



Crime in the Princely State of Cooch Behar: A Historical Outline of Dacoity Cases

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ABSTRACT

Crime has been a regular occurrence in a country like India since very early times. It has continued up to the present time, but the nature and pattern of crime has changed now. However, in the case of Princely states like Cooch Behar that has happened. In colonial India, Princely states like Cooch Behar did not except one. In the state of Cooch Behar, there was crime-like *dacoity* cases happened more or less every year. Crime reports of Cooch Behar state shows about the scenario of *dacoity* cases within the state. The *dacoity* cases of Cooch Behar which has mentioned various types, but the nature of these cases was almost similar. These *dacoity* cases were enquired by the police if complaints lounged to the police stations. However, in this paper, the main intention of the researcher is to find out the historical outline of the *dacoity* cases in the Princely state of Cooch Behar.

Keywords: Dacoity, Cases, Cooch Behar, Police, *Sannaysi Dacoits*.

Literature Review

Basudeb Chattopadhyaya in his book “*Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal 1770-1860*”, chronologically delineated the interfaces between crime and control in colonial Bengal. He demonstrates that the importance of the invention lies not merely in its narrow application to crime and violence. The *thanas* (police stations) were designed to serve the front-line defence against forces of disorder that threatened

to undermine the authority of the company in its new role as the *Sarkar Bahadur* (the ruler).

Sumanta Banerjee in his book “*Wicked City: Crimes and Punishment in Colonial Calcutta*”, explains that the Wicked City unravels a fascinating panorama of crime in the colonial metropolis over two centuries. It began in the eighteenth century when Governor Warren Hastings plotted his revenge against the British East India Company.

“*Terror, Crime and Punishment: Order and Disorder in Early Colonial Bengal 1800-1860*” by Ranjan Chakrabarti and Sanhita Sen describes how British colonial rulers used courts, prisons, and the police as weapons of social and political control to prevent public disorder and exploit rural surpluses.

Arun Mukherjee in his book “*Crime and Public Disorder in Colonial Bengal: 1861-1912*” mentioned different types of crimes and colonial Bengal was widespread turmoil. The author wanted to highlight various forms of crime which were occurred; in colonial Bengal and the disorder in particular.

H.N. Chaudhuri in the book “*The Cooch Behar State and its land revenue settlement*” narrated the land revenue system of Cooch Behar State under Princely rule and its various reforms which are related to its land and sometimes the peoples of that region and little administration of that present time.

These books are reviewed by me, and the author points out their perspective on crime, particularly its various nature but I found that no one highlighted the *dacoity* cases in Cooch Behar directly or indirectly.

Research Methodology and Results

This article has followed the method which is both explanatory and narrative. In my discussion regarding *dacoity* cases of Cooch Behar, I have used the data extracted from government records. The primary data has been collected from the government documents which were kept in the West Bengal State Archives in Kolkata, North Bengal State Library, Cooch Behar and National Library, Kolkata. To prepare this work I have used and consulted the relevant documents of Police records, and also general proceedings from the princely State respectively. For the preparation of this work, I would like to be too dependent on the official reports of the two states and also contemporary data both indigenous and colonial sources. However, apart from that, some secondary sources are from different books and journals. The names of places such as Kuch Bihar have been spelt according to their official spelling. For convenience, the original spelling has been retained

in the reference section. Non-English words have been given in Italics forms.

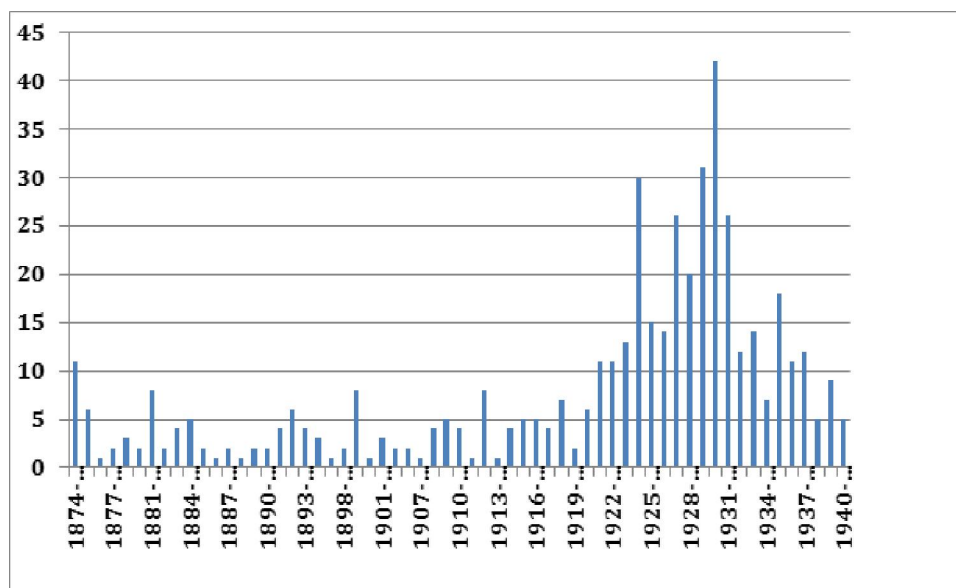
From this research paper, I found that *dacoities* were the crime cases that occurred in the Princely states of Cooch Behar throughout the years more or less. And it is evident from the records from the official that *dacoity* cases were a more or less regular occurrence in the state of Cooch Behar. These *dacoities* were one of the major crimes in the colonial period, particularly in the Princely State of Cooch Behar.

