

Social Banditry in Colonial Punjab: A Period of Transition, Agrarian Distress, and the Making of Folk Heroes

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Social banditry in the Punjab, though prominent in popular memory, remains under-researched in academic scholarship. This paper situates the phenomenon within the theoretical framework of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry and examines its manifestations in the Punjab, a historical region in the northwestern part of South Asia. The narratives of these bandits—preserved in myths, oral traditions, folklore, and collective memory—are treated as vital components of people's history, offering insight into popular perceptions of justice and defiance. Social banditry is contextualised within a specific transitional moment in the Punjab's past, marked by the shift from pre-colonial to colonial structures. At the same time, the paper traces the imprints of earlier heroic traditions of war and defiance that prefigured this phenomenon, while engaging with the broader historical context and distinctive features of this transition. In doing so, the study situates Punjabi social banditry at the intersection of cultural memory, historical transformation, and the complex entanglements of crime, violence, and popular moral economies.

"Paurī.

Khandaṁ prithmai sāj kai jin sabh saisār aupāṁ.

Brahmā Bisan Mahes sāj kudratī dā khel rachāe banāiā.

Sindh parbat mednī bin thamā gagan rahāiā.

*Sirje dāno devote tin andar bād rachāiā."*¹

"First, the double-edged sword was created, then the entire universe.
Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were created, then the play of nature.
Oceans, mountains and the earth were created,
the sky stands above without pillars.
Both demons and gods were created,
and conflict between them was caused."

Introduction

The foremost question that arises is: what, in fact, is *social banditry*? Social banditry refers to the historical presence of outlaws across diverse regions of the world, emerging in particular periods and under specific socio-political and economic conditions. In the vernacular idiom of the Punjab, such figures are often described as *baagi* (rebels), *daaku* (dacoits), or *soorma* (heroes). At times, however, no such title was employed; instead, the mere invocation of their personal names sufficed, as the name itself had come to function as a title or metaphor. These were individuals or groups—sometimes brigades—who were declared criminals by the state or other governing authorities, yet who simultaneously enjoyed popular legitimacy among the communities they inhabited. Far from being perceived merely as lawbreakers, they were celebrated as people's champions, remembered and revered in folklore and collective memory as heroic figures. It was this universal phenomenon of social banditry, transcending local contexts, that Eric Hobsbawm famously conceptualised in his seminal works, *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969). Colonial Punjab², too, was not exception to this universal phenomenon of social banditry, so vividly described by Hobsbawm, where its local contours demand closer examination.

Eric Hobsbawm's seminal works introduced into history and historiography a marginalised phenomenon, explaining its main characteristics and significance from a new dimension. At the same time, however, his generalisation of social banditry as a universal phenomenon has been subjected to several critiques. Among these, the first is the tendency to apply or justify this conceptualisation across every society without sufficient political and social contextual differentiation.³ Second, critics have questioned the reliance on bandits' myths and folklore as historical sources.⁴ Third, in some instances, social banditry has been criticised for being portrayed as an archaic form or precursor of social or peasant movements.⁵ Fourth, there has been resistance to interpreting social bandits as expressions of peasant protest, or, in James Scott's terms, as 'weapons of the weak'.⁶ Instead, some scholars have argued that social bandits could at times be co-opted, manipulated, or even made to serve the interests of elites and power structures.⁷

In our understanding, however, Hobsbawm's conceptualisation fits to a considerable extent when examined in the context of the Punjab as a regional case. It must be remembered, nonetheless, that we regard this

phenomenon as distinct from the *thuggee* or *dacoity* prevalent in colonial or post-Mughal India.⁸ Even so, while engaging critically with Hobsbawm's ideas, we approach criminality in the Punjab within its own historical and social context, treating Punjabi banditry as an autonomous case. Where necessary, we seek to highlight its particularities and essential distinctness.

Eric Hobsbawm, however, regarded social banditry in its fundamental form as a product of peasant societies—whether agricultural or pastoral. He understood it as a phenomenon that arose during particular historical transitions: from pre-capitalist to capitalist formations, or, in certain contexts such as the Punjab, from pre-colonial to colonial structures.⁹ This framework applies to the social bandits of Punjab as well. Yet, banditry in the Punjab was not defined solely by the peasant society of colonial times or economic conditions in isolation. Rather, its remembrance and celebration within popular consciousness were deeply conditioned by the region's heroic traditions of resistance and its long history of warfare, which left a lasting imprint upon agrarian communities. Even if not always shaping the bandits individually, these traditions profoundly influenced how they were perceived, commemorated, and narrated in folk memory. Since social banditry generally involved confrontational or violent activities, its reception in the Punjab was inseparable from the region's historical geography. Punjab, positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Mediterranean world, experienced successive waves of conquest and had from ancient times been subject to repeated invasions and upheavals. This legacy inevitably shaped the ways in which banditry was remembered and interpreted. For this reason, it becomes necessary to briefly discuss the long history of warfare and resistance in the Punjab, which left a deep imprint on collective memory and influenced the perception of social bandits. Interestingly, the heroes of this earlier tradition of resistance were themselves often remembered and celebrated in the Punjab in ways strikingly similar to social bandits, and at times even placed on an equal footing with them.

I. The Heroic Imprint of War and Resistance

The history of wars, conflicts, violence, and criminality in the Punjab is deeply rooted in antiquity. While it records the presence of many tyrants, it simultaneously reveals the emergence of a heroic tradition upon this

land. The ancient trajectory of violence and warfare in the Punjab region extends from the battles fought under various deities in the Vedic traditions, through the great war of the *Mahābhārata*, to the confrontations waged by the ancient tribes of the Punjab, who repeatedly resisted invaders advancing from the west. In the time of Alexander the Great, resistance in this region was not limited to King Porus; Alexander also confronted numerous autonomous tribes and their chiefs, including confederations such as the Mallians (Malavas) and the Oxydracians.¹⁰ In these accounts, we encounter both mythological and historical references to ancient warfare and violence, underscoring the deep antiquity of the Punjab's martial traditions.

In the medieval period, tribal¹¹ warfare and kinship-based confederations were significant. While they cannot be situated within the framework of social banditry in any strict sense, at times their actions and distinctive personalities evoked resonances with that phenomenon. Such echoes arose not from structural affiliation but from the shared socio-cultural milieu of pastoral and agrarian communities, deeply tied to land and folk custom. The Punjab continued to provide numerous examples where tribal warfare manifested in diverse forms. The tradition of tribal conflict and resistance, already established in antiquity, persisted across the wider region through the medieval era and into later centuries, shaping the collective memory and political culture of the Punjab. Beyond the well-documented wars of the Sultanate and Mughal emperors, political authority in the Punjab often operated in fragmented forms across the land.¹² Within this landscape, tribal culture and clan-based coalitions were deeply entrenched, and violence assumed many different expressions. In the Punjab, particularly across the Ravi River on its western side in the region of the *Bar*,¹³ numerous warlike tribes fought among themselves for centuries. Distinct from settled agriculture, these tribes sustained themselves primarily through pastoralism and animal husbandry. While the Khokhar tribe is especially prominent in accounts of the medieval period, in the later medieval era, the influence of warlike tribes around the Ravi River—especially in Sandal-bar and the adjacent Bars—was considerable. Examples of such tribal and clan-based conflicts are numerous; the *Khara*, *Sial*, *Bhatti*, and *Virak* clans are particularly noteworthy.¹⁴

This kinship-based culture of tribal warfare gave rise to celebrated heroes and memorable events in the Punjab's medieval history. Muhammad Ghori was the ruler of a vast dominion, stretching from the

western regions of Khorasan to the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. A significant historical event occurred in 1206 when he was killed by young men of the Punjab's warlike Khokhar tribe.¹⁵ This tribe also ruled parts of the Punjab in the 14th and 15th centuries. Similarly, Dulla Bhatti, a Rajput tribal chief of Sandal-Bar, fought against the great Mughal emperor Akbar. Dulla Bhatti is celebrated in the Punjab through songs and stories, remembered by the common people as a defender against tyranny and injustice, and as a guardian of agrarian rights. He is generally remembered in the same manner as the 'Robin Hood of Punjab', who helped the poor and arranged the marriages of poor daughters. However, in this discussion, we do not classify him under the definition of a social bandit.¹⁶ The history of these warlike tribes and powerful clans thus extends from battles against great kings and empires to blood feuds and local vendettas.

