Chapter 5

Identification of Criminals in Nadia

A study of crime as a social problem makes it necessary to focus the human element—the distinguishing characteristics of men and women who chose to resort to the legally prescribed codes of conduct. By and large people in general have very little or no sympathy for the criminals. Peoples’ perception of the crime and criminality most of the time was not very dissimilar to the thinking of the ruling class. This chapter describes some relevant matters relating to the criminal. Who became criminal under situation? What were the rites, rituals and motivations associated with their criminal activities? What can we infer about the socio-economic background of the incarcerated? What were their social origins? Is it pertinent to talk of a criminal typology? This chapter makes an attempt to answer some of these questions. It tries to present a survey of Nadia district’s criminals by reviewing excerpts from confessional records of dacoits and from different police reports, all of which throw light on the criminal career of Nadia dacoits. Apart from dacoits, there is almost no information about the other criminals in the government documents.

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

Regarding information about criminals in the relatively arid zone like Nadia district I had to depend mainly on the manuscript sources and also on the confessions of the dacoits. These confessions provide the most authentic and detailed narratives of early background of common criminals, their initiation into the criminal fraternity, their organizational pattern and composition of gangs, their rituals, modus-operandi etc. And in this matter, the confessions of four sirdar dacoits of Nadia Gowala Gang stand out most striking and significant.

**Who Were Dacoits?**

Why people use to join criminal fraternity in spite of their awareness of punishment they were bound to incur? Uncertainty or evasion of punishment was an encouraging factor for someone joining in criminality. Confessions by numerous dacoits indicate that they used to go for the *dacoity* because they saw dacoits had been neither captured by the police nor punished by the court. Bad harvest tempted them to
join in crime. Economic hardship led men to jump into the criminality. Sometimes sheer curiosity made one join the criminal gang. Low moral character, lack of education might play crucial role for one perpetrating crime. Initiation into the world of criminality, therefore, for would-be criminals was caused by several factors. Hereditary or born criminals, a popular subject of colonial discourse, had no existence in this district. Confessions of dacoits clearly suggest that almost all dacoits started their criminal career due to external influence or the effect of neighborhood. They did not learn the art of crime from the members of family. They did not take any formal training for learning the act of crime. In this context the most glaring examples are the confessions of four sirdar dacoits of Nadia who had confessed their crime before the dacoity commissioners in 1850s’. Their revelations illustrated some interesting facts. All of them were driven into the world of criminality due to the inspiration and motivation of others. Without the encouragement and instigation of others no one could join in the criminality. The official stereotyping of low moral character, lack of education, criminal propensity of persons of lower order of natives could be added as the factor of their joining to dacoity. Nabai Ghose lost his parents in his tender age. Then he went to Parulpara to his nephew Hulludhar Ghose. Hulludhur was a dacoit. He taught him the skill of stick fighting and used to take him out as a ‘teccalattiar’. One day Hulludhur asked Nabai to join him in dacoity and he agreed. Later he committed at least 24 dacoities on land and in river.¹ Manick Ghose was a victim of circumstances which made him join the dacoity gang. His father got converted
to Christianity. The rest of members of his family, for avoiding conversion, ran away to Kidderpore. There were two notorious dacoits, Monohur and Kuber Ghose. Monohur was his relative and under his apprenticeship Manick joined the gang and embarked on a career of dacoity. The situation in which Bishtu Ghose, the fourth leader of the Gawala gang became a dacoit was slightly different from those above two. Bishtu was the strongest of the three sons of his father. His father consequently appointed Bishtu to the take charge of his cattle as in that country strong and courageous men were required to watch cattle grazing due to perpetual rows and fights amongst the Gowlas or with other villagers. By making use of his lathi continually, he became expert and courageous. He, in leisure time, used to go to some of his friends houses' in the village to refresh himself. He used to go to Manick Ghose’s house, who was famous as a dacoit. One day Manick offered Bishtu to join him in dacoity as they would get a lot of money with very little trouble. He consented. After a few days Bishtu went with Manick for his first dacoity venture on a sawaree boat at Nawapara. On the first occasion he was frightened and did not go on the boat, but stood on the shore looking on. The first experience in terms of money was not satisfactory to Bishtu. He got only two old clothes as his share of the plundered booty. He was disappointed, frustrated and vexed and even decided to quit it altogether and told Manick that it was not worthwhile to undergo imprisonment for mere two old clothes. Manick still insisted and promised Bishtu that he would take care of and look after him in the next dacoity. Manick kept his word and gave Bishtu 100 rupees after the next dacoity.
exclaimed and wondered, “I had never seen so much money in my life. I left my father’s cows to my brother. From that time...I have all along committed dacoity. I thus, become dacoit”.