Introduction

Within the Indian subcontinent, the term “banditry” is replaced by “*dacoity*”. The Hindi word “*daaku*” is spelled with the informal Indian English phrase “*dacoit*,” which has this meaning (Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, 1903) Banditry is the term for robberies carried out by armed groups of bandits. The East India Company established the Thuggee and *Dacoity* Department in 1830, and the Thuggee and *Dacoity* Suppression Acts ruled British India from 1836 until 1848. *Dacoity* instances were more or less constant in Cooch Behar State.

The number of *dacoity* instances in the state is shown in the figure below.

Chart
Statement of *dacoity* cases in Cooch Behar State, 1875-1940



Sources: The Annual Administration Report of the Department of General Administration and Criminal Justice of the Cooch Behar State for the relevant years, Cooch Behar: Cooch Behar State Press.

We may get a sense of the number of *dacoity* crime cases in the State of Cooch Behar from the numbers above. It seems that offences such as *dacoities* were reported to the police department and documented annually. Every year, the number of *dacoities* varied. In the years 1930–1931, the maximum number of *dacoities* was 42. There has been at least one *dacoity* overall in every other year. Additionally, *dacoity* changed over time. Nonetheless, administrative records make one thing very evident: crimes such as *dacoity* were virtually always committed once a year in the state of Cooch Behar. Thus, it is evident that *dacoity* was commonplace. However, fewer occurrences were seen again in some years as a consequence of the administration's supervision, particularly following Police patrols. A few *dacoity* case examples are described in greater depth below for your better understanding.

Frequent prey for Cooch Behar State and the neighbouring districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur were the *dacoits*, whose leaders included Bhabani Pathak, Devi Chaudhurani, Majnu Saha, and others who have earned historic infamy.¹ Powerful individuals had no qualms about surreptitiously arming robbers. To eradicate evil, the Company laboured ceaselessly and persistently. At the beginning of 1773 A.D., Captain Thomas was killed while pursuing a party of *dacoits* at Rangpur consisting of three thousand *Sannyasis* and *Fakirs*. The Court of Directors ordered soldiers to be stationed at several sites in response to this occurrence; this measure offered some temporary respite but did not permanently resolve the situation. In 1782 AD, 700 *dacoits'* remains were dispersed.² They had camels, horses, and elephants, and they were well-equipped. Lieutenant Macdonald, who had been sent to deal with them, divided them up; some ran into the hills to the north, while the others went southeast into Mymensingh. In 1786 A.D., the troops of the Company marched again from Berhampore to Rungpore to put an end to the activities of *Sannaysi dacoits*. In 1787 A.D., Lieutenant Brenan took part in the battle against *dacoits*. Despite this continuous struggle that lasted more than two years, it took longer to remove the *Sannyasis* and *Fakirs*, some of them were openly committing dacoities in 1789 A.D.³ Smaller groups of *Sannayasis* founded *Akhras* and opted to be involved in the company.

One group of *Sannyasi dacoits* from Nepal took shelter in the dense forest of Baikunthapur in the Jalpaiguri district. They seemed to raid Cooch Behar after that. Two *thanas*, or police stations, were established at Dimla and Baikunthapur by the Collector of Rangpur since the Maharaj's officers were unable to keep them under control. In 1794 A.D., the Commissioner of Cooch Behar, Mr Bruce, asked the King of

Nepal to maintain control over a band of Nepali *dacoits* inside his domain.⁴ This could not be an easy task, considering that these criminals had a base in the Himalayan fort in the forests. The *Sannyasi dacoits* had no spouses or children and travelled across countries under the guise of pilgrims. Usually, they had very little on. They were accomplished in their field, brave, and some even had strong financial acumen. They gained strength by capturing strong boys. The locals refused to divulge their whereabouts and bestowed upon them attributes that bordered on divinity. The Company was compelled by these forces to devise severe plans for its annihilation.