This tradition is also clearly reflected in the Punjab's famous *qissas* (epic ballads).¹⁷ In the tale of Mirza-Sahiban, the internal rivalry and conflict between the *Sial* and *Kharal* clans play a crucial role. Yet the narrative of these two lovers extends beyond the immediate context of clan rivalry, symbolising the broader Punjabi cultural tension between individual desire and collective honour. It is particularly noteworthy that Mirza's mother addresses him in relation to the *Sial's*, the rival clan, a gesture that encapsulates how kinship and enmity could be linguistically intertwined within oral tradition.

*"Chardhe Mirze Khan nu mattan deve maa.
Bure Sialan de maamle, buri Sialan di raah.
Buriyan Sialan diyan aurtaan, laindiyan jaadu paa.
Kaddh kaleje khaandiyan, mere jhaate tel na paa"*¹⁸

*"The rising Mirza Khan is given counsel by his mother.
Siyal's sinister schemes, its evil paths unseen.
Wicked women weave wiles, leading men to their ruin.
Devour your heart, do not destroy me, I convene."*¹⁹

In the same way, even up to colonial times, warlike tribes continued to fight according to their inherent nature and disposition. During the colonial period, the fierce resistance offered by Ahmad Khan Kharal, chief of the Kharal tribe, against the British government is celebrated both historically and in folklore. On both sides of the Ravi—the Sandalbar and the Neelibar, as discussed earlier—warlike tribes were concentrated. In

this area, Ahmad Khan Kharal of Jhamara village fought the British. Ahmad Khan Kharal was the principal fighter during the revolt of 1857. The *Kharals*, together with the *Wattoo* clan, carried out the Gogera Jailbreak, which became a very famous incident in the history of colonial Punjab.²⁰ In this way, the pattern of resistance and violence continued throughout the colonial period in the Punjab.

One important aspect requiring closer attention is the role of women. In discussions of social banditry, including Eric Hobsbawm's influential work, the position of women has often remained underexplored. Yet the Punjab's pre-colonial history and its traditions of warfare and violence allow for a discussion of women's role within tribal and kinship-based societies. In these communities, women were not only respected but also played crucial roles in shaping conflict and reconciliation. At times, they became the cause of conflict, yet on many occasions they also acted as mediators, invoking the bonds of extended kinship—where adversaries were ultimately brothers—to restrain hostilities by appealing to the ties of brotherhood and the welfare of children. In doing so, they were able to halt battles and establish an atmosphere of peace.²¹ Their presence was central to the moral fabric of tribal society, and their honour was carefully safeguarded. Equally significant is the participation of women from marginalised strata, who also contributed to these traditions.²² In the confrontation between the Kharals and the colonial government, for instance, the tribe famously declared to the British that "*they do not share their women, horses, or land with anyone*" underscoring the inseparability of women's honour from collective identity. The ballads of Dulla Bhatti vividly illustrate this. In one such ballad, women of his household are depicted as being seized and dishonoured by rivals, while exhorting him to rise in defence:

*"Rūṛe Jatt ne hāin māriā, mūhre Dulle de jā,
Terā bhet sharikā de liā, Mughal lathe san ā
Bannh laio ne Laddhī mā nū, jīhdī kukhe rahiō samā
Terī bhaiṇ Salemo bannh lai, tainū gīdī ākhdi jā
Terā bannh liā bachṛā Nūrkhān, hathī hathoṛiā lā
Terī Phullrā Rāṇī bannh lai, jīhdī sejē bahīdā sain jā
Tū dāhane san Dilī de kingre, Lāhor vāle te pahilā dāh
Bhalke roṭī vele nū vikaṇe, barade Lāhor vich jā
Take take nū bādhā vikaṇiā, Dullea! būhe sharikā de jā
Je tū Bind Rājpūt dī, bādhā chuṛā ke vikhā."²³*

“The Rurra Jatt raised cries, standing before Dulla:
 “Your secret has been betrayed to your rivals, the
 Mughals have descended. They have bound your
 mother, Laddhi, in whose womb you once dwelled.
 Your sister Saleemo has been seized; she calls out to
 you in grief. Your young son, Noor Khan, has been
 captured, his hands bound in irons. Your queen
 Phullran Rani has been bound, upon whose bridal
 bed you once sat. You were destined to topple the
 ramparts of Delhi, but first bring down those of
 Lahore. Tomorrow, at the hour of bread, your kin
 will be sold in Lahore’s market. For mere coins, your
 women will be sold, Dulla! Go to the doors of your
 rivals. If you are truly the son of Rajput, then free
 your women and show your valour.”

These heroic imprints have been permanently imprinted upon the collective consciousness of the people of the Punjab. What unites all these figures is their bravery, compassion for their community, the spirit of fighting for their kinship and tribe, and their refusal to submit to foreign domination or hierarchical power—indeed, their willingness to challenge such authority. Such traditions of warfare and resistance cannot be overlooked when situating the discussion of social banditry in the subsequent sections.

II. Disrupted Bonds: From Tribal Kinship to Colonial Economy

“*Kal Aee Kuthae Muhee Khaj Hoa Muradhar Gusae* | |
Rajae Pap Kamanvadhae Oulattee Varr Khaeth Ko Khaee | |”²⁴

Bhai Gurdas’s (1551-1636) verse vividly depicts *Kaliyug* as an age in which rulers themselves consume those they are meant to protect—“when the protective fence itself was devouring the field.” Within Indian knowledge traditions, and particularly in Sikh thought, *Kaliyug* signifies darkness, disorder, and moral decline. Such metaphors acquire specific resonance in particular historical contexts. In colonial Punjab, while the British projected their rule as progress and enlightenment, for the peasantry, it was experienced as a new *Kaliyug*. Agrarian distress—manifested in indebtedness and exploitation—defined this era, with both the colonial

administration and princely states complicit in the subjugation of rural society. What was proclaimed as modernity was, for the people, a profound rupture and descent into darkness.

For our subject of social banditry, among the many changes introduced under the colonial state, the most crucial is the impact of this transition on the social formation and the traditional order of society. As we have discussed, forms of tribal warfare, raiding, clan-based rivalries, and other modes of violence were present in the Punjab—as indeed in many parts of the world—in varying degrees. Yet social banditry is not a phenomenon found in every historical period.²⁵ While outlaws or other heroic traditions may overlap with social banditry, that is a separate question; the distinctive feature of social banditry is that it emerges specifically in a particular historical period of transition. In the Punjab's tribal kinship-based society, colonialism struck a profound rupture, particularly within the rural and agrarian sphere. Neeladri Bhattacharya has described this as 'the colonial reshaping of a rural world'.²⁶ Social banditry in the Punjab likewise arose during this colonial transition, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

Indeed, during this specific period, changes occurred not only in the agrarian landscape and economy, but also in the very social setup of the rural Punjab. The colonial transition disrupted long-standing kinship ties and customary practices.²⁷ In place of the tribal kinship-based order, new forms of social stratification began to take shape.²⁸ The British sought to redefine local communities; how far they succeeded, or whether they produced a peculiar condition of ambivalence instead²⁹, is a separate matter. What remains clear is that the movement toward commercial agriculture and new political-administrative structures gave rise to new classes.³⁰ Out of this complex and multi-layered transformation, Punjab's social banditry was born. During this specific period of transition, a distinct class of moneylenders came into existence. Debt had become the greatest torment for the Punjab's peasantry, trapping them in a vicious cycle from which escape was nearly impossible. As Malcolm Lyall Darling encapsulated, "*The Punjab peasant is born in debt, lives in debt, and dies in debt.*" Darling's remark explains the structural cycle of indebtedness in colonial Punjab, where credit relations bound peasants to moneylenders across generations. His observation is less a literal description than a critique of the agrarian economy's systemic constraints.³¹ This cycle of indebtedness spread even into the princely states. The colonial administration, while actively promoting and facilitating this class of

moneylenders, simultaneously sought to restrain and regulate them.³² This contradiction stands as a major example of the ambivalence of the colonial state, which introduced several legislative acts in an attempt to manage the situation. Yet, freeing the peasantry from debt and agrarian distress had become an unattainable task.³³ For the peasants, beyond the immediate realities of hunger and poverty, the most tangible and proximate form of exploitation they encountered was the moneylender. It was precisely for this reason that, in the Punjab, social bandits most often targeted moneylenders—seeking to turn wrong into right, and to strike at the figures who embodied the everyday oppression of rural society.