They were the leaders. But about the large number of subordinate gang robbers we have no definite information regarding their stimulus for joining robberies. They were temporary dacoits who joined robbery for some quick financial gains as dacoity was a never failing resource.

The career of another dacoit of Nadia is quite interesting. Story of his life expressed many aspects of a dacoit. Sonatun Mandal, a strong, stout and fearless boy got himself admitted in a school as his father wanted him to rectifying his obstreperous behaviour. One day on his way to Santipore he fell in with a party of Lathials. He joined them in conversation. He asked them if they could assist him in procuring a job. They agreed because Sonatun was ‘khoob jowan’. This expression indicates that a strong and fearless village boy had always a chance to fall in felony. He had at the same time an opportunity to get a job for his powerful physique. The party which Sonatun met took him because he was a strong and young man. The party saw in him the possibility of being a good fighter. So, the party took him with them to their master, an indigo planter. Here he got a job, but at the same time gradually he fell in with people of criminal tendencies. He was engaged in affrays and dacoities. He got seven years' sentence of imprisonment for being involved in an affray with murder. He escaped from prison and fled to Assam. Three years after he was traced, captured and confined into Burdwan Jail with two years’ additional imprisonment for escaping. After serving nine
years’ as a convict he was released and he returned to his native village where he found an old friend of his father Gour Seth, an oil presser. Sonatun sought his assistance. Gour received him kindly but advised him to take to dacoity for livelihood and promised to help him in selling of his plundered property. This incident is a proof that it was difficult for a convict to return to normal life. Mr. Redfearn, the first collector of this district wrote in 1789, “There is a great reason to believe that those who have been once guilty of dacoitee, confined and corporally punished for it, seldom quit this course of life when they regain their liberty.” He also explained the causes for such belief. He wrote “if they [dacoits] are ryots, and paid a small revenue, on their return to their habitations they find what little property they left behind them consumed, their lands taken from them, and no one ready to afford them any assistance, and being destitute of the means of supporting themselves and, those who depend on them for a subsistence, they are in a manner obliged to have recourse to their former practices, nearly similar is the situation of every other person on his release from prison.” Sonatun followed Gour Seth’s advice and for several years carried on this trade with great success, not however without little inconvenience. He was arrested during this period nine times, although he was committed to the session judge five times, he was acquitted three times and convicted twice only, however on both occasion he was released after appeal to the Nizamat Adalat. One day Gour Seth died; Sonatun then gave up dacoity and lived on the proceeds of his life of crime. He built a comfortable two storied Pucca house and became a leading man in his
But he could not return to normal life. The Police arrested him for once being a dacoit, convicted and transported. He complained to the Commissioner that he had been apprehended in spite of quitting robbery, but it was of no avail. Sonatun tried to begin his normal life again, but succumbed this time to the state power.

