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## The Marauders from the Jungle: Tracing the Historical Marginalisation of the Jungles

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### ABSTRACT

A colossal part of 18th and 19th-century legends of rural Bengal was dominated by tales of the infamous Dacoits and their several exploits. Even our immense treasure of classical literature and sastras have also not left out studies on dacoits and robbers, capturing their fantasies over the 'art of stealing', and corroborating them with a blend of reality, within codices of ethics. In contrast, there has been some sort of lack of non-fictional literature about dacoits and their way of living. Despite the endeavours of the contemporary rulers to grasp a certain amount of control over the dacoits, few records have been kept in regards to the object of this entire journey, that is the dacoits, as if they'd been subtly erased from the surface of history, with some amount of remains within oral folklores and only their patron-deity temples reminiscent of their existence and exploits. Therefore, despite being fictional, it's mostly popular literature that serves as an archive for acquiring more information on the social conditions within which the dacoity groups spread their dominion. A careful reading of the fictional fantasies leads to the observation that dacoits, previously ascribed as '*jungles*', mostly if not always, emerge from and retreat to the jungles, often interpreted to be the margin yet not the end of civilization. This paper, therefore, attempts to trace the contexts within which the dacoity groups and communities have been historically categorized and subjected to the margins of civilization.

### KEYWORDS

Dacoits, Jungle, Jungles, Criminal Tribes, Marginalisation, Wildness

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*“But if I don’t leave you, how can you leave me?... I won’t deceive you any longer. Whatever you think I am, learned Brahmin or not, I’m really a bandit-chief. My name is Bhabani Pathak.”*

*Debi Choudhurani, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay*

This grand yet simple revelation of the iconic yet infamous dacoit Sardar Bhabani Pathak at once declares not just boldness but also power and dominion, such that his characterization captured the readers’ awe in a way that he has been immortalized within even more fabricated fables among Bengal’s storytelling circles, impossible to be unheard of to any person that spent their childhood in Bengal. Despite being a Dacoit chief, who had always been ascribed as being merciless, infamous for their loot, trespassing, deviant, and manipulative nature, one could really think about nothing but absolute admiration for him, be it for his ethical practices, his selflessness or his empathy towards those who have been abandoned and led astray by the lawless rulers of the contemporary Bengal which was, at the time, entangled within a power struggle between the Nawabs and the British (Chattopadhyay 23). Like Bhabani Pathak in classical literature, a colossal part of 18th and 19th-century legends of rural Bengal was dominated by the infamous Bengal Dacoits. Similarly, at one point, Bengal’s popular and classical literature had also been significantly devoted to crime novels, particularly the legendary concepts of dacoits, most of which adhered to the old Robin Hood style. In contrast to this, there has been some sort of lack of non-fictional literature about Bengal dacoits or dacoits as a whole, and their way of living. Therefore, despite being fictional, it’s mostly popular literature that serves as an archive for acquiring more information on the social conditions within which the dacoity groups spread their dominion.

Moreover, even our immense treasure of classical literature and sastras has also not left out studies on dacoits and robbers, capturing their fantasies over the ‘art’, corroborating them with a blend of reality, within codices of ethics. Almost all the narratives of the Hindu folklore are repetitions of themselves, with minor changes, regarding important motifs and experiences. Most notable of them being that of Muladeva, ‘a natural born charlatan’, who has climbed to the pinnacle of tricky mischief, famed as the ‘lord of the rogues’, with mastery over magical practices and the science of thieving. Apparently, the name ‘Muladeva’, literally meaning “he who makes roots his divinity”, originates within the sphere of narrative in which “magic practices by means of roots” is a familiar skill, even from the time of the Atharvaveda<sup>1</sup> (Bloomfield 619). One other example is that of Rauhineya from *Rauhineyacaritra* which narrates the upheaval journeys of thief Rauhineya and minister Abhaya with a twist of magic, intellect, and reincarnation (Johnson 4-9). There are several similar short stories and adventure series in Jataka, Kathasaritsagar, Mrcchakatika, etc., and many other Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain literature that have consistently reflected on the character and nature of a thief or robber. Therefore, robbers or Dacoits and their lifestyle weren’t just another social occurrence in the context of India, rather, they became part of a greater culture that romanticized their practices and stereotyped them within fabled ethical values that travelled the regions by means of words.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bloomfield (1913; 1923a; 1923b; 1926) for encyclopedic narrations and symbolism of the character and adventures of robbers in early South Asian literature.