The pauperisation of the peasantry becomes the cause for the emergence of social bandits. The impoverished peasantry of the Punjab during this transitional period was deeply ensnared in the clutches of moneylenders. There were several reasons behind the phenomenon of moneylending. In the colonial Punjab, alongside the imposition of high rates of land revenue, recurrent famines also contributed to this condition. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the spread of diseases during this period—such as plague, malaria, smallpox, and cholera—together with the colonial state's mismanagement of these crises, had a profound and devastating impact on the social and economic life of the people. Consequently, with rising interest rates and the alienation of land, the economic structure of the peasantry became increasingly destabilised and deteriorated day by day.³⁴ The people found no solution to escape the harassment and exploitation at the hands of Shahukars (moneylenders), for these figures were inseparably tied to government officials, the exploitative administrative system, Zamindars, the Zaildars, and the Lambardars.³⁵ This nexus of power meant that moneylenders were not isolated agents but part of a wider colonial and local structure of domination. Consequently, social banditry in the Punjab was directed not merely against individual creditors but against the broader system that sustained rural exploitation.

Under British colonialism, the so-called civilising mission and the rhetoric of modernity were not confined to claims of progress or the production of a "civilised" human being. These projects carried multiple layers, deeply intertwined with everyday practices, modes of living, and mental orientations, which gradually became visible within colonised societies.³⁶ In the Punjab, colonialism decisively reshaped pre-colonial social formations—disciplining, redirecting, and ultimately controlling ways of life and thought. Colonial rule introduced new forms of

discipline, fear, and coercion, extending power into everyday conduct. Unlike pre-colonial polities, which lacked the capacity to penetrate every locality or individual, colonial authority expanded its reach, eroding older forms of autonomy and resistance.³⁷ Practices rooted in kinship codes, once legitimate within tribal society, were increasingly criminalised under colonial law. The codification of customs froze practices that had previously been flexible and adaptive, while the imposition of modernist frameworks disrupted long-standing social bonds. This dual strategy—preserving certain clan-based ties while reshaping them according to utilitarian and liberal frameworks—produced a complex and contradictory situation, simultaneously redefining identities and generating new forms of stratification and conflict.³⁸

The Punjab, named after its rivers, experienced its most profound agrarian rupture when water was transformed from a sacred life-source into a regulated commodity.³⁹ Colonial canal construction reconfigured landscapes and livelihoods, embedding irrigation within the logic of commercial agriculture. This canalisation entered oral traditions, where ballads and folk songs marked canals and bridges as contested sites of authority. One verse captures this vividly:

“Ghōrī sāhab kōl sarkārī,
 Jiūṇe kar laī khōh asavārī
 Aḍḍī chaṛhde jaṭṭ ne māṛī, nahrōm pār ho giā,
 Jiūṇā maur ghōrī ‘te farār ho giā.”⁴⁰

“The government officer had a government-allotted mare. Jeona snatched it and mounted for riding. The Jat struck his spur and crossed the canal. Jeona turned the mare and escaped in flight.”

Taken together, these processes—erosion of kinship identities, expansion of disciplinary power, commodification of agrarian resources, and reordering of traditions—constituted the deeper transition of colonial Punjab. They fractured the old order and generated new forms of exploitation, while the “colonial gaze” redefined communities and imposed new categories of recognition. Within this context, social banditry emerged as a response to rupture, injustice, and everyday oppression, embodying resistance to both economic domination and the disciplining of conduct and identity.

III. Forests of Memory, Deserts of History

Before turning to the discussion of social bandits of the Punjab, it is essential to recognise that the stories of these figures have reached us primarily through folklore and oral traditions, transmitted across generations.⁴¹ In the vernacular, this mode of transmission is referred to as “*seena-ba-seena*” (from chest to chest). What matters most here is not their strict historical authenticity, but rather their popular acceptance. As Eric Hobsbawm has written in relation to the Robin Hood myth: “For the bandit myth, the reality of their existence may be secondary. Few, even among archive-rats, really care about identifying the original Robin Hood, if there was such a one. We know that Joaquin Murieta of California is a literary invention; nevertheless, he is part of the structural study of banditry as a social phenomenon.”⁴²

Social bandits and folk heroes can be understood within historiography as a marginalised group. In mainstream historiography, social bandits and folk heroes have generally not been considered central figures, receiving little importance and often occupying only a peripheral place within historical narratives.⁴³ Being heroes of the subaltern, they—like the histories of subaltern and marginalised communities themselves—have tended to remain outside the dominant frameworks of historical writing.⁴⁴ Scholars of social banditry, folk heroism, and subaltern history have consistently pointed to this absence of emphasis.

On the oral traditions, Jan Vansina’s seminal work stands out, particularly his important contributions to the study of African oral traditions.⁴⁵ In the Punjab, however, written scholarship on oral tradition remains sparse. Where such work does exist, it has rarely engaged with oral narratives and folklore in a sustained academic manner. Yet this absence should not be read as a negation of their importance, nor does it diminish their significance in the eyes of the people. Indeed, one of the earliest extensive written efforts to record Punjabi legends was undertaken by Richard Temple, who documented them through bards and oral sources. Even so, Temple’s work did not encompass all figures of Punjab’s heroic tradition—for instance, Dulla Bhatti is absent from his accounts.⁴⁶ Later, Ahmad Salim worked on the *var* (ballad) of Dulla Bhatti,⁴⁷ while in more recent times, research has begun to focus on Ahmad Khan Kharal and the *Kharals* in relation to the 1857 uprising.⁴⁸

The crucial point, however, is that research on the Punjab’s social bandits—most of whom emerged during the colonial period—remains

limited. In Malwa, poets did compose *qissas* (ballads) about bandits, but in the western Punjab, such narratives are far fewer, leaving little material for further scholarly exploration. Malwa's bandits are remembered in the *qissas* of Bhagwan Singh, Babu Rajab Ali, Rita Din, and many others.⁴⁹ Yet even within these ballads, the stories of bandits vary, precisely because they are rooted in folklore and oral tradition. Poets wrote these *qissas* under the influence of what they heard or remembered, and thus variation is intrinsic to the genre. It is therefore important to stress that the central issue is not their historical authenticity, but rather the ways in which these bandits left an imprint on popular consciousness and collective memory.

This imprint is visible not only in the oral and written traditions of the twentieth century but also in their modern afterlives. Some songs and stories about the Punjab's bandits belong to the realm of myth and legend, while others are part folk ballads —indeed, many of these songs are anonymous, with no information available about their authors. At the same time, a significant number were consciously crafted by lyricists,⁵⁰ who gave poetic form to the exploits and reputations of bandits. These compositions were then carried into popular circulation through the voices of celebrated Punjabi folk singers.

The performance of such folklore, legends, *qissas*, along with songs in live arenas, on radio, and later through cassette culture ensured their wide dissemination.⁵¹ Their appeal was not confined to rural audiences alone; they became part of a broader Punjabi cultural repertoire, often blurring the line between folk memory and popular entertainment. By the late twentieth century, many of these performances were further amplified through cinematic adaptations,⁵² where bandit figures were dramatised and their songs integrated into film soundtracks.

What is striking is that even after the decline of traditional bardic performance and the cassette era, these songs continue to thrive in the digital age. On platforms such as YouTube, they attract audiences in the hundreds of thousands and even millions, demonstrating their enduring resonance. The viral success of a recent Bollywood song in *Animal*, which drew upon Punjabi folk meters to narrate the figure of *Arjan Vailley*,⁵³ illustrates how the idiom of bandit songs remains culturally potent.

From this, one can discern much about the Punjabi banditry: in people's memory and folk traditions, its presence remains as dense and expansive as a forest, while in historiography it appears more like a desert. The question of the authenticity of these mythic legends, however, is ultimately left to the judgment of readers and audiences themselves.

In this sense, cultural texts—rather than archival memory—are approached as sites of meaning within the framework of memory studies, not merely as records of historical events.⁵⁴ At the same time, we aim to situate the historical period in which these social bandits emerged, and to place the Punjabi tradition of social banditry within the broader framework of a universal phenomenon.