Social Origin

The general perception is that the criminals used to come from the lower order of the society. The dacoits were the most visible face among the criminals. A murderer may come from the upper caste of the society. A landlord might be involved in an affray, but he was not considered a habitual criminal. A thief or a burglar might also be involved in dacoities. So the composition of dacoits may give meaningful insight into the condition of criminals of the district in question. It is difficult to assess the social composition of Nadia criminals due to scantiness of data of criminals. However some available data about dacoits helped us to guess at the social compositions of Nadia criminals. One of the earliest descriptions of convicted dacoits of this district is found in a list of 33 members of three different gangs. The sirdar of each gang was a chowkidar. The occupation of the 33 dacoits were as follows- 11 cultivators, 7 chowkidar, 4 peadas (peons), 3 laborers, 2 beggars, 2 betel sellers, 2 thatchers, 1 lime seller and 1 bearer. There are more detailed lists of prisoners who had failed to make the security deposits required by judicial authorities to guarantee their good behaviour. In other words the lists are not of convicts but of persons suspected of dacoity, and of other crimes. Some of
the persons detained were found to have been accused unjustly however the lists nevertheless seem to reflect in a general way the social composition of robber gangs. So far as the largest occupational categories of the suspected offenders in Nadia jail are concerned there were 103 cultivators, 33 labourers, 31 fisherman, 30 bearers (probably palanquin carriers), and 11 milkmen and cowherds. Only three prisoners were listed as chowkidars but the discussion of individual cases made it clear that many cultivators and other prisoners also served as watchmen and that dacoits were often chowkidars. The Information of the castes of prisoners in the list confirms the official view that dacoits were generally recruited from the lowest castes. The list had 93 Muslims, 35 Bagdies, 21 Koras, 13 Gowalas, 12 Bouries and 11 Doms. The 93 Muslims represented 38.7 % of 240 Nadia prisoners, or roughly same proportion as they constituted in the district as a whole, according to an estimate. Dom, Bagdis, Kaoras and Bouris were all among the lowest castes. Doms were basket makers and cultivators; Bagdis were labourers, fishermen, cultivators, palanquin bearers and village watchmen; Kaoras were swine-keepers; and Bouries were cultivators, labourers, fishermen and palanquin bearers. The trend of forming robber gang from the lowest caste continued even in the 1850’s and chowkidars held dominant positions in the gang formation. Haro Sirdar gang of Suksagar and Chakdah thanas included a large number of chowkidars in his gang. The confessions of many sirdars of this period indicate that most of the robbers belonged to the Muslim and Gowala community. In Punditpur river dacoity 6 dacoits were concerned and all of them came from Gowala
caste. They were (i) goburdhun Ghose, (ii) Madhub Ghose, (iii) Brijо Ghose (iv) Manick Ghose, (v) Ishan Ghose and (vi) Nabai Ghose.\textsuperscript{13} At Sadhunpara gang robbery 14 dacoits were involved and in this case 9 came from the Gowala community and 5 from the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{14} In another list of 19 dacoits, 10 were Gowalas and 6 were Muslims.\textsuperscript{15} But there were instances of groups with mixed religion and caste where bagdis, Brahmins, manjis, chamaras, mandals and others worked under a Muslim or Hindu sirdar.

One of the characteristics of dacoits of 1850’s in this district was that they were lathial dacoits. All four dacoits of Nadia Gowala Gang, who confessed their crime before the commissioner of the suppression of dacoity, were lathials. Mr. J. Ward, the commissioner of the suppression of dacoity, remarked that in Nadia, dacoity had been committed by the lathials.\textsuperscript{16} They were either Gawalas or Mussalmans.\textsuperscript{17} Although the Gowalas and Muslims dominated the criminal charts, yet there were many dacoits who came from other socio-economic back-ground. Johny Dick, a natural son of William Dick, a European indigo planter, was a sirdar of dacoits in this district.\textsuperscript{18} His friend in the gang of dacoits used to call him as Jhan Mahammad.\textsuperscript{19} Women criminals especially dacoits were almost absent in archival documents. Direct involvement of women in robbery is not found in the police reports. Only one such instance is found in the report of the suppression of dacoity. This woman was Sona Dhopani, wife of Prem Sirdar, who used to go with the gang in the expedition of robbery. She was worshiped by the members of this gang as an incarnation of the Kali.\textsuperscript{20} Women, though indirectly, assisted dacoits more
than one way. They used to play vital role as spies of the dacoits. The dacoits had female companions who used to give useful information and shelter in hard times.

Organization and Modus Operandi

There were clear differences between the system of gang robbery of the first decade of nineteenth century and that of middle of the century in Nadia. Dacoits of earlier decades were more organized and systematic. Their discipline was as good as military regiment. Dereliction of duty was certain to incur death. They could contest with the soldier. The dacoits of the early decade of the nineteenth century were very cruel. Murder and physical assault during dacoities were almost the routine affair. Dacoits in the middle of the nineteenth century avoided murder and considered insult to women as bad luck. Manick Ghose, a star dacoit of 1850’s in Nadia, for example, confessed that hurting women during robbery was the action of bad dacoits. A newspaper summarized the difference of dacoits of Nadia in this way: “Four or five sirdars were the real rulers of the country [Nadia]. Each of them ruled from four to six hundred men and exercised over his gang a permanent authority... Their rule was maintained by the sword, disobedience being punished by instant death. The gangs themselves were composed of very different materials from those which now occasionally harass magistrates and terrify quite villages. At present the majority are only occasional dacoits, men tempted by the prospect of plunder or dismayed by the effect of a bad year. Their leaders may live solely by the
trade but the subordinates are ‘half armed, cowardly scoundrels, who would fly from anything except women and unarmed villagers. The dacoits of 1809 were almost invariably men who had followed the profession for generations. Their discipline was as perfect as that of a regiment, and in every band there was a chosen troop, a “sacred cohort” who would even face soldiers.”

