65-66.

14 Ward to The Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 20, p 14, RSD 1855-56.

15 RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58, see Additional Session Judge's remarks on the trial of Obhorshee Bagdi, p xxxv; T E Ravenshaw, Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity to the Secy, Government of Bengal, Fort William, No 40, February 21, 1859, p 15; See confession of *Mahajan Sirdar*, Appendix F, p xli.

16 RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58 Ravenshaw to Commissioner of Circuit, No 44, February 4, 1859; Dy Magistrate for Suppression of Dacoity to Commissioner for Suppression of Dacoity, No 29, January 29, 1859.

17 Selections, pp 79, 81, 101, 123, 132, 157, 166.

18 Ravenshaw to Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 44, February 4, 1859, para 44, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.

19 Selections, p 101, confession of Gooroochuran Pan.

20 Selections, p 74, confession of Kanai Lohar.

21 Ibid, p 167, confession of Dhanu Mundul.

22 Ravenshaw to Commissioner of Cicuit, Burdwan Division, No 384, October 4, 1858, p xiii.

23 Selections, p 150, confession of Kalachand Khan.

24 Ibid, pp 102-03, 114.

25 Ibid, pp 1-27.

26 Ibid, pp 50, 59.
27 Ibid, p 1, confession of Ubdool Faqueer on November 25, 1843.
28 See H L Dampier, Offg Jt Magistrate to Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity, Hooghly, No 31, January 19, 1857, Appendix I, RSD 1855-56.
29 Ibid, p 3.
30 Ward to Young, No 35, March 5, 1857, para 43, p 23.
31 Selections, p 5.
32 Ibid, pp 18-19.
33 Ward to The Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Divison, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 7.
34 Ibid.
35 Ward to Young, No 35 of March 5, 1857, para 26, p 17.
36 Appendix A, paragraph 38 of Ward's note of February 4, 1857, p iii.
37 Selections, pp 18-19.
38 Ibid, p 9, confession of Gooroochura; confession of Khaibul Doss, p 116; Purshed Shenna thus confessed: "everybody knows they commit dacoity", p 20.
39 Ibid, pp 112, 124.
40 Ibid, p 123.
41 Ravenshaw to Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 384, October 4, 1858, pp xxii, xxiv, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.
42 See Appendix F, RSD, 1856-57 and 1857-58, pp xliv-xlvi.
43 Selections, p 87, confession of Sham Doss.
44 Selections, pp 1-27; 31, 58, 63, 67, 72, 83, 108, 109, 119, 124, 136, 160, 161, 162, 165.
45 Ibid, pp 22, 112, confession of Dholab Ghose.
46 Appendix F, RSD, 1856-57 and 1857-58.
47 Selections, p 100.
48 Ibid, p 35.
49 J R Ward, Commissioner For the Suppression of Dacoity to the Junior Secy, to the Government of Bengali, Fort William, No 18, January 12, 1857, RSD.
50 Selections, p 84. Also see pp 33, 52, 84.
51 Ibid, pp 47-48.
52 Ibid, p 90.
53 Ibid, see the confession of Sreenath Haree, p 35.
54 Ibid, p 49; there were instances of yearly monetary contracts between sirdars and local police station, see p 116.
55 Selections, p 90; Ward to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 23, p 16.
56 Selections, p 164, see the confession of Sadhu Charan Deb.
57 Ibid, pp 1-27.
58 *Sekaler Darogar Kahini,* pp 28-29.
59 Selections, p 77.
60 Appendix A, paragraph 38 of Ward's note of February 4, 1857, p 39.
61 Selections, p 116, see the confession of Khaibul Doss.
62 Ibid, p 18; also see p 59, the confession of Madhusudan Doss.
63 Ibid, p 88.
64 Ward to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 24, p 17.
65 Darogas of the time also admitted this fact. See *Sekaler Darogar Kahini*, p 18.
66 Selections, confession of Ubdool Faqueer on November 25, 1843 before W Riddell, p 11.
67 Ibid, p 12.
68 Ibid, pp 166-68.
69 See letter No 32 of February 19, 1956 from Offg Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, cited in RSD 1855-56.
70 J R Ward, Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity to A R Young, Offg Secy, to the Government of Bengal, Fort William, No 35, March 5, 1857, para 17, p 12.