IV. Crime and Community in Colonial Punjab

In colonial Punjab, those whom the state designated as “criminals” can broadly be divided into three categories. The Punjab witnessed the presence of numerous social bandits, but even more numerous were the ordinary bandits, raiders, and robbers—those for whom raiding and plundering constituted a natural part of life. Yet, during the colonial period, there were also hundreds of thousands of people who were neither social bandits nor raiders or brigands, and yet, strikingly, the colonial government declared them to be criminals.

The first category of criminals consisted of those communities whom the British, without attempting to understand the complexities of the Punjabi society or the dignity of its indigenous lifeways, labelled as thieves and *dacoits* and declared “criminal tribes”.⁵⁵ Many nomadic and gypsy-type groups were thus stigmatised as criminal tribes, subjected to social ostracism and constant surveillance. Indeed, under the colonial gaze, every individual was deemed “uncivilised” if, according to British standards, he did not think, behave, or discipline himself in the prescribed manner. Nomadic life and forest-based modes of living were brought under control, and entire communities were declared criminals, barbarians, and uncultured by birth. This law, influenced by administrators such as Captain W.H. Sleeman and his thuggee campaign in central India, was introduced in the Punjab in 1871, and its scope was further tightened and expanded in 1911.⁵⁶ This was, in fact, one of the most extreme forms of colonial oppression inflicted upon a large population in the Punjab without any substantive justification. Among these groups were the Bauria, Bazigar Banjara, Bangla, Barad, Gandhila, Nat, Sansi, and other subgroups.⁵⁷ These were innocent people, living in accordance with their natural lifeways and small worlds of their own making. They are not the subject of this paper. However, before turning to the social bandits—those who were considered criminals in the eyes of the state—it is

necessary to outline this cruel and ironic situation created by the colonial regime.

The second category of criminals in the Punjab comprised those for whom raiding, plundering, *dacoity*, and even maintaining blood feuds were common practices.⁵⁸ Yet, these cannot be equated with the forms of *thuggee* and *dacoity* found elsewhere in India.⁵⁹ First, these activities were not carried out by organised gangs or groups, as in the case of the *Phansigars*⁶⁰ of northern India. Rather, such traits were found across entire communities or clans. Second, these practices were not their primary occupation; instead, they were regarded within pastoral or agrarian communities as signs of valour. Raiding, counter-raiding, and cattle theft were the most prominent expressions of this ethos. One may say that this was a cultural phenomenon embedded within the Punjab's tribal and kinship-based social fabric.⁶¹ Unlike the so-called 'criminal tribes', these clans or tribes were not in as precarious or marginalised a social and political condition. This was because, during the British colonial period, many of them had received land grants or were otherwise engaged in settled agriculture, which gave them a degree of association with and control over land.⁶² However, for such tribal societies, adjusting to the new colonial system was an extremely difficult task. The British, therefore, experimented with multiple forms of coercion and employed a variety of methods to the extent that court cases and appearances became part of the everyday routine and a common phenomenon for these communities.⁶³ Their integration into agrarian practices meant that, socially and politically, they were not subjected to the same level of exclusion or surveillance. Over time, however, the spread of settled agricultural routines and the pressures of colonial administrative control led to a significant decline in raiding, cattle theft, and related practices.

The third category of criminals—and the central focus of this paper—were the social bandits.

V. Social Bandits of the Punjab

“Jaggā jammēām tē milaṅ vadhāīām
 Vaddā hoēā ḍākē mārda pūrnām
 Mām kōlō viśhṛ gaeā o putt sūrmā
 Jaggē māriā Lyallpur ḍākā, Ke tārām kharak paīām āpe
 Tarīkām bhugatṅ gae tere māpe”

“Congratulations were offered at Jagga’s birth. Grown to manhood, he carried out daring raids. From his mother, he was parted, that valiant son. Jagga struck the Lyallpur robbery – the telegraph wires themselves began to rattle. Your parents must endure the court appearances.”

As noted earlier, the arrival of the British in the Punjab marked a period of transition. Within this transitional phase, the rise of social banditry and its confrontation with the colonial state, along with the tensions it generated, are vividly articulated in this particular folk song about Jagga.

Within Punjabi folklore and oral traditions, Jagga is surrounded by many stories, yet certain aspects of his life remain recurrent and broadly acknowledged as fact.⁶⁴ His village, Burj Ran Singh Wala, was located near Kasur, between the regions of Okara and Lahore. His period of activity is generally situated in the early decades of the twentieth century. The story of Jagga’s transformation into a bandit is tied to a conflict with a local moneylender, arising from debt and the harassment of his family. This narrative is among the most common in the universal repertoire of banditry. Fundamentally, Jagga fulfils the primary condition that distinguishes a criminal from a social bandit: he was a victim of injustice.⁶⁵ The injustice he faced was rooted in the exploitation carried out by the newly emergent class of moneylenders in colonial Punjab, who preyed upon ordinary villagers. In retaliation, Jagga killed the moneylender who had tormented his family—likely his first act of violence.⁶⁶ Yet this crime, in the eyes of his community, was not considered a crime at all. Rather, he was perceived as having transformed a wrong into a right.⁶⁷ Consequently, instead of being condemned as a criminal, Jagga was honoured and respected among his people. From this point onward, Jagga continued his exploits and gradually attained the status of a social bandit in the Punjab. Written accounts of Jagga are scarce, yet his memory endures in the Punjabi oral tradition, most vividly through a famous folk song whose verses encapsulate the clash between banditry and colonial authority, the social transition in the Punjab, and the rise of the new state apparatus.

Among Jagga’s exploits, the most renowned was the Lyallpur dacoity. This raid holds considerable historical importance, for Lyallpur was the very region where the celebrated hero of the Punjab’s heroic tradition, Dulla Bhatti, had once resisted Emperor Akbar.⁶⁸ Lyallpur can be regarded as the very edifice, or a major exemplar, of the British

government's social engineering and irrigational projects in the Punjab.⁶⁹ The city itself was named after Sir James Lyall, then Governor General of Punjab. More importantly, Lyallpur and its surrounding region became the centrepiece of the canalisation and irrigation schemes initiated by the British in the 1880s, at that time among the largest such projects in the world.⁷⁰ Of the nine canal colonies established in the Punjab, Lyallpur, together with adjoining areas such as Gujranwala and Jhang, formed the Lower Chenab Colony, under which approximately 2 million acres of land were brought under irrigation.⁷¹ Land grants were distributed afresh, and new populations were settled in the region.⁷² The demographic transformation was striking: in 1892, the district's population stood at roughly 60,000, but by 1911 it had risen to 1,160,000.⁷³ In short, Lyallpur had by then become a major hub of commercial agriculture for the British government.

Alongside this expansion, debt and moneylending also reached unprecedented levels.⁷⁴ It is in this context that Jagga's raid in Lyallpur acquires particular significance. References to direct confrontation between the Punjab's social bandits and the colonial state are relatively rare. Typically, the targets of social bandits were not the highest authorities or, more particularly, with the "fount of justice",⁷⁵ but rather local intermediaries in rural society—zamindars, lambardars, zaildars, petty officials, and above all, moneylenders. Yet in Jagga's narrative, as preserved in the folk song, we encounter a direct confrontation with the apparatus of the colonial state. The song explicitly mentions two crucial departments of the British colonial government: the telegraph and the law courts.⁷⁶ Neither had any precedent in the pre-colonial Punjabi society. The reference to the telegraph sounding after Jagga's raid signifies the intrusion of modern state technologies into local life, and highlights how social banditry—and the heroism of figures like Jagga—was perceived as a direct challenge to the colonial state, instilling fear within its institutions. Equally significant is the motif of "*Tareeka Bhugtana*" (court appearance), which marks a profound departure from tribal customs toward the new legal codes introduced by the British.⁷⁷ The law courts brought with them a system of punishment tied to imprisonment, a novel development in human history that introduced surveillance as a central element of penal practice. As Michel Foucault has observed, "*the state's focus shifted from the body to the soul, aiming at control rather than mere physical punishment.*"⁷⁸

