

Rebels of the Chambal Ravines: Post-Colonial Dacoits and their Encounter with the State

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Abstract: *The Chambal ravines, which run through Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, have long been seen as the center of Indian banditry. Dacoits prospered in this inhospitable terrain from pre-modern times to the colonial era, bolstered by socio-economic marginalization, agrarian distress, and caste identities. Banditry in Chambal changed from being a crime to a way for people to protest and get justice. In post-independence India, however, the continued existence of dacoity was a direct contradiction of the democratic state's ideals of order, legitimacy, and modern governance. This study examines the Indian state's response to Chambal banditry through coercion and persuasion, integrating police operations, village defense groups, and prominent surrender missions spearheaded by reformers such as Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan. During the post-colonial era, dacoit authority was initially upheld by violence and fear, but technological advancements, infrastructural development, and rural modernization gradually diminished their power. By the end of the twentieth century, the way of life of the dacoits seemed old-fashioned and not able to last, as the modern state grew stronger. This paper analyses Chambal's evolution from a bandit stronghold to a representation of the state's assertion of authority, positioning banditry at the nexus of culture, politics, and resistance.*

Keywords: , Banditry Chambal, Dacoits, Post-Independence, Surrender Violence etc.

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Introduction

Central India's Chambal region is mainly around the Chambal River, which flows across Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, along with its countless ravines. Since pre-modern times, this area had been infamous as a bandit-ridden region. Chambal's bandits rose to legendary status in the history of Indian banditry. However, the range of dacoits' operations, which had been continued since pre-modern times, started to decline in

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modern times as the state became more centralized and professional police and jails evolved from the colonial period. The presence of dacoits came into direct conflict with the ideology of the newly constituted democratic country after independence. Post-independence, the Indian government encouraged nation-building, stability, and the idea of the modern state, where dacoits were deemed total outlaws. The local legitimacy and tolerance of banditry ran contrary to the Indian state's ideology and policies. The government acknowledged dacoity in the Chambal area as a serious trouble against the state's authority, and requiring elimination. This study will examine the post-colonial Indian state's response to the pre-modern phenomenon of banditry in the Chambal region to assert governmental authority, and how banditry became an antiquated practice due to technological progress and social modernization.

Banditry as a Part of Chambal Life

Banditry has been a part of Chambal's society and culture since pre-modern times. In the eighteenth century, the Chambal and nearby region witnessed unhindered lawlessness, making the area hazardous for its residents—the absence of central power paved the way for expanding dacoit bands. Marathas, Pathans, Pindaris, Thugees, and others thrived in this land, sustaining themselves through looting and plundering. The British during the colonial keenly identified and tussled with the existing crisis. However, the existing prerequisites of this region further facilitated the banditry problem. The Rajputs' martial ethos, socio-economic complexities, a terrain unsuitable for agriculture, and soil erosion in the ravines birthed a banditry culture in the region.

Gradually, banditry evolved beyond mere criminality and posed challenges to the administration as it transformed into a mode of protest for the unprivileged section of agrarian society, during the colonial era. Bandit figures like Banjara Singh and Sultana are rising to iconic status among the marginalized rural population. Simultaneously, esteemed land-holding caste groups such as Rajput and Brahmins sank into deprivation because of the land dispossession during the colonial time, giving rise to bandit groups that aligned themselves with their caste identities. Martial Rajput were at the forefront of this transformative situation; with their enduring military culture, they orchestrated gangs, and engaged in acts of plunder. The rural areas in Bundelkhand became a dacoit-intensified area, orchestrated by Bundela Thakurs. Despite government efforts, figures like Dhiraj Singh

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Bundela, Nahar Singh, Dulla, and Balwanta remained active in the colonial period. Later a surge of dacoit gangs occurred, Lachhman Lodha, Maniram, Gokula Lodhi, Arjun Singh Gosain, and others left their mark in the Doab region before the 1960s.¹