Based on the data of 1865–1866, it seems that twelve *dacoities* happened in the state of Cooch Behar. Apart from that, however, there were sixteen incidents of *dacoity* from 1867 to 1868 and fourteen cases from 1868 to 1869.

In 1870–1871, there were five instances of *dacoity* as opposed to seven in 1869–1870. In 1874–1875, a year marked by famine, eleven crimes were committed, indicating that, on the whole, people were not motivated to crime out of despair.⁵ Cooch Behar's unique geographic location gave it the perfect place for the *dacoity* offence. Due to Koch Bihar's ideal position, *dacoits* from the Rangpur and Jalpaiguri regions may easily commit crimes there and then flee into these enclaves to avoid being immediately captured. In a similar vein, inhabitants of Koch Bihar who would flee there after committing a crime found easy refuge in these enclaves. The *Sannyasis* took up residence and dug dens in the Raikat region of Baikunthapur and the Koch Bihar enclaves in the Rangpur district.⁶

Three occurrences of *dacoity* were reported to the police in 1879. *Dacoity* happened in isolated parts of Mathabhanga, as well as in Dinahata and other places. The first instance happened in the Cooch Behar state's Mathabhanga area. On August 26, 1879, a report was filed at the Mathabhanga Police Station following the incident. Joy Nath Manjee's home had been the scene of a *dacoity*. Joy Nath Manjee himself alleged in his complaint that his property, which was worth Rs. 12–8, had been taken. The police looked into the situation as a result. Following the case investigation, four people were taken into custody and put on trial. Though not overwhelming, the evidence against them was highly dubious. The *Naib Ahilkar* of Mathabhanga released them in this regard.⁷ The Mekhliganj region was the source of another case. On March 28, of that same year, Sheeb Prosad Shing reported to the police that a *dacoity* had been perpetrated in his home. He added that anything worth roughly Rs. 50 had been taken. The Police looked into the situation at the end of the year after the complaint was filed. Dinahata

Sub Division accounted for the third case. On March 31, a dacoity was perpetrated in the home of Gyan Das of Picknidhara in the Dinhata region. Property worth Rs. 495-9, according to Gyan Das, was taken. The police looked into the situation as a result.⁸

A group of men stole from Boodhroo Das's home, worth approximately Rs. 236-9, after committing a *dacoity*. After being detained by the police, fourteen *dacoits* were forwarded to Mekhligunj's *Naib Ahilkar*, who conducted the preliminary inquiry. Three males were dismissed by the *Naib Ahilkar* due to insufficient evidence, while eleven men were brought before the Sessions based on the testimony of an approver named Kishen Deb. The Session Court acquitted one, and Section 395 of the Indian Penal Code sentenced seven to two years in solitary incarceration.⁹ In a different instance, a man named Najootoola from Teldhar said that something was stolen from his home, valued at roughly Rs. 75. The police reported the case on form C as true as they were unable to locate the offenders. There was another dacoity in Mekhligunj. A man named Hemotoolla reported to the Mekhligunj Police Station that his house was the scene of a *dacoity* and that his belongings, valued at Rs. 56, had been plundered. At the close of the year, the Police had this matter under investigation.¹⁰

In Kashee Das of Kalpanee's home, another *dacoity* was committed, resulting in the theft of valuables valued at Rs. 93-2-3. Seven of the perpetrators from that incident were detained and taken to court by the police. Following that death, five people were sent to the Sessions, but *Naib Ahilkar* released Babu Kedar Nath Mookherjee from his leadership preliminary inquiry since there wasn't enough evidence against him.¹¹ The second case was from the Mathabhanga area. A complaint had been lodged to the Police of Mathabhanga by Boodoolya Noshyo of Borakholsamari regions that a *dacoity* had taken place in his house and this regard property valued at 508-6 had been carried off.¹² The Police then detained sixteen guys on suspicion of being criminals and put them on trial. A preliminary inquiry was conducted under the direction of *Naib Ahilkar* of Mathabhanga, who dismissed three individuals for lack of adequate proof. Eleven were committed to the Sessions, and two were declared State witnesses with the Deputy Commissioner's approval.