Thus, this folk song does not merely recount the exploits of an important social bandit in the Punjab; it also illuminates the emergence of

modern governance and the broader historical transition unfolding in colonial Punjab. Another striking aspect of the folk song about Jagga is its reference to the very state apparatuses with which he is shown in confrontation. Lyallpur symbolises economic development, the telegraph represents new forms of communication, and the law courts signify modern administration. What is particularly noteworthy is that these very three elements either prevent social banditry from emerging in the first place or ultimately become the decisive factors in bringing about its decline. As Eric Hobsbawm has written: *"In a broader sense, 'modernisation', that is to say the combination of economic development, efficient communications and public administration, deprives any kind of banditry, including the social, of the conditions under which it flourishes."*⁷⁹

In numerous folkloric narratives, Jagga is depicted in association with another Punjabi social bandit, Malangi, with their friendship often highlighted. In some traditions, it is even suggested that Jagga's death was indirectly caused by Malangi's earlier demise. According to these accounts, Jagga visited Malangi's mother at night, since, after her son's death, she was being harassed by certain individuals. Jagga assumed the role of her son, seeking to protect her and punish those who troubled her. It was during this intervention that he was treacherously killed.⁸⁰ Many oral sources emphasise that Jagga was betrayed and slain by village barbers (*nāī*), who were familiar with him. The *Bohar* (Banyan) tree, deeply significant in the Punjabi society as a communal gathering space yet also associated with death and fear, makes his killing a profound social crime. This is captured in the folk verse:

"Jaggā māriā bohṛ dī chāvē, te nau man ret bhij gāī"

"Jagga was slain beneath the shade of the Banyan tree, and nine maunds of sand were drenched."

One of the essential conditions for the operation of social banditry is the availability of a geographical environment that provides refuge and concealment. Such terrain is most effective when sparsely populated or remote.⁸¹ To see further nuances of social banditry, we can understand it better by placing it in the context of different regions of the Punjab. The regions of Majha and the Bist Jalandhar Doab in the Punjab did not offer such conditions. Even in pre-colonial times, these areas were heavily cultivated, with abundant rainfall due to their submontane location, and

numerous wells that supported dense settlement.⁸² By contrast, the Bar tracts of the Punjab—such as Sandal Bar, Ganji Bar, and Neeli Bar—were largely uninhabited wastelands. Agriculture was confined to lowland areas along riverbanks, while the interior was dominated by pastoral tribes.⁸³ However, under direct colonial control, these “waste lands” were systematically transformed into canal colonies. Every corner of these tracts fell under the surveillance of the colonial state. In colonial terminology, land was divided into rectangles and squares, villages and fields were mapped, and the entire region was subjected to cartographic representation.⁸⁴

Consequently, the Malwa region remained the most secure refuge for social bandits in the Punjab. Situated south of the Sutlej River and stretching toward the Thar desert, it formed a semi-arid zone marked by dry forests and sand uplands (*tibbe*), likely shaped by old river courses or some other ecological processes. Despite colonial interventions, its sandy soil, scattered forests, and semi-arid tracts and remoteness offering cover and mobility, set it apart from other parts of the Punjab, where the reach of the newly established administration was comparatively limited.⁸⁵ Geography alone did not foster social banditry;⁸⁶ it was the oppressive socio-economic conditions—pauperised peasants, exploitative zamindars, rising moneylenders, and feudal retainers under princely authority—that created fertile ground. For these reasons, most of the Punjab’s social bandits emerged from Malwa.

Nevertheless, the Bar tracts were not devoid of bandit activity. Jagga himself, for instance, is associated with Sandal Bar and Ganji Bar. Similarly, in the western Punjab, numerous bandits are mentioned in oral traditions. Some of these figures may be classified as social bandits; among the well-known bandits of the Punjab’s western region are Malangi Faqir, Nizam Lohar, and Jabroo Nai. A famous saying about Malangi declares: “*By day the rule of the British, by night the rule of Malangi.*”⁸⁷ Malangi himself belonged to the Kasur area, where his land was seized by a wealthy individual. In response, he allied with bandits from the Ferozpur region. These outlaws, apart from operating in Malwa, also found refuge in the Changa-Manga forest. It is noteworthy that Changa-Manga was not a natural forest but rather a plantation created by the British government near Kasur to supply timber for railways and other needs. The forest itself took its name from the bandits Changa and Manga, who carried out raids and then concealed themselves within it.⁸⁸ Their presence instilled fear in the area. Yet it is important to note that

Changa and Manga, though notorious, cannot be classified as social bandits: they robbed ordinary people and were not connected to peasant grievances. Consequently, they are not remembered in folk memory in the same way as figures like Malangi.

Nizam Lohar's grave is located in Kasur, where he is commemorated as a folk hero. His epitaph in a local cemetery reflects this popular remembrance.⁸⁹ Folklore often depicts Nizam Lohar and Jabroo Nai fighting together. They are remembered for burning the account books of moneylenders, for Nizam Lohar's repeated jail breaks, and for direct confrontations with the police.⁹⁰ In Pakistan, these social bandits remain part of folk memory, and films about them were produced decades ago. This indicates that while they played a significant role as social bandits during the colonial period, their influence on oral tradition and popular imagination ensured that soon after independence, they became subjects of cinematic representation.⁹¹

An especially interesting aspect of these three social bandits is that all of them belonged to marginalised or so-called lower occupational groups in the Punjab. Nai (barber), Lohar (blacksmith), and Faqir (mendicant or ascetic) are occupational categories, but in the Punjab, they were incorporated into the caste hierarchy, which carried notions of social ranking and discrimination.⁹² Social banditry as a universal phenomenon is not defined by caste. India's caste system, however, renders the Indian case distinctive and raises particular questions in this context. The tradition of *dacoity* in India, distinct from social banditry, involves different dynamics and lies beyond the scope of this paper. Here we are treating the Punjab as an independent case, examined on its own terms. In the Punjab specifically, although caste existed and discrimination was present, it does not prominently surface in the folklore surrounding social banditry. Bandits and common robbers were found across castes, but the famous social bandits of the western Punjab reinforce the point that caste was not the decisive factor. Rather, class stratification was crucial.⁹³ In the Punjab's social banditry, class struggle was sharply drawn: on one side stood poor, landless peasants and debt-ridden cultivators, and on the other side zamindars, moneylenders, and feudal retainers who extracted surplus and reinforced rural oppression. This conflict was further sustained by the colonial state apparatus—law courts, police, and administrative machinery—which protected elite interests and extended coercive authority into the countryside. Yet social banditry did not

amount to a revolutionary phenomenon, for its scope was limited and it could not evolve into a broader social movement.⁹⁴

Jeona of Maur village stands out as the most celebrated bandit of the Malwa region. His turn to banditry came when his brother Kishna was unjustly imprisoned. Malwa, as already discussed, was not only geographically suitable as a refuge for bandits, but also, unlike the fertile Jalandhar Doab and Majha, it was marked by a large “rural surplus population.”⁹⁵ Because of the scarcity of work, the region could not provide employment to all “able-bodied men.”⁹⁶ This combination of geographical refuge and demographic imbalance, together with rural distress and elite oppression, made Malwa the most fitting ground for banditry in the Punjab. Equally noteworthy is that its case was not at all like that of the Sindouse in Uttar Pradesh, where landlords and elites deliberately fostered or protected large numbers of thugs and bandits, making them an extra source of income for the elite.⁹⁷ There, elites offered protection and demanded a share of the booty. In the Punjab, however, folklore and popular memory did not valorise collusion with elites; instead, they celebrated those who resisted them, and Jeona Maur became the archetype of such resistance.

Kishna himself was a well-known bandit, but he was betrayed by his companion Ahmad Dogar, who treacherously delivered him into prison. Critics of social banditry often argue that bandits were not truly “social,” but rather worked with the state or elites.⁹⁸ In the Punjab, however, folklore drew a clear distinction between “good” and “bad” bandits.⁹⁹ Ahmad Dogar was a common or potential bandit, but his collusion with authority led to Kishna’s downfall. Kishna, by contrast, was remembered as a “good bandit.” Yet neither Kishna nor Ahmad Dogar received the legendary stature that folklore accorded to Kishna’s brother Jeona.

As preserved in oral narratives, or as local traditions recount, Jeona and Sucha Soorma can be considered both avengers and noble robbers.¹⁰⁰ As an avenger, Jeona sought retribution for the injustice inflicted upon his family—his brother Kishna, writing from Andaman jail (vernacularly referred to as *kala-pani*), urged him to take revenge—which he carried out by killing Ahmad Dogar. As a noble robber, he thereafter roamed the countryside, embodying popular ideals of justice, protection, and communal guardianship. His legend illustrates that the Punjabi banditry was not simply an act of defiance but a means of fulfilling social expectations of honor and resistance.