71 Ravenshaw to Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 44, February 4, 1859, para 23, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.
72 Ward to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 29, p 14.
73 C H Keighly, Assistant General Supdt to J R Ward, Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoities, Hooghly, No 14, January 10, 1856, RSD 1855-56.
74 Ibid.
75 Ward to Young no 35, March 5, 1857, para 55, p 29.
76 Selections, confession of Kanai Lohar, p 76; Ward to Young, No 35, March 5, 1857, para 29, p 19.
77 Ward to Young, para 26.
78 Ibid, para 42, p 23.
79 See Sekaler Darogar Kahini, pp 9-10.
80 C H Keighly, Offg Dacoity Commissioner to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 43, February 12, 1858, pp 4-5.
81 Selections, p 75, confession of Kanai Lohar.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid, p 21, confession of Purshad Shenna.
84 Ward to Young No 35, March 5, 1857, para 35, p 21.
85 Selections, p 171.
86 Ibid, pp 9,11,12-14, 16, 26, 29,42, 47, 67-68, 71, 73, 75, 82, 84, 86-87, 89, 94-96, 100, 104-05, 121, 125, 127, 134, 136, 140, 144, 151, 155, 158, 162, 165, 170, 172, particularly see the confession of Ubdool Faqueer.
87 Ward to Young No 35, March 5, 1857, para 29, p 19.
88 Selections, p 59, confession by Modhusudun Doss.
89 Ibid, pp 60, 123.
90 Ibid, p 49.
91 Ibid, p 115, see the confession of Dholab Ghose.
92 Ibid, p 26, confession of Purshad Shenna on December 22, 1843.
93 Appendix F, p lviii, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.
94 Ibid, pp 2, 6.
95 Ibid, p 53, confession of Modhusudun Doss.
96 Ibid, pp 3-4.
97 Jam H Carey, 'Robbery and Dacoity in British India During 1600-1858', *Folklore*, No 6, Vol 13, 1972.
98 Selections, pp 32, 36-37,40, 42.
99 See the deposition of SheikhMolan Ooddeen, p 124.
100 Selections, p 121.
101 Selections, p 121. Usually after a raid the sirdar earned almost the double of what he spent for *khorakee* for the members of the group.
102 Ibid, p 124.
103 Ibid, p 161.
104 Ward to Young, No 35, March 5, 1857, para 46, p 25.
105 Selections, p 49.
106 Selections, p 91; RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58, Appendix F, pp lii, lvi.
107 Selections, pp 36-37.
108 Selections, pp 43-44.
109 Ravenshaw to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 384, October 4, 1858, p xxv, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.
110 Selections, pp 54-55.
111 Ibid, p 60.
112 Ibid.
113 Ravenshaw to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 384, October 4, 1858, pp xvii-xviii.
114 Ward to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 31, January 31, 1856, para 6.
115 J R Ward, Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 71, February 14, 1857, para 4, p 5, RSD 1855-56.
116 Selections, p 12; Ravenshaw to the Commissioner of Circuit, Burdwan Division, No 384, October 4, 1858, p xxiv, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58.
117 Selections, see the deposition of Sreenath Haree, p 46.
118 This is clear from perusal of RSD 1855-56, RSD 1856-57 and 1857-58 and confessions of the accused in Selections.
119 Quoted in Norman Alan Bowers, 'Crime, Punishment and the Mode of Production: An Exploratory Foray', University of Missouri – Columbia PhD thesis, 1975, p 417.
120 See Basudeb Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal 1770-1860.*
121 See Jennifer Davis, 'The London Garotting Panic of 1862: A Moral Panic and the Creation of a Criminal Class in mid-Victorian England' in V A C Gatrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker (eds), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500*, Europa Publications, London, 1980.
122 Ibid. As Foucault noted that "the prison manufactured delinquents but delinquents turned out to be useful". See Prison Talk: An Interview with Michel Foucault' by J J Brochier, *Radical Philosophy*, 16, Spring, 1977, p 10.