During the era in which the region had no proper ruler, complicated further by the aftereffects of 'the Famine of 1176' and the imminent burgeoning of the colonial empire that was yet to happen, Bengal was left in a lawless state, as ascribed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee himself, and was caught up in an extensive power play between the dacoits, and the tyrannous, self-indulgent and rapacious Zamindars, while also challenging the newly emerging British, as well as, having a firm stronghold on the public dominion. In an attempt to tame these dacoity and thuggee groups, the British primarily started by criminalizing them through a series of Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts passed between 1836 and 1848 and establishing the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, also called Thagi and Dakaiti Department, in 1830, thus ascribing the tribes or castes who were professionally robbers or dacoits as the 'criminal tribes.' Despite all of the struggles and the bridges that the British had to burn to grasp a certain amount of control over the dacoits, few records have been kept in regards to the object of this entire journey, that is the dacoits, with the exception of a few memoirs, courtroom proceedings and newspaper articles, as if they had been subtly erased from the surface of history, with some amount of remains within oral folklores and only their patron-deity temples reminiscent of their existence and exploits. Therefore, through this study, I attempt to excavate the obscurity that surrounds the livelihood of the dacoits, most of what has been forgotten, as an effect of the fleeing sands of time.

## 2 | FROM JUNGLE TO OUTLAW: THE MAKING OF THE 'JUNGLEE'

Apart from the gleaming streets and mansions of the lustrous civilized life, there are those who have been pushed away from the luxuries and abandoned as an equation of consequences of the civilized world- those who have been subjected to and belong to the margins, which are, the section of the mass deemed to commit crime. Such is the case of robbers who are not unheard of across the globe but there is a distinct scenario going on in regards to India where robbers are tied to tribes or communities who claim themselves to be "professional robbers", also commonly known as *dacoits*. Although the word 'dacoit' itself was coined during the British era, their profession and way of life have been a point of interest for centuries in both classical as well as popular literature which lays out the historical context within an immense collection of *steya-sastra*, *cora-sastras*, and *caurya-carya* and has defined the perception regarding dacoits and their nature of being, even to the extent that entails stereotypes. However, even if their existence and lifestyle have been acknowledged by the dominant part of the society, they've been situated at the very margin of the civilization, that is the 'jungle', the amalgamation point between everything that is considered 'civil' and everything that is perceived as 'beastly'. This is precisely the point that embodies everything that a dacoit is- a somewhat human existence yet almost comprising the mannerisms of that of an animal, hence ascribed to be '*junglee*'. They embody everything that goes against the notions and norms of civilization and exist beyond the realm of political-economic control of the civilized and governed society. What remains disparate here is the politics of being and becoming, situated in a temporal existence.

It is an enduring question that asks if it was the convenient imperialist myths and fiction about the colonized other that made them become one with the fiction or if it was their own nature of being that made them art of the stereotype. This conflict cannot be situated in history alone since history can be manipulated and distorted but rather it will have to be in the historical contextualization of the social perception where answers can be found since "where chronology serves only a superficial function in recording the temporal

dimension of personal transformations, it is the spatialization of time, which utilizes movement across bounded spaces, that expresses ‘inner’ growth or changes” (Glücklich 120). Regardless of that, because of their “uncivilized” nature the jungle or the other has been condemned with an animalistic ascription of being ‘beastly’. Derrida’s conceptions on the ‘sovereign and the beast’ “examines both an entire range of issues in philosophical treatments of ‘animal life’ and classical questions concerning the meaning of political sovereignty in the human sphere” (Krell 7). The *jungle beast* is therefore conceived as the embodiment of the Brahmanical notion of everything vice and is believed to sway towards vice even when given a choice between virtues and vice<sup>1</sup> (Piliavsky 330). What this truly entails is that they cannot be comprehended by the common and dominant ideologies of what is ‘proper to mankind’, and therefore, there is a necessary intervention of the “philosophical interpretation of the limits between what is called ‘man’ and what is improperly and in the generic singular called ‘the animal’” (Krell 8). Perceiving them as animals only makes it easier to discriminate, marginalize and judge the unboundedness of the ‘beastly other’.

### 3 | THE MYTH OF THE JUNGLE

Despite being a jungle beast, by the usual instincts of a human, the criminal tribes of India have their own unique dharma as well as their own patron deities because apparently their activities require a divine sanction. They are bound, not by the common social norms, but by their own ethics of thievery, whose virtue is depicted by the success and technical mastery of robbery since, apparently, “a good thief can skillfully assess, navigate, and outwit his circumstances because stealing is only wrong ‘when one gets apprehended or killed’” (Piliavsky 334). Again, a twelfth-century Jain characterizes a robber’s moral qualities as “pride, egoism, greed, craftiness and so on, ability to adopt various outward shapes, habitual stealing of vast quantities of wealth, lack of concern for military strength used against them, contempt for divine and temporal power, and skill in burglary” (Dundas 282). The Parisista XX of the *Atharvaveda* situates the divine origin of the art of stealing back to Skanda or Karttikeya, also known as Dhurta or deceitful, and mentions a ritual called Dhurta-kalpa or Skanda-yaga which later became associated in the worship of Kali by the Bengal Dacoits<sup>2</sup> (Chakravarti 230). Even though the traditional epitome of a dacoit cannot be seen today, their existence is still not only lingering in our folklore but also situated in a commonly inconspicuous structure and history of stereotype and marginalization.