In rural India, banditry remained connected with the class consciousness and the pursuit of justice. The state frequently failed to protect people experiencing poverty from the tyranny of the authoritarian land-owning class. Poverty, heightened by rural starvation, famines, and droughts, compounded the difficulty of the underprivileged. Against this backdrop, social banditry emerged, a young man from a peasant milieu emerged as a social bandit—a heroic outlaw. Rejecting the role assigned by poverty, he sought liberation, using his bravery as a bandit to bring justice.² Social banditry surfaced as the ultimate form of self-defense within peasant communities in times of heightened tension and upheaval. Their class-conflict-infused robberies mainly targeted the adversaries of people with low incomes—moneylenders and exploiters in rural society. They robbed the wealthy and channeled generosity to needy people, skillfully evading the law for an extended period with the sympathy and support of the unprivileged rural people.

One such formidable figure in the colonial period was Banjara Singh, who once waged ruthless depredation against the wealthy in the region between the Jamuna and Chambal rivers. Pitiless toward the wealthy and compassionate toward the poor, Banjara Singh's trajectory, as exemplified by Ranajit Guha, typified the journey of young peasants driven by poverty to embrace the profession of dacoity, emerging as rivals to the rich. Banjara was born to an impoverished peasant family.³ Another colonial-time bandit was Sultana, in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, who earned the title 'Indian Robinhood.' The colonial state captured him with his family, and he rebelled against unjust imprisonment. Upon escape, he formed a bandit gang, becoming a champion for the impoverished, never robbing them and always offering charity. His actions earned him God-like standing among villagers, and his large follower groups helped him elude the authorities.

Until the colonial regime, the fury of banditry disturbed the peace of the imperial government. After independence, banditry took its position against the independent Indian state, thus against the patriotic sentiment. At the same time, their popularity among the rural marginalized sections gradually started to decline. People in the Chambal region adored dacoit Man Singh, who lived in the middle of the twentieth century, more than any of his successors. After independence, dacoit leaders like Lakhan Singh, Madho Singh, Chhabiram, and Malkhan Singh, and others achieved popularity, but their influence over the people

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decreased compared to Man Singh.⁴ After Man Singh, a generation of small dacoit bands began to emerge,⁵ those who adopted the tactics of fear and terror as an alternative conduit for authority over the subject population of their locality, which manifested as the degeneration of moral values among the dacoits.

Violence as a Mechanism of Power: The Dacoits

Banditry has been a part of the social and cultural fabric of the Chambal region since before modern times. As a result, the end of the bandits' predatory rule and the rise of trust in the authority of the modern state were decades-long stories of socio-cultural transformation in the post-colonial era. The Chambal area remained in social backwardness, with an inclination towards the gun culture. A 1982 study shows that farmers were inclined to deal with their land in exchange for firearms in the Bhind-Morena district.⁶ On the other hand, dacoits garnered respect and admiration in their local society. Their family members experienced esteemed respect within their rural culture, and their progeny entered into marital unions with affluent families of their society. In the post-colonial period, dacoits secured votes for politicians in exchange for protection. Even the local youth considered them inspirations, captivated by their charisma.⁷ People in the Chambal area thought that the end of the Dacoity Raj was impossible and that banditry would always be a part of life in the area. Journalist Taroon Koomer Bhaduri's experiences are an example of this. When Bhaduri went to find out how the villagers were reacting after the dacoit Chhabiram was killed, he heard an older man say that they thought that even though one Chhabiram had died, another Chhabiram would soon come out of the village.⁸

However, Chambal bandits of the post-colonial era adopted the path of inflicting violence and fear to maintain control over their territory. They employed intimidation to dissuade villagers from supporting law enforcement in the post-colonial period. Mr Bhaduri wrote in his book, 'Abhisapta Chambal', in December 1960, he had asked some village headmen about the interplay between the police and dacoits in their locality. They responded by expressing their dilemma, "*Saheb kya bataye hamari musibat, batao toh Daku maarte hain, aur nahi batao toh policewale maarte hain*" (If they informed police about the activities of the dacoits, then dacoits beat them, or if they remained silent, then policemen beat them).⁹