Besides, the dacoits of early nineteenth century used to send prior notice to the house-holders who were going to be attacked. This revealed the audacity of mock attack on the gate of a house before real act. These are the facts recorded in the official documents. But nothing had been confirmed by dacoits themselves about their own method of robbery and organizational pattern. About the organizational pattern and method of their operation, the detailed information is available in the confessions of the Nuddea Gowala gang. These confessions are more reliable than what the police recorded. Usually a gang of dacoits used to be managed by a sirdar. Sirdar had many crucial responsibilities. He had to provide expenses of operation, gather persons to join in dacoity and so on. A gang of dacoits used to divide their works and duties among all members before committing every robbery. It was performed in a well planned and systematic way. Distribution of duties depended on the capacity and skill of gang members. Reward also varied according to risk and difficulties involved in each section of duty. The strongest and most daring person always performed his task as a sentry of gang at the time of dacoity. For this, sentries used to get the double of what the other men, who broke into the house, got. Sentries’ duties
were to inform men, who were inside the house, about the situation outside the house they attacked. If villagers approached during _dacoity_ towards the house, the sentry called out to the pitch of his voice, ‘take care’, ‘don’t come too near’, ‘you will be killed’._24_ A new-comer or those who had been involved only once or twice in a _dacoity_ were made to hold torches and act as coolies in taking away the property while the older men were engaged in breaking boxes and chests and plundering. The Sirdar of the gang always had to take up the most risky jobs. He, generally, used to stand as sentry during _dacoity_. And for such work he used to get larger share of the booty than what the rest of the party acquire in the robbery. There might be three or four sirdars in a venture of _dacoity_. Each of them used to come with his men. It was the sirdar’s business to encourage the rest and to give direction as to the part each man had to take during _dacoity._25_ Before committing any robbery, the head of the gang had to gather vital information about the house or boat intended to be attacked. After enquiry, when the leader of the gang thought that the chance of success of this or that _dacoity_ was greater than failure, he used to inform this to other members of the gang.

They generally used to fix a code-word before committing _dacoity_ by which they might communicate one another. If there was a chance of fighting with the villagers, the sentries called out ‘_khunchee_’ which meant that the gang had to come out at once to join the sentries. They also used the word ‘_markhetta_’ implying that villagers were assembling in great numbers and those inside in the house must come out to fight with villagers.
Another word ‘jalkorou’ was frequently used as a signal to instruct other members of a gang to leave the house. They have peculiar kind of vocabulary of their own. In replying to a question Bishtu Ghose said that they had particular names for different object:

“Tel oil, we call ross

*banduk*, gun, we call bill.

*Kodalee*, bill, we call *kopah*.

*Mussals* torches we call full

*Lathi* club we call *goda*

And so on.”

Every gang of dacoits used to depend on the spies. Without accurate information from spies the robbers seldom resorted to any crime. In the early period of the nineteenth century the spies of Nadia dacoits were more accurate than even of the spies of the police. The question rises then who acted as spy? It needs to be discussed in detail. According to the views of the district officers every *chowkidar* and *pyke* acted as a spy in the early decade of the nineteenth century. From the confessions of dacoits it appears that spies came from the diverse socio-economic background. Though most of them were criminals, but men of respectable and influential position in the locality also acted as spies of dacoits. Servants of the house acted as spies too. A boy servant of Lalmohun Tewaree of Hatgatcha kamaree, was a spy in the robbery of his
house. A person, for the creation of irritation among his neighbours, also invited dacoits to attack their houses.

Social Infrastructure of Dacoits

Criminals need a kind of social support for continuing their offences. It cannot be denied that dacoits had very formidable logistical infrastructure. The support of common people was not able to bring great success. They required the backing of powerful and influential persons of local origin where they were residing. The zamindars and their amlahs, the police, the village watchmen and the other persons of power and repute had provided the vital support which was absolutely necessary to the dacoits. The dacoits were brave and had courage and great skill of fighting which had the utility value to landlords. These dacoits extended their physical support to landlords. They had bargaining power. More powerful, strong and stout men received more remuneration, salary and other facilities from the landlords.