The most common of the preconceived notions is that of ascribing the dacoits as ‘junglees’ who belong to the jungles such that in most popular literature and folktales we see the dacoits’ habitat being the forest, where they emerge from and return to, situated at the very end of a city or village. From Alibaba discovering the secret treasure trove of the forty thieves deep into the forest to Prafulla encountering Bhabani Pathak while trotting along the forest path, the *Dacoit Sardar* who also claims the jungle to be his dominion, it’s almost as if the ‘jungle’ is of the so-called criminal tribes as much as it is of those animals who reside within it. This particular notion of the ‘jungle’ is situated in the very concept of

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<sup>1</sup> See Piliavsky (2011; 2013; 2015) for a more comprehensive understanding of Criminal Tribes in contemporary Indian society.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed understanding of ancient thievery and the worship of Skanda, see Goodwin (1890) and Chakravarti (1950)

'wildness' which does not depict it as a mere forest or woods like the common understanding of it does. In our contemporary understanding, we commonly refer to the 'jungle' as a long range of deep forest, however, the earlier conception identifies it as an uninhabited and uncultivated dry wasteland that marks not the end but the margin of the civilization itself. The Aryan narrative believed that "all the values of civilization lay on the side of the jungle" which can be cultivated, "overcome, conquered, colonized by irrigation" (Zimmermann 19), essentially being the "soil of Brahminity" (Skaria 197). While the promises of a civilization were laid out on this dry land, everything that proved to be barbaric was pushed back into the dense impenetrable forest, creating a conflict between the wild land and the cultivated land, which soon became a civilized land while the outline of it now became the jungle. A constant paradox became evident through the expansion of civilization, with the jungles being constantly displaced according to the movement of the civilization. Although their location changed, they still had to be rooted in the forest. In the course of this, as their own community expanded and occupied much of the frontier through their raids, the narrative soon shifted into them being the inhabitants of the jungle, "a socially negative space home to various outsiders to ordinary moral, ritual, legal, and social life" (Piliavsky 329), and thereby called the 'jungles'. However, the European colonial notions rebranded the jungles into some particular 'other' who were part of the 'wildness' that signified not some valorised promises of civilization but the justification of the violence, oppression, and criminalization that they had been subjected to. Through this entire journey, the constant shift in the narrative of the value-loaded term 'jungles' unravels the underlying power structure that they had been a victim to, which not only alienated them but also utilized them in a manner that won't make apparent their vitality in the social cycle but rather labeled them as the embodiment of terror if anything.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

Even though the so-called jungles are victims of the structure that governs the society, they're still outlaws, who don't just disregard the law but also exist beyond the law itself. The status of an "outlaw" is what the sovereign and the jungle beast share (Krell 10). While one is held above the law, the other is below and beyond the law "as part of a ragged and oscillating edge just beyond the effective political control of the centralized state" (Skaria 195). In some way or other, both are somewhat 'outside the law' and invoke similar fear, authority, and admiration among the people. On the other hand, in the Indian context, the jungle is posited as a direct enemy of the sovereign, since he is not merely an enforcer of laws but also the embodiment of law who can bend and amend the law at his will. Contrarily, the jungle beast, viewed as the embodiment of vice itself, can be subjected to punishment but never bound by laws and hence enabling a constant clash of powers between the two. Even in most of the literature, we always witness a direct confrontation between the two symmetrical yet oppositional powers- "the sovereignty of *dharma* (and *artha*) and the sovereignty of "permanent transcendence"—the individualist scoundrel" (Glucklich 191). This confrontation with the law, accompanied by a constant fear of insecurity, is undoubtedly what led the rulers to expend so much energy in reining them in. The Dacoity groups, being a force of lawlessness that existing structures could not suppress, is precisely what led the newly emerging British authority to establish new laws to criminalize them as they engaged in the mission of 'civilizing' the nation of India. While dacoits and the truth surrounding them have been elusive to history, they have been kept

alive still through legends and folk tales. With the aid of such, this study has attempted to unravel some amount of the obscurity that has surrounded their reality.

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