Four occurrences of *dacoity* were documented in 1885; further cases were discovered in the reports from that year. One of them was discovered to be untrue after the investigation was finished, and the reports covered the other three cases in great detail. Shahanatoolah of Burabari, Mathabhanga, saw a *dacoity* in his home and reported it to the police.¹³ Consequently, the Police brought up 12 men for trial in

this case. However, there was insufficient evidence to convict them, and as a result, the accused was the rightful owner of the recovered property. All of them were released by the *Naib Ahilkar* of Mathabhanga because of inadequate proof.¹⁴ The Haldibari case was the second one. Nundiram Das of Hudumdangah, in the Haldibari region, had committed a *dacoity* at his home. He alleged that goods worth Rs. 102.2 had been looted in a police complaint that he filed. Following a police investigation in this respect, four individuals were taken into custody and subsequently scheduled for trial. The reason for their discharge was inadequate evidence.¹⁵ From Mekhligunj came the third case. Panmahmud Nassay of Dahola Khagrabari reported to the police that something inappropriate had happened in his home. There had been a theft of items worth Rs. 4 in this event. The Mekhligunj sub-divisional officer has two persons on trial after establishing an inquiry.¹⁶

Six occurrences of *dacoity* were reported in 1893; of these, two were reported as true and four were actually from the year before. The aforementioned cases were thoroughly examined. In the Dinhata subdivision's village of Nagarer Bari, a house *dacoity* was committed. The owner of the home, Kakur Das Adhikari, stated that the property was valued at Rs. 717 and hauled off. There had been another case from the Mekhligunj region. On February 19th, a group of males in their 40s to 50s broke into Rajkumar Sing's Mekhligunj home. The report states that the men stole several valuables and cash worth Rs. 23,799 from the residence.¹⁷ It was only 1.5 km from Mekhligunj to the location of that *dacoity*. The *dacoits* had already departed the complaint's residence when the Inspector and Sub Inspector arrived because the police had not received the information promptly.¹⁸ But it seems that two constables, fully equipped with guns and ammo, had shown up just as the robbers were running away, too scared to shoot. It probably would have been followed by the item's recovery and the case's discovery. As a result of their stupidity and cowardice, the two constables in question have been suspended for six months. With the assistance of Sub-Inspectors Bhagabati Charan Chuckerbutty, Muktaruddin, and Head Constables Wasubuddin and Naziruddin, Inspector Jati Nath Chatterjee looked into the case.¹⁹

Cited four instances of *dacoity* in the state in 1894. The examples are presented in a very condensed form. The Dinhata region accounted for the first instance. At the home of Lalatu Nashya in the Dinhata Sub Division's Atiabari village, a *dacoity* was committed. The report claims that *dacoits* stole a piece of property worth Rs. 179. Police reported the case as factual. The Dinhata sub-division was also involved in another case. In the Dinhata subdivision's Nagarerbari village, Manglu Das's

home was the scene of a *dacoity*.²⁰ A property valued at Rs. 324 was taken in this event. The police seized some property and approximately Rs. 86, and ten guys were brought up for prosecution. Under the direction of *Naib Ahilkar* and the committed offender to the Court of Session, a preliminary investigation was carried out. Following the session court, all were found guilty; two were given sentences of nine years each, while the remaining individuals were given sentences of seven years of hard labour. A *dacoity* happened that same evening in the village of Kuktikata, which is located roughly nine miles northwest of the Mathabhanga Station. About sixty members made up the *dacoit* group, who broke into Haramohan Das's home and stole valuables valued at Rs. 321. The same gang then shows up at the neighbouring residence after that incident. A juvenile named Indra Narain Das was the neighbour, and the group stole some jewellery worth Rs. 8321.²¹

According to Cooch Behar's reports from 1903, there were two cases that year. However, it omitted information regarding specific cases from the report. One case was found to be true, while another was rejected based on section 203 of the Criminal Procedure Code. The report states that there was only one incidence documented in that particular year. However, there was no comprehensive discussion of the occurrence.²²

Conclusion

Aside from the Cooch Behar case study mentioned above, it appears that *dacoity* cases were common in the Princely states in the past and remained so. The aforementioned case study and discussion discussed numerous instances of *dacoity* in various Cooch Behar State regions. These *dacoity* occurrences occurred rather often throughout the state. Thus, it is evident from the explanation above that the many *dacoity* occurrences that occurred at the time were extremely serious offences in the state of Cooch Behar.

Acknowledgement

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reference portion, the original spelling of the same has been retained for convenience. Non-English words have been given in Italics forms.

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