Bandits of Chambal reacted violently against police interference in their territories and activities. In the early post-independence era, the dacoit king of the Chambal, Man Singh

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exhibited cruelty towards those who dared to cross his path. The arrest of his son stirred Man Singh to exact severe retribution on the police personnel who apprehend his son and police informant Jagganath Singh. Man Singh kidnapped the police officer who had arrested his son from the police station in Bhadora, Mathura and killed him. Besides, Man Singh evaded government safeguards, subjecting Jagganath Singh to a brutal death – gouging out his eyes, severing both hands and dismembering his flesh. On another occasion, Man Singh went further, eliminating forty individuals one by one to eliminate potential witnesses against his son in court.¹⁰

The dacoit leaders perceived the punishment of betrayal (or informing the police) was only death for the members of their gang, like the fate of Hariya in Man Singh's disciple bandit Rupa's gang. Hariya supplied crucial information about Rupa's movements to the police of Bhind. Later, despite police protection, when Hariya ventures towards his village, Rupa blocks him, orchestrating a brutal killing.¹¹ In another case, the Madhya Pradesh police strategically positioned an informant, Fauzdar Singh, in Lakhan Singh's gang. Collaborating with Fauzdar Singh, law enforcement orchestrated a tactical assault on Lakhan Singh's gang in the vicinity of Nagara, near Lakhan's village. While Lakhan was stunned by the surprise attack, he sensed the alarming truth—that an insider had betrayed him by divulging crucial information about his whereabouts. Lakhan summoned his cohorts to assemble in a disciplined queue. In a display of instinctive prowess, Lakhan successfully identified Fauzdar Singh as the treacherous informant, unhesitatingly killing him in a single, decisive shot.¹²

Thus, in the Chambal area, banditry was a normal part of life, and they set up predatory rule by ignoring the government. The Indian government had to fight for decades to put an end to it. However, to eliminate banditry, the post-colonial state, on one side, urged law enforcement to repress the dacoits rigorously. Conversely, at the community level, the state urged society to persuade bandits to surrender and advocated for people to establish defensive forces against them.

Police Courage in Resisting Banditry

Over the preceding decades, after independence, the law enforcement agencies in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan valiantly confronted notorious dacoit gangs that wielded significant influence over the socio-political fabric of these regions. The

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compiled data on Crime in India by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) illuminates that while the incidence of dacoity constituted a relatively small fraction of overall criminal activities in the early decades of post-independence era, a considerable number of police officers made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives during their endeavors to suppress banditry. The 1955 Crime in India report highlights that Uttar Pradesh, with 14 casualties, Madhya Bharat, with 8, and Rajasthan, with 6, witnessed anti-dacoity operations as the primary reason for the highest number of police deaths.¹³ The proportion of dacoity in the spectrum of total criminal activities fluctuated between 0.6% and 1% from 1966 to 1970.¹⁴ Yet, it exacted a heavier toll on the lives of law enforcement personnel than any other criminal category. In 1967, a total of 137 policemen lost their lives on duty, and notably, 22 of them (16.05%) perished during operations against dacoits.¹⁵ Similarly, in 1968, out of the 100 policemen who met their demise on duty, 18 (18%) were casualties of dacoity operations.¹⁶ However, the Indian police force witnessed an enhancement in their operational capabilities from the late '50s against the bandits. Eliminating notorious dacoits like Man Singh, Rupa, and Lakhan Singh provided a morale boost to the police force. As per the 1958 Crime in India report, proactive patrolling, and the strategic deployment of wireless communication in affected regions strengthened the police's efficacy in combating dacoits.¹⁷