Receivers of stolen goods were the great source of encouragement for the criminals in general and in particular for dacoits. Diverse kinds of persons were involved in this trade. All criminals had their own receivers. It is difficult to select any particular group of people who were concerned with this job. A dacoit might have more than one receiver even in the same village. Manick Ghose had more than one receiver in the Belpukur. In the same way more than one person was concerned with this trade in the same village. Pritam Senkra, Tarun Senkra, Okay Battacharyya, Ramnidhi Koondoo—all were receivers of Manick Ghose and also resided at the
same village. In the first decade of nineteenth century when dacoity was at its height in Nadia, allegation of the existence of purchasers of stolen goods was frequently found in the official reports. Chaytin Kassaree, Gopal Kassaree and Gobinda Kassaree of Chagdaha were the regular purchasers of the Gangaram sirdar’s gang. Gopal was also the purchaser of plundering goods of Ramsoonder Kapalee. Ramcoomer Senkra of Mahatpur was the receiver of Nabai Ghose. Ramcoomer Senkra of Mahatpur was the receiver of Nabai Ghose. Calachand Senkra of Gowaree was the regular receiver of plundered goods of Kuber Ghose. There was an instance of a person who acted as a receiver of different offenders at the same time. Baikuntha Majumdar was the receiver of many dacoits of Nadia Gowala Gang. Receivers were the great instigators, patrons and encouragers of dacoits. Most astonishing fact was that they were seldom punished for their acts.

Rites of Dacoits

Dacoits used to perform certain kinds of rites and rituals before their operations. Kali was a favourite goddess worshiped by every dacoit gang. Goddess Kali, actually was, the symbol of power and terror in extremity and an inspirer to the people of lower order of the society. The goddess Kali’s images and actions were very much similar to the actions adopted by the robber gangs. It is not clear, however, whether members of the gang belonging to the Muslim community used to perform rituals like those of the Hindu gangs. It is an astonishing fact that when the officers asked questions to dacoits, they never asked to the Muslim gangs whether they offered any special
prayer to God or any other deity. The Nuddea gang used to perform Kalipuja before every robbery on the land, but no such worship did take place before dacoity in the river. A place was chosen where there was no jungle and where the whole gang could sit down. They used to sit in one line or two fronting each other. The sirdar or sirdars who perform the kalipuja used to sit in the centre. They put down a cloth or chose some very clear place and on this they placed a ‘bhaur’ of oil, the mossals and all the weapons. The sirdar, then, addressed the rest of the gang and apportioned duties to each member. He, then, counted men, touched each man on the forehead with his hand, marked each man’s forehead by his finger after dipping it in the ‘bhaur’ of oil and told everyone to call Kali. In course of touching oil a gang member used to feel stronger and gained courage. When all were ready, the sirdar broke the ‘bhaur’ of oil and all of them got up. The two head-men stood near each other and all passed between them one by one. After Kalipuja, thus, performed they ran as fast as they could, looking neither left nor right, to the house which was to be attacked. After the ceremony each gang had to take oath and the sirdar instructed the new-comer not to confess, if caught during the robbery. Signs of bad and good were concerned with this worship. If the sirdar broke the ‘bhaur’ in one blow, it was considered a good omen but if it took two blows, it was bad and not lucky. They believed either the gang would be unsuccessful or would be discovered or something terrible would happen.

They were superstitious. They believed in good and bad omens and favourable and unfavourable days. If a bull bellow
near the robbers, or a lizard was heard, or during Kalipuja any member coughed or sneezed, it was considered a bad omen. A young girl seen on the right hand, seen a woman with a kalshi full of water and a jackal seen crossing from right to left were regarded signs of good luck by the dacoits. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday were regarded as favourable days and Thursday and Saturday as unfavourable days, though usually they did not pay much attention to these things. The dacoits’ superstitious belief was not different from that of the people at large of the interior of Bengal.