The same is true of Sucha Soorma: his story reveals that, even while he displayed the traits of a noble robber, he also resorted to revenge and violence. In fact, among the Punjab's bandits, elements of both the noble robber and the avenger were present; they embodied aspects of each type, though the noble robber traits were more pronounced. While they did at times resort to revenge and violence, their dominant image was that of noble robbers—marked by limited use of force, the looting of the rich, redistribution to the poor, and serving as the voice of the peasantry.¹⁰¹ Yet under extreme circumstances—when confronting injustice or attempting to right a wrong—they did engage in violence, even outright killing. By contrast, in the avenger category of social bandits, violence, often extreme violence, constituted the central mode of action.¹⁰² This duality reflects the Punjab's historical association with a tradition of war and violence, in which justice was frequently perceived in close relation to revenge. In many folk songs, the theme of vengeance is central, with references to firing bullets and creating terror—practices common among the Punjabi social bandits. Such terror, in turn, helped them establish power and an enduring image within the peasantry.¹⁰³ Consequently, people looked to these avengers with hope, appealing to them for assistance, as reflected in numerous references found in oral narratives and folk tales.

*“Kāle pāñīu morh nū, khaṭṭ kishne pāiā,
Badlā lai lāī, Jioñiā je mā dā jāiā.”*

“From the jail (kala-pani), Kishna,
sent a letter to Maur (Jeona),
Oh Jeona! If you are truly the son of your
mother, rise up and take revenge.”

The story of Sucha Soorma, within the wider framework of social banditry, highlights another crucial dimension. Whether noble robbers, avengers, or guerrilla fighters, however, bandits could not always uphold the full range of images demanded of social bandits; in questions of sexual morality, they remained uncompromising.¹⁰⁴ Extra-marital relations were perceived by them only in terms of rape or, in anti-social customs, concubinage.¹⁰⁵ In the Punjab, Sucha Soorma's tale provides a striking example: he killed his sister-in-law, Balbiro, because she had formed an illicit sexual relationship with one of Sucha Soorma's close companions. He abandoned his military service for this reason, but managed to obtain

a firearm from the military itself, with which he killed both Balbiro and her lover Ghukkar, before spreading terror among others. Desertion from the army, or expulsion for various reasons, occupies an important place in the phenomenon of social banditry. Across the world, many social bandits had, at some stage in their careers, a connection with military service.¹⁰⁶

“Suchchām siō ne āuṇī badkār takkāli,
kandh utte rakhī bai raphal chakk lī
diur bharjāī rahige kalle mitro
“saraṛ-saraṛ” goli challe mitro”¹⁰⁷

“Upon seeing Balbiro, the wicked one,
The clash could no longer be undone.
From the wall, he seized the rifle’s might,
gripped it firmly, and prepared to fight.
Brothers-in-law and sisters left behind,
he marched ahead with a steadfast mind.
“Saraṛ-saraṛ” — the bullets thundered loud,
they crackled through the air, my friends, unbowed.”

A distinctive feature of the Punjabi banditry, unlike most traditions elsewhere, was the expectation that bandits act as protectors not only of the poor but also of the cow. In the Punjab, the phrase *gau garib da rakhwala* (“protector of cow and poor”) was used as a metaphor for heroic figures and social bandits. This was common among the Punjabi bandits and reflects the centrality of the cow in Malwa. The cow was revered not only in religious or folk-religious terms, but also held economic and communal significance in pastoral and rural society. In the colonial period, cow protection acquired political dimensions, but in folklore, the emphasis remained on bandits saving cows from butchers. Numerous ballads and oral narratives attest to this motif, and both Jeona and Sucha Soorma are depicted in folk songs as protectors of cows as well. A similar kind of story is found in folk songs and *qissas* about Harfool Singh, who, in response to the injustice he suffered, took up arms. He then became a figure of hope for the peasantry and the poor, refusing to bow before any other authority. A famous Punjabi song about Harfool declares:

“Khōhnde kadē sūrme kisē dā haqq nā,
āṇā nahīm chhaḍde”

“The warriors never seize another’s right,
Nor do they ever abandon their own.”

Although one feels compelled to record more stories and songs about these Punjabi social bandits, we must, to keep the discussion within reasonable limits, leave this narrative open for further research. To understand each Punjabi bandit within the category of social banditry, it is essential to repeatedly revisit their tales and myths. Indeed, within the Punjab, there are accounts of more than one hundred bandits, each requiring careful examination through the lens of oral tradition and folklore.

However, within this entire phenomenon, and keeping its historical context in view, it is important to recognise that the period of social banditry in the Punjab broadly coincided—though with slight variations—with the era in which numerous politically organised movements emerged. Even without listing them exhaustively, these included social reform, religious reform, agrarian-peasant protests, left-oriented violent and non-violent movements, and the national freedom struggle influenced by the Congress. By the first half of the twentieth century, the Punjab had become a major centre of political and social movements. It must be emphasised that these movements were initiated by the politically conscious classes of society. It is in this context that Eric Hobsbawm regarded social banditry as the archaic form of such organised movements. Social bandits did not directly become part of structured or programmatic movements; rather, they functioned symbolically.¹⁰⁸

One reason for this was that bandits were often illiterate and lacked the precise language to articulate their demands. Conversely, the organised movements themselves did not possess a language accessible to the bandits, which might have enabled their integration. Occasional references suggest that dacoits in the western Punjab may have assisted the *Babbar Akali Lehar* or similar movements, but such claims remain doubtful.¹⁰⁹ In reality, social banditry was connected to what Hobsbawm termed the “primitive form of class struggles” and to the “moral economy” of the peasantry. This linkage inspired marginalised and oppressed groups, for revolutionaries and bandits shared one crucial aspiration—the “dream of justice.” Thus, we can trace a continuum: from

heroic tradition to banditry, from social banditry to consciously derived social and political movements. This trajectory allows us to situate the Punjabi social banditry within both its local cultural memory and the broader comparative framework of resistance and transformation.

Conclusion

As the Punjabi proverb reminds us—“Walk fewer steps, but walk with dignity”¹¹⁰—the collective ethos of the Punjab has long been defined by an insistence on living with pride and honour. This cultural disposition is not accidental; it is the product of a long historical experience that has shaped the Punjabi identity across centuries of conflict, resilience, and adaptation. Today, the Punjabi diaspora, dispersed across the globe, continues to carry this ethos with them, transmitting their cultural heritage internationally. Even in the contemporary age of digital communication, the social bandits of the Punjab endure as figures of cultural memory and popular imagination. Their ballads—whether of Jagga, Sucha Soorma, or Jeona Maur—are listened to with equal enthusiasm by the elderly and the youth, testifying to the enduring resonance of these figures. It is necessary that academic studies be meaningfully connected to people’s history and their lived realities, ensuring that scholarly debates and discussions remain engaged with the social truth of everyday life. Such an approach allows us to move beyond abstract theorisation and situate cultural memory within the lived experiences of communities. Yet, despite the prominence of social bandits in popular culture and collective memory, academic scholarship has remained comparatively silent on their role within the larger transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Punjab. While colonial Punjab has been extensively studied, the phenomenon of social banditry—situated at the intersection of myth, folklore, and lived experience—remains underexplored. The persistence of oppression, injustice, and economic exploitation, alongside humanity’s enduring dream of a just society, ensures that the study of social bandits will remain a necessary field of historical and cultural research.