Profound sacrifices of police officers and relentless battles against dacoits gradually seized the upper hand in the '80s. Notably, in 1979, accounting for the highest casualties of police personnel on duty during the operations against the dacoits, compared with other encounters of police against criminals, around 17 per cent of all police fatalities occurred during confrontations with dacoits.¹⁸ During the 1980s, the conflict between the police and dacoits persisted. Law enforcement began to gain the upper hand over the dacoits. Police continued relentless campaigns against dacoits until the terror inflicted by traditional bandits waned. In the '90s, the severity of dacoity operations decreased, resulting in a decline in police casualties. In 1994, dacoity operations constituted only 4 per cent of on-duty police fatalities, and by 1995, this figure, combining anti-dacoity operations and border duties, stood at 4.8 per cent.¹⁹

However, it was crucial to bring about a psychological change in the local people, besides the desperate efforts of the police against dacoity, to establish the state's power against dacoits. Since the dacoits exerted substantial influence over the local culture of the Chambal region, it was necessary for a transformative shift in the populace's mindset.

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Government took initiative to alter the public mentality towards banditry through encouraging the formation of village defense force, and persuading dacoits to surrender.

Village Defense Groups and Surrender Missions

During the period after independence, the state encouraged the solidarity of villagers to fight against the bandit gangs, since village police were not fully capable to resist bandits. Village Defense Committees' formation played an effective role in countering the menace posed by bandit gangs. The 1954 Crime in India report highlighted instances where dacoits were apprehended red-handedly by Village Defense Committees, collaborating with police.²⁰ The success of the Village Defense Committee represented the installation of an anti-bandit mentality among the populace, which was greatly encouraged by the state of the period. In 1958, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, K. N. Katju, praised the role of the Village Defense Committee in controlling banditry in the Bhind and Morena districts, and he sought to expand these Village Defense Committee in other parts of the state.²¹

Besides, during the early decades of post-colonial history, a transformative movement emerged in the dacoit-ridden areas of the Chambal to change the psyche of the bandits and convince them to surrender for the betterment of their families and progeny. Influential national figures like Dr Sushila Nayar, former Army Secretary President Yadunath Singh, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan launched missions to influence the dacoits to surrender before the law and assure them of sympathetic treatment from law enforcement. In 1960, Bhave set out on a mission in the dacoit-infested villages of the Chambal. He aimed to transmute their disobedience into kindness. Bhave mandated justice for them so that he claimed to view them with mercy.²² In response to Bhave's appeal, around twenty dacoits surrendered, escorting him from village to village and sharing police jeeps during the mission. Several communities mobilized support for the families of these dacoits, constructing ashrams for the families of the deceased dacoits.²³ Jayaprakash Narayan took forward this dacoit surrender mission in the 1970s.

However, the key concern was the future of dacoit families, which motivated the success of several surrender missions of the period. The Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Mr. P. C. Sethi, stated in a press conference in 1972 that dacoits mainly set two conditions for surrender: one was the exemption from a death sentence, and the other demand was to settle

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their families and assurance of the Government for look after their families.²⁴ The question about the fate of the dacoits' progeny after their infamous parents' demise or capture remained a critical social issue of the period, and the dacoit families suffered from the crisis.

Conclusion

However, due to the relentless fight against the bandits, social messaging and advancement of communication, technological progress, and rural urbanization, the capacity of bandits declined over time in maintaining a grip of threat over the villagers. Their perpetual existence stayed in hiding from the eyes of the police; they resided in seclusion, without entertainment and technological conveniences, living without electricity.²⁵ Mohar Singh, a dacoit who surrendered in 1972 before Jayaprakash Narayan, confessed in 1982, "*In my old days, I dreaded the sight of an electric bulb; we led a hard, hazardous and uncertain life, wandering in the deserted land.*"²⁶ Exhausted by the monotonous lifestyle, some chose to surrender before the state, attempting to reintegrate into mainstream society. Even within their clandestine hideouts, peace eluded them. Mannan Akhtar, the former District Magistrate of Jalaun, Uttar Pradesh, articulated in an interview that the improved road connectivity in the Chambal's dacoit-infested areas empowered law enforcement to suppress the dacoits.²⁷ Unlike other professional criminals of contemporary times, Chambal dacoits found themselves in a hazardous position. They experienced a lack of financial opportunities for investment, contrasting with the self-sufficiency other criminal enterprises enjoyed. So, by the end of the 20th century, the Chambal dacoits' primitive way of life was no longer challenging in the face of the modern state system. They could no longer threaten state authority like they used to.