Attitudes of Administration and Natives towards Dacoits

The colonial creation of images of criminals of Nadia is not favourable for finding a good criminal. The portrayal of characters of dacoits of Nadia is found in a letter sent by the magistrate of Nadia to the secretary of Judicial Department on 25 October, 1809 of Bengal Government. He narrated briefly the character of some members of famous Bishwanath gang. Many members of this gang had the ability to collect hundreds of men in emergency. Apart from Bishwanath, sirdars like Krishendhun Chaudry, Buddhea and Docourie were able to raise three to four hundred men, whenever needed. The magistrate narrated that Buddhea was the most savage of the gang whose delight was to show his depredation. It was a common proverb that whenever “he was a party blood always followed with scenes of horror to the wound.” He used to hang up the head of the persons he murdered. Docurie was equally as bad as Buddhea. Whenever he went, his first object was to
get hold of the women. Titulyah, an adopted son of Buddhea, was a terror to every father of a family. Sannyasee Bagdi was well known in the Nadia and Burdwan district. He was fond of carrying spear in both of his hands besides sacre on his shoulder, and the person who came within his reach was sure to suffer death. There was a dacoit about whom a little more information is available in the government documents. This man was Gangaram Sirdar. Ganga commenced dacoity at the age of 12 years and since then he had been the sirdar of his gang. The Magistrate described him as a complete savage. His cruelty surpassed even Bishwanath and the person who resisted him was bound to die. He confessed that he had murdered 33 persons with his own hands. He was an intelligent and a fearless dacoit sirdar. When the magistrate asked if he had any intention to return to his district, he quickly replied, “would I not, I am a dacoit. It is my profession.” Again when the magistrate asked him if he was not afraid of the sepoys, his reply was ‘I can shoot where they are blind.’

It is an interesting and strange fact that the native ideas of criminality of people of lower castes in Bengal are strikingly similar to the colonial ideas regarding the same. Contemporary native sources of information on the criminals, though scanty, believed what the British propagated. Contemporary respectable and wealthy natives in whom even the British had great faith uttered their supportive statements regarding what the colonial government recorded on the criminals. Nadia as a crime prone district attracted huge attention from the native observers. Native ideas about criminals are available in the writing of Girish Chandra Bose who was the darogah of police
in this district in the 1850’s. Bose has claimed that he is writing an objective history about the contemporary dacoits, thieves and burglars of Bengal. But nowhere, the writings had matched with his words. Repeatedly his biasness towards upper castes and even his justification of colonial government’s policy towards dacoits are clearly identifiable. According to Bose, all sorts of criminals came from the Muslim, Gowala, Bagdi and other low castes communities of this district.50 Despite his certain knowledge of the local zamindars’ complicity in robberies, he exhibited a cultivated blindness to their criminality. Instead, he recorded this as an aberration. Anticipating shocked reactions from the readers to a dacoit’s true identity, he said that once Bamundasbaboo’s house was looted by dacoits. Readers will be astonished to hear that the dacoit was from a bhadralok family whose father held a high post in the Krishnagar district. Since his childhood he had kept bad company, and had finally left friends and family to join a group of dacoits as leader.51 In fact, Girish Chandra differentiated between active involvement in dacoities, planned by the people of the lower caste, and formation of a dacoit band for robberies masterminded by the zamindars. In this district, a couple of zamindars were openly involved in such dacoities, but they disdained the use of such hired bands and commandeered the loyal group of lathials and sarkiwalas themselves.

In Nadia there was a group called Bediya designated as criminal tribe a little latter of the nineteenth century. The Bediya community lived in Nadia and Jessore district, though it was not confined in these two districts only. As early as 1810,
one of the magistrates of Nadia, in his report, described this group as a notorious house breaker.52 W.W. Hunter depicted this community in the following manner: “Bediyas, a semi aboriginal tribe; half Hindus, half Muhammadans in religion, but recognized by neither...a predatory tribe, ostensibly gaining their livelihood as jugglers and fortune tellers by day, but during the night committing burglaries and gang robberies...and wander about from village to village with their families, living under tents, tending cattle, exhibiting feats of jugglery, begging and committing thefts and robberies.”53 This comment on Bediyas has been echoed in the narrative of Girish Chandra Bose. Bose wrote, “ostensibly the Bediyas are performers or are dealers in herbs, but in reality stealing is their real profession. If they see a lone traveller, or a small village, they plunder it, take the loot and disappear...they are also heavy drinkers. They freely spend money on drink. Their women steal ducks, hens, vegetables and other things from the way side villages and prepare meals. If they are unfortunate enough to secure nothing, they beg.”54 Girish Chandra also described the Bediyas’ modus operandi. Those who settled in Nadia district, especially the Bediyas of Krishnagar, were famous thieves and broke into houses by using a sind-kaati (pick), with which they tunneled under walls from the outside. One Bediya, recalled by Bose, said:

“Our main occupation is thieving...tunneling under the outer wall of a residence to gain secret admittance is our specialty. To make our task easy, there are actually written tracts on the subject. We learn the art of tunneling from childhood upwards. At the coming of winter, we scatter to
various parts of Bengal, and come back to our villages before the monsoons break...we do not leave our villages together because that would only attract the attention of the police.”