To approach them merely as marginal figures of violence is to miss their deeper symbolic significance: they embody the moral economy of the peasantry, articulating collective notions of justice, dignity, and resistance. Their memory continues to animate the Punjabi consciousness, bridging heroic traditions of defiance with modern struggles for social and political transformation. In this sense, they exemplify what Eric

Hobsbawm identified as the “archaic” yet profoundly meaningful form of resistance—figures who, though outside formal politics, remain central to the imagination of justice and dignity in the Punjab. Ultimately, the study of the Punjabi social banditry must be situated within broader historiographical debates on subaltern resistance, postcolonial memory, and the politics of folklore. By interrogating these figures not only as cultural icons but as historical actors embedded in structures of colonial domination and peasant protest, scholars can illuminate how narratives of outlawry intersect with questions of power, identity, and justice. Such an inquiry enriches our understanding of both the colonial past and its afterlives, revealing how the symbolic repertoire of resistance continues to inform contemporary struggles for equity and dignity in the Punjab and beyond.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Guru Gobind Singh, *Dasam Granth: Chandī di Vār*, ed. and trans. Jodh Singh (Patiala: Heritage Publishers, 1999), vol. 2.
- ² Roughly half of the figures examined in this paper—such as Sucha Soorma and Jeona Maur—emerged from the Malwa princely states (Patiala, Nabha, etc.), which, though not directly administered by the British, remained deeply enmeshed in the colonial order through political subordination, fiscal arrangements, and the presence of British political agents. The other half, including Jagga Jatt, Malangi, and Nizam Lohar, belonged to the British-administered districts of Punjab, particularly the bars and their tribal hinterlands. For this reason, the term “Colonial Punjab” is employed here in an inclusive sense, encompassing both directly ruled districts and the princely states, whose agrarian distress and social dynamics were equally shaped by imperial structures.
- ³ Anton Blok, “The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14, no. 4 (September 1972): 494–503.
- ⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2001), Postscript; Cheah Boon Kheng, “Hobsbawm’s Social Banditry, Myth and Historical

Reality: A Case in the Malaysian State of Kedah, 1915–1920,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 17, no. 4 (1985): 34–51.

- ⁵ Anton Blok, “The Peasant and the Brigand,” 494–503; Kim A. Wagner, “Thuggee and Social Banditry Reconsidered,” *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 2 (2007): 353–375.
- ⁶ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- ⁷ Anton Blok, “Peasant and Brigand,” 494–503; Kim A. Wagner, “Thuggee and Social Banditry,” 353–375.
- ⁸ Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- ⁹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 21, 27.
- ¹⁰ Arrian, *The Anabasis of Alexander*, trans. E. J. Chinnock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), Book VI, Chapter XI.
- ¹¹ In this paper the word “tribal” and “warlike tribe” is used in a historical and descriptive sense, referring to kinship-based groups, clan confederations, and pastoral communities in the Punjab. The term itself has a long colonial history: British administrators and ethnographers employed “tribal” as a category to classify populations they considered outside the mainstream, often attaching stereotypes of primitiveness or backwardness. Scholars have since pointed out that such usage was not neutral, but part of a broader colonial vocabulary of governance and control. At the same time, “tribal” remains a familiar term in both historical sources and popular memory, and it is difficult to avoid when discussing the communities who appear under this label in records and folklore. Our use of the term here is cautious and contextual, intended to describe social formations of clans and confederations in the Punjab’s past, without implying inferiority or primitivism. Where appropriate, we also highlight the heroic traditions and resistance associated with these groups, which were remembered in oral narratives and ballads rather than in colonial stereotypes.
- ¹² Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), Introduction.

- ¹³ Bār is vernacular word for a specific region on the western side of the Punjab. For more details, see Jasbir Singh and Harinderpal Singh, "A Metamorphosis of Bārs: Critical Role of Canal Colonies in Transforming Punjab's Agricultural Landscape," *Journal of Sikh & Punjab Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2025).
- ¹⁴ Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*. (Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2019), 342; Saeed Bhutta, *Raj Dhara tey Lok Takkni: Official View and Observation of People*, transliteration by Paramjeet Singh Misha (Amritsar: Sachal Parkashan, 2020 [Shahmukhi ed.]; 2023 [Gurmukhi ed.]).
- ¹⁵ Minhaj-i-Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, trans. H.G. Raverty (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1881), 1206 entry; and Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals, 1206–1526* (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997).
- ¹⁶ Dullah Bhatti is not placed within the category of social bandits. Although popularly referred to as the "Robinhood of Punjab," the term itself is a recent addition to the Punjabi vernacular, emerging in the digital age. In folklore, he appears as a heroic figure who occasionally aided the poor. Yet, during the period of Akbar, while certain land reforms were underway, these did not amount to a major economic or social transition. Moreover, Dullah's actions cannot be understood as genuine class struggle, nor did he emerge from the lower ranks of the peasantry; rather, he was himself a substantial zamindar or tribal leader.
- ¹⁷ In Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), Farina Mir defines the *Qissa* as a genre, Punjabi-language *Qisse* are rooted in Arabic and Persian storytelling traditions of the same name. They have particular affinity with the Persian romance *Qissa*, a subgenre marked by its use of the *Masnawi* poetic form, which dates from c. 1000 C.E. This latter tradition, both its literary norms and its repertoire of stories, was transmitted to South Asia from Central Asia and Persia during the medieval period, likely crossing regional boundaries with court poets, merchants, traders, Sufis, and mendicants. A genre of narrative poetry in Punjabi that circulated widely in oral and later printed forms. It is characterized by its ability to transcend religious, caste, and social

boundaries, becoming a shared cultural form across communities in colonial Punjab.

- ¹⁸ Peelu, "Punjabi Kavita", accessed December 18, 2025, <https://www.punjabi-kavita.com/PeeluPeelu.php#gsc.tab=0..>
- ¹⁹ Kumar Sushil, *Pilu: A Monograph on Punjabi Poet* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2025), 102.
- ²⁰ Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1992), 100-106.
- ²¹ *Neeli te Ravi: Folk Heritage of Pakistan*, ed. Kartar Singh Shamsheer (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Akademi, 2007), Introduction.
- ²² Surinder Singh and Ishwar Dayal Gaur, eds., *Popular Literature and Pre-Modern Societies in South Asia* (Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008), 90-112.
- ²³ *Tin Lok Varan: Folk Poetry*, ed. Ahmed Salim, transliteration by Paramjeet Singh Misha (In Punjabi; Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Parkashan, 2015), 50.
- ²⁴ Bhai Gurdas. *Varān Bhai Gurdās Jī Sampardāi Steek*, Vol. I. Annotated by Hari Singh "Randhawe Wale." Amritsar: Singh Brothers, n.d., Vār 1, Paurī 30.
- ²⁵ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 21, 27.
- ²⁶ Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest*.
- ²⁷ For further discussion, see *Ibid*.
- ²⁸ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 21.
- ²⁹ For further discussion, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), chap. 4.
- ³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm in both works insists that social banditry should be understood as a primitive form of class struggle, reflecting his Marxist orientation.
- ³¹ Malcolm L. Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925).
- ³² This dual policy was embodied in colonial legislation such as the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901 and similar measures in other provinces. These acts aimed to protect cultivating peasants from losing

land to urban moneylenders, while still ensuring that credit networks remained functional for the colonial economy.

- ³³ For further discussion, see Mridula Mukherjee, *Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).
- ³⁴ For more discussion, see Sukhdev Singh Sohal, *Credit, Rural Debt and the Punjab Peasantry (1849– 1947)* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 2012); Sasha Tandon, “Epidemics in Colonial Punjab,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20, nos. 1–2 (2013): 217–234.
- ³⁵ Lambardars and zaildars were key intermediaries in colonial Punjab’s revenue system. Lambardars, hereditary village headmen appointed under the Mahalwari system, collected land revenue, maintained village records, and ensured local order at the village level. Zaildars, drawn from influential landed families, supervised clusters of villages (zails), oversaw lambardars, and acted as links between district officials and rural society. Together, these institutions reflected the British strategy of indirect rule, embedding colonial authority within traditional hierarchies while stabilizing agrarian society.
- ³⁶ For more discussion, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- ³⁷ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap. 1.
- ³⁸ Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest*.
- ³⁹ Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 52.
- ⁴⁰ Kuldeep Manak, *Jeona Morh Ghodi Te Farar*, written by Hardev Dilgir, YouTube video, 6:12, posted by “Saregama Punjabi,” February 14, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQN0PtUBFRU&list=RDRQN0PtUBFRU&start_radio=1
- ⁴¹ Singh and Gaur, *Popular Literature and Pre-Modern Societies*.
- ⁴² Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 10.
- ⁴³ Singh and Gaur, *Popular Literature and Pre-Modern Societies*.