Notes and References

¹ The historical background of Chambal dacoits during the colonial period has taken from Hukum C. Jain's Ph.D. thesis; Jain, Hukum C, *Nature and Bases of Dacoity System with Special Reference to Dacoits Infested Regions of Uttar Pradesh*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Bundelkhand University, 1984, pp- 209-220.

² Eric Hobsbawm conceptualized the social banditry in peasant society. For conceptualizing the idea of social banditry, see, Hobsbawm, Eric, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963; and Hobsbawm, Eric, *Bandits*, New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969.

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³ For discussing the role of Indian dacoits, like Sultana, and Banjara Singh as social bandits (Indian Robinhood) or as a form of peasant protest, see, Guha, Ranajit, *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*, London: Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 79-108.

⁴ Through his writings, Journalist, Taroon K. Bhaduri expressed the opinion that after Man Singh, dacoit leaders and their groups could not rise to the same level of popularity. See, Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Abhisapta Chambal*, Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 2012; and Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Behar Baghi Banduk*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2023.

⁵ Mr Bhaduri introduced his readers to the next generations of Chambal bandits after Man Singh and delineated the changes in their nature. See, Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Abhisapta Chambal*, Kolkata: New Age Publishers, 2012, p. 41.

⁶ Mr Agnihotri discussed about the inclination of the villagers towards life of banditry. See, Agnihotri, Ram Bharose L, *Sarvodaya Concept of Crime and Punishment Surrender of Chambal Valley Dacoits*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Kanpur University, 1982, pp. 164-165.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ After Chhabiram's death, while speaking with an elderly man from his village about Chhabiram's demise, the elderly man made the following remark to Mr Bhaduri. See, Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Behar Baghi Banduk*, Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2023, p. 159.

⁹ Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Abhisapta Chambal*, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

¹² Bhaduri has delineated the ability of Lakhan Singh in searching informers who assist the police. See, *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

¹³ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1955*. Casualties Among the Police. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1956.

¹⁴ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1970*. Percentage Distribution of Crime under Important Heads during 1966-1970 in India. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1971.

¹⁵ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1967*. Casualties Among the Police. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1968.

¹⁶ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1968*. Casualties Among the Police. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1969.

¹⁷ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1958*. Survey of Crime. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. 1959.

¹⁸ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1979*. Chapter 11, Police Personnel Killed or Injured on Duty. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1980.

¹⁹ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1994*. Chapter 14, Police Personnel Killed and Injured on Duty. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1995.

²⁰ National Crime Records Bureau. *Crime in India: 1954*. General Situation in the Country. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 1955.

²¹ "Village Defence Committees: Role Commended by Dr. Katju." *Times of India*, 22 March 1958, p. 9.

²² Mr Bhaduri described in his work the initiation and nature of Vinoba Bhave's mission for surrendering the Chambal bandits. See, Bhaduri, Taroon K, *Abhisapta Chambal*, pp. 128 – 142.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁴ "Chambal Dacoit Gangs Want to Surrender." *Times of India*, 3 March 1972, p. 9.

²⁵ Vittal, Balaji, *Pure Evil: The Bad Men of Bollywood*, Noida: HarperCollins, 2021, p. 137.

²⁶ The experience of the post-surrender life of Mohar Singh has been discussed in the fifth chapter, Manifestation of Problem in Real Life, in Mr Agnihotri's Ph.D. thesis. See, Agnihotri, Ram Bharose L, *Sarvodaya Concept of Crime and Punishment Surrender of Chambal Valley Dacoits*, Kanpur University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1982, pp. 213-214.

²⁷ According to Mr Akhtar, the road connectivity has improved a lot in the area of Bundelkhand, Chambal region in last few years that make the region more open towards the outer world and ultimately hindered the

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