At the end of the narration, the darogah asked what he would do when he got caught. The Bediya’s answer reflected the attitude of the people towards a thief or a robber, and also the thief’s calm acceptance of the fact that a beating was inevitable, if caught. But contrary to the generally held opinion that a prison sentence had no terror for the average prison-goers, it is clear from the statement of the Bediya, that receiving a beating by a whole village was preferable to confessing under police compulsion and then being sent off to jail.

“There is nothing else to do, we get beaten up. At first it is the people whose house we had gone to burgle; then the neighbours and villagers come in force, and beat us up, abuse us, spit upon us and even urinate on us. Some villagers think that they have punished us enough and let us go. But some cannot help turning us in to the police, and that’s when we are in real trouble. The villagers, while beating us up, retain some pity, but the bloody police do not have any mercy. They only want a confession, and they don’t care how they get it....I, too, had to confess once... and had to serve a prison sentence of three years.”

Girish Chandra also encountered individual thieves who wanted to be at loggerhead with the society. The statement of a big thief, hardened by countless beatings and interrogations, is treated by him as a combination of defiance and challenge. The
thief had declared that he had seen enough of the law to evade it, and to be jailed was ignominious for him, as it affected badly on his professional skills. The average thief was also shown to have a working knowledge of the functioning of the penal institutions introduced by the colonial government. The thieves, especially the wily, were characterized as ones taking full advantage of the loopholes of the law. Munshi Sheikh outlined the methods he used to outwit the police and evade imprisonment. If he was caught and taken to the police station, he would immediately confess to avoid being beaten, and be sent off to the magistrate. Whether he confessed to the magistrate or not, he would then be sent to the *hajut* (lock-up) to await trial, which was the presentation of a carefully engineered sequence of events, for ‘apart from being imprisoned, there is no maltreatment of prisoners.’ When the Magistrate, heard the man’s denial, he sent him back to the thana. At this miscarriage of his plans, the thief had to resign himself to the torture of the thana. At that time he used to ask the *darogah*, ‘Has there been a new law passed? How come things turned out this way?’

“I am not a *kancha* or a new (unripe) thief...so I know very well that if I don’t confess myself, or produce the stolen goods, even a hundred accomplices confessed and declared that I was guilty, no Magistrate could pin any crime on me: for that reason I had never made a *ekraar* (statement), and hence never been imprisoned.”

Social Bandit
One of the vital questions consistently pursued by the scholars of social history of crime is whether there was the social bandit in the colonial period. Social banditry is a form of preindustrial social protest. The history of social banditry deals with a form of individual or minority protest within peasant societies. Social bandits are mainly peasants’ outlaws whom the state refers to as dangerous elements, but who remain within the peasant society and are looked upon by their co-villagers as heroes. They shall never harm any of their neighbours. The peasant would evaluate such bandits with their own perception of justice. Social banditry constitutes an extremely backward and primitive form of social movement lacking consistent ideology and organization. Social bandits, according to Eric Hobsbawm, “are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.” On the mission of the social bandits, Hobsbawm further wrote, “they rights wrongs, they correct and avenge cases of injustice, and in doing so apply a more general criterion of just and fair relations between men in general, and especially between the rich and the poor, the strong and weak.” They have no ideological and philosophical visions. They are mere activists in the midst of the poor peasants. It would be naïve therefore to search any noble or farsighted plans or programmes in their functions. As Hobsbawm puts it, “they are activists and not ideologists or prophets from whom novel visions or plans of social and political organization are to
be expected.”\textsuperscript{63} The distinction between a social bandit and a criminal bandit, as emphasized by Hobsbawm, theoretically sounds well, but in concrete terms it is extremely difficult to locate such bandits who are in tune with Hobsbawm’s model.