- ⁴⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959; new preface and minor amendments, 1971), Introduction.
- ⁴⁵ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
- ⁴⁶ Singh and Gaur, *Popular Literature and Pre-Modern Societies*, 90-112.
- ⁴⁷ *Tin Lok Varan: Folk Poetry*, 50.
- ⁴⁸ Turab ul Hassan Sargana, *Punjab and the War of Independence, 1857–58* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020); Hardeep Kaur, “Revisiting Punjab’s Role in the Revolt of 1857: Resistance, Repression and Exile,” *Journal of Sikh & Punjab Studies* 32 (2025)
- ⁴⁹ Dr. Satinder Kaur Maan, *Punjab De Dakuan De Chittar Ate Vichar: A Book of Criticism* (In Punjabi; Samana, Patiala: Sangam Publications, 2018).
- ⁵⁰ Hardev Dilgir (Dev Tharika Wala/Dev Dilgeer), lyrics on Punjabi folk heroes including *Sucha Soorma* and *Jeona Maur*, performed by singers such as Kuldeep Manak; see also Kartar Singh Shamsher, ed., *Neeli te Ravi: Folk Heritage of Pakistan* (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Akademi, 2007), and Ahmed Salim, ed., *Tin Lok Varan: Folk Poetry*, transliteration by Paramjeet Singh Misha (Amritsar: Ravi Sahit Parkashan, 2015).
- ⁵¹ For Punjabi ballad traditions, see performances by Idu Sharif, Kuldeep Manak, Surinder Shinda, Gurdas Mann, and Alam Lohar; also Jagmohan Kaur, among others, whose repertoires include qissas and vaars celebrating folk heroes such as Jeona Morh and Sucha Soorma.
- ⁵² For Punjabi cinematic treatments of folk bandits and rebels, see *Jatt Jeona Morh* (dir. Ravinder Ravi, 1992), starring Guggu Gill, which dramatizes the legend of Jeona Maur; *Jeona Morh* (dir. Balvir Atwal, 1980s, Sekha Films); *Sucha Soorma* (dir. Jagjit Gill, 1983), based on the outlaw Sucha Singh; *Jatt Sucha Soorma* (dir. Darshan Bagga, 1994); and *Maurh* (dir. Jatinder Mauhar, starring Ammy Virk, 2022), which revisits themes of rebellion, outlawry, and cultural memory in contemporary Punjab. See also *Jatt Jeona Morh* (2023 remake), which reinterprets the folk hero for a new generation, and many more films that continue to explore Punjab’s folk bandit traditions

- ⁵³ Manan Bhardwaj (music) and Bhupinder Babbal (vocals), “Arjan Vailly,” from *Animal*, dir. Sandeep Reddy Vanga (Mumbai: T-Series, 2023).
- ⁵⁴ For further discussion, see Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*.
- ⁵⁵ Birinder Pal Singh, ed., “Criminal” Tribes of Punjab: A Social–Anthropological Inquiry (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2010), Introduction.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Introduction.
- ⁵⁷ For further discussion, on each tribe, see Singh, “Criminal” Tribes of Punjab.
- ⁵⁸ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap. 1; Neeladri Bhattacharya, “Pastoralists in a Colonial World,” in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2nd ed., chap. 2.
- ⁵⁹ For further discussion, see Wagner, *Thuggee*.
- ⁶⁰ Phansigars, a type of *thug* in colonial India, were groups identified by the British as professional stranglers who used a cloth or noose (*phansi*) to kill travelers during robberies
- ⁶¹ Saeed Bhutta, *Raj Dhara tey Lok Takkni: Official View and Observation of People*, transliteration by Paramjeet Singh Misha (Amritsar: Sachal Parkashan, 2020 [Shahmukhi ed.]; 2023 [Gurmukhi ed.]), 91-97.
- ⁶² *Punjab District Gazetteers, Volume XXXI: Lyallpur District, Statistical Tables 1912* (Lahore: Government of Punjab, 1913), section on “Criminal Administration.
- ⁶³ H. Calvert, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1922), 206–207.
- ⁶⁴ Bhaktaur Singh, “Jagga Dakoo’s Daughter Wants Patriot Tag for Him,” *Nawan Zamana* (Jalandhar), n.d. The report recounts the appeal of Resham Kaur (alias Gebo), daughter of the folk bandit Jagga Daku, who urged that her father be recognized as a freedom fighter. The article highlights her claim that Jagga resisted colonial authority and deserves patriotic remembrance, while also noting her request for artists to reconstruct his likeness from memory.

- ⁶⁵ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap. 1; chap.4.
- ⁶⁶ For more details, see Dharam Singh Goraya, *Jagga Daku: A Noble Rebel* (In Punjabi; Jalandhar: Chetna Parkashan, 1998).
- ⁶⁷ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap.4.
- ⁶⁸ Singh and Gaur, *Popular Literature and Pre-Modern Societies*, 90-112.
- ⁶⁹ For more discussion, see Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Jasbir Singh and Harinderpal Singh, “A Metamorphosis of Bārs: Critical Role of Canal Colonies in Transforming Punjab’s Agricultural Landscape,” *Journal of Sikh & Punjab Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 2025): 59–79.
- ⁷⁰ Ali, *Punjab under Imperialism*.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest*, 403.
- ⁷⁴ Mridula Mukherjee, *Colonizing Agriculture*
- ⁷⁵ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap.2.
- ⁷⁶ For more discussion, see Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947* (Delhi: Manohar, 1988). Ranjit Majumder, “Military Imperatives and the Expansion of Agriculture in Colonial Punjab”, *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol. 8, 2001, pp. 161-63.
- ⁷⁷ For more discussion, see Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest*.
- ⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 16–17.
- ⁷⁹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, 15-16.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 4.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 1.
- ⁸² Indu Banga, *The Agrarian System of the Sikhs: Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Punjab* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), chap.1.
- ⁸³ Singh and Singh, “A Metamorphosis of Bārs.”
- ⁸⁴ For further discussion, Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest*.

- ⁸⁵ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap.1.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, chap.2.
- ⁸⁷ Punjabi folklore saying (transliteration): *Dine rāj phiraṅgī dā, rātī rāj malaṅgī dā.*
- ⁸⁸ “Malangi and Nizam Lohar: The Robin Hoods Who Ruled the Forests of Punjab,” *Dawn*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1255424/malangi-and-nizam-lohar-the-robin-hoods-who-ruled-the-forests-of-punjab>
- ⁸⁹ *Rebel, Martyr and an Unsung Hero of Punjab | Nizam Lohar*, YouTube video, posted by Xee Hoo (Zeeshan Hussain), December 29, 2024, <https://youtu.be/IGQM6k6nO9Q>.
- ⁹⁰ Mirza, *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*, 138-157
- ⁹¹ For Punjabi and Urdu Pakistani cinematic treatments of folk bandits and rebels, see *Malangi* (dir. Rashid Mahmood, 1965), starring Akmal, which dramatizes the outlaw Malangi as a Robin Hood-like figure; *Nizam Lohar* (dir. Masood Parvez, 1976), starring Sudhir, which portrays the legendary blacksmith-turned-bandit; *Jagga Jatt* (dir. Iqbal Kashmiri, 1975), starring Sultan Rahi, based on the folk hero Jagga; *Dulla Bhatti* (dir. Rasheed Dogar, 1979), starring Mustafa Qureshi, which celebrates Punjab’s iconic rebel; and *Sher Khan* (dir. Younis Malik, 1981), starring Sultan Rahi, which, though fictional, resonates with the bandit/rebel tradition. See also *Malangi* (remakes in later decades), *Nizam Lohar* (revived in Punjabi stage plays), and many more films that continue to explore Punjab’s folk outlaw traditions in both Punjabi and Urdu cinema.
- ⁹² Mirza, *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*, 138-157.
- ⁹³ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap. 2.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, chap.8.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- ⁹⁷ For further discussion, see Wagner, *Thuggee*.
- ⁹⁸ Anton Blok, “Peasant and Brigand,” 494–503
- ⁹⁹ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, postscript.

- ¹⁰⁰ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap. 4; chap. 5.
- ¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 4; chap. 5.
- ¹⁰² *Ibid.*, chap. 4; chap. 5.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 67
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 74, 75.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, 38.
- ¹⁰⁷ Babu Rajab Ali, *Qissa Sucha Soorma*, in *Qissas of Babu Rajab Ali*.
- ¹⁰⁸ Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, chap.2.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mirza, *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*, 138-157.
- ¹¹⁰ Original proverb in Punjabi: Transliteration: "Do pair gha \square \square urnā, par \square urnā ma \square hak de nāl."