Bishwanath sirdar, the famous Nadia dacoit of the first decade of nineteenth century, has been designated by many scholars as a social bandit. He was a low caste Hindu by birth, but for his achievement he came to be known as Bishwanath Babu. He was the friend of the poor and enemy to the rich. He was against any attack on the women during the dacoity. He distributed plundered goods among the poor.\textsuperscript{64} He enjoyed good support among the poor villagers in his locality. Once police was surrounded him in a village, but the women of that village gave a shout to warn him and Bishwanath on that occasion escaped apprehension.\textsuperscript{65} His attack on the indigo planter has been seen by many as a protest against the oppression of the indigo planters.\textsuperscript{66} He modified the mode of \textit{dacoity} and modified its cruelty. Before his arrival at the stage of robbery this short of crime practised by the different gangs was very oppressive and torturous.\textsuperscript{67} He always stood by the causes of the poor. Dacoits of the time of Bishwanath used to attack the rich men. As observed by a news paper “those who refused to pay, and all travelers, all traders on the river, and, generally speaking, all notoriously rich men, were mercilessly attacked”\textsuperscript{68} There are many examples of his charity in the vernacular books and articles.\textsuperscript{69}

In official records Bishwanath was regarded as a notorious dacoit. He was once banished from this district to
Dinajpore from where he escaped by breaking jail with some of his fellow comrades. Even his fellow dacoits did not regard him as a great dacoit leader. Gangaram, a contemporary sirdar, commented on Bishwanath while communicating with the magistrate in the following manner “you (magistrate) call Bishwanath sirdar dacoit. Do you know he was my pupil and acted as a coolie”? Gangaram also said that his only achievement was an attack on Mr. Faddy, a European planter. There is a clear clue to the intention of Bishwanath’s attack on Faddy in the original report sent on 29 September, 1808, by the then acting magistrate of Nadia, Mr. H. Shakespeare. According to this report, Bishwanath attacked Faddy’s house because he was very active and co-operated with the magistrates for apprehending dacoits. Bishwanath became famous for this attack as it had been made on a European. Certainly it was a remarkable venture of Bishwanath, but it could not be equated with any type of peasant rebellion against the indigo planter. The origin of Bishwanath’s legend is the writings of official historians like Hunter and Garrett. Kumudnath mullick has been recorded the bravery of Bishwanath and his associates which resembles hunter’s description of the ‘Statistical Account of Bengal’. Gangaram also blamed Bishwanath’s action for his arrest by the police. However Gangaram’s deposition gives clear indication that the colonial officers of the criminal department regarded Bishwanath as a sirdar dacoit. But there is hardly any hint in official records to the fact that Bishwanath used to distribute his plundered property among the poor. On the other hand, the record is full of the account of his gang’s cruelty. Bishwanath
and his gang, for example, once murdered four persons including an elderly woman who was the mother of a sirdar dacoit at a village. That village was the residence of a sirdar dacoit named Thakur Das who was earlier an associate of the Bishwanath Gang.73 This attack was conducted due to his quarrel with Thakur Das on the sharing of robbed booty. In another incident Bishwanath’s gang carried away a woman and ravished her for one day and night and she returned home little better than being dead.74 There is, therefore, no one argument that can help to conclude that Bishwanath was a social bandit. There is no evidence of his softness during dacoity. Most of his contemporary dacoits were engaged in the cruel form of torture and atrocities and Biswanath was no exception.

The remarkable point which would go against dacoits in course of equating them with social bandits is their intimate connections with the landholders. The landholders were the real oppressors of the poor people. Almost all dacoit sirdars were in the employment of the zamindars. Even when Biswanath was active the dacoits were engaged in the service of the landholders. They fought for them to strengthen the influence of the zamindars in the locality. They fought for zamindars in lieu of cash against poor peasants whom the social bandits were supposed to protect.

In spite of empirical limitations of applicability of social bandit theory, Biswanath might be considered to some extent as a bandit with a difference.
Criminals were essentially the products of society. There was no existence of *janam* chore or born criminals in Nadia. The band of dacoits was not a homogenous constituent; rather it consisted of heterogeneous band of persons. The criminals of Nadia used to follow certain code of their own, peculiar vocabulary and precautionary word. Dacoits came from Muslim and Gowala community and they were also employed by the *zamindars* as *lathials*. They played as tools by and large in the hands of landholders. Their existence on the other hand very much depended on the same community. Nothing great was found in their confession other than their own activities. Therefore it would not be wise to equate them with the social bandits as found in the vernacular fictions.75

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