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## **Dacoity Crime and Administration in Early Colonial Nadia District in Bengal Province**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study narrates dacoity crime and its various facets of colonial Nadia district. Dacoity was an organized, collective action, perpetrated usually by a large gang. It was infested in the early period of colonial Bengal. Most of the districts of that province were overrun by large gang of dacoits. Nadia district was the worst victim of this sort of crime. Almost all villages of this district had witnessed one or another kind of dacoity. Different factors had contributed for the sudden rise of such violent and brutal crime. There was hardly any security and safety of the inhabitants and for their life and property in Nadia. People and peasants used to leave the district to get rid of the menace of dacoity. This sort of crime had undermined the authority of the infant colonial district administration. The dacoits had not even spared the Europeans from their attack. Thus the dacoity crime had reached beyond all control. Finally the administration woke up and had taken steps to subdue the menace of this crime. Reorganization of thana system and the increase of number of police personnel were steps taken by the administration which had temporarily halted the crime.*

***Key words: Crime, Dacoity, Colonial Nadia, Administration, Bengal.***

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Crime manifests in various ways. Different types of crime have different implications to the administrators as well as to the society. The colonial state's response towards each crime was conspicuously different. This differentiation was made according to the priorities of the state. This was because of the perception of potentialities of threat in the perception of the colonial perceived notion of order.<sup>1</sup>In this way crimes that occurred were divided into extraordinary and ordinary category.<sup>2</sup>Even in policy making and its implementation at the local level, the distinctive method of dealing with criminality was very clearly evident. Collective crime like violent gang dacoity was an extraordinary crime to the colonial rulers. Therefore this sort of crime has been getting much attention from a number of social historians in all over

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<sup>1</sup> Freitag, Sandria, 'Crime in the Social Order of the North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol.25, No. 2, 1991, p.227-261

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 229

India. Violent gang robbery in Nadia district had almost undermined the power and authority of the local administration in the first decade of the nineteenth century. This paper narrates the episode of the gang *dacoity* of the Nadia district and its various facets.

*Dacoity* as a type of crime formed an integral part of the Indian rural life. The word *dacoity* is an equivalent one for banditry. It is presumed that this term has been derived from Hindi '*daka parna*' meaning plunder and is used for a system of robbery by gangs. It has also been held that the term is derived from Hindi '*dakait*'- 'robbery' belonging to an armed band'-probably from *dakna* (to shout) and usually employed as an equivalent for brigandage.<sup>3</sup> *Dacoity* was the most dangerous crime as thought by the colonial administration. It was an organized, collective action, perpetrated usually by a large gang. It had the potential of an insurrectional character. For this serious reason the district administration singled out this sort of crime for early suppression. Almost all the districts of Bengal in the period under survey were, more or less, infested by violent gang robbery. Yet Nadia district was considered as a special place to the colonial administration, for its dubious distinction of gang *dacoity*. Many initiatives for suppressing this category of crime, taken by the government, had begun on the experimental basis in this district. For example, the employment of spies or *goindahs* to collect information about the dacoit gangs had first started, on a large scale and in systematic manner. Government had to appoint special magistrates with special powers for suppressing the dacoits.

It is, no doubt, a fact that the district administration was ignorant of what was actually the law-and-order situation in the interior of the district. The magistrate who was in charge of the police establishment was sitting idle only to rely on the report periodically sent by the *darogahs*. These reports contained the situation of their respective *thanahs*. But these reports were unreliable, defective and the magistrates were also aware of it, yet they seldom took the trouble to personally visit the interior of the district. An observer of a contemporary periodical observed "I was in Zillah Nadia the year previous to the development of its real internal condition. There was apparently no business for the magistrate. His *darogah* sent him no reports of *dacoities* and murders. The arrears in business were small; the duties of his office were easily performed by the magistrate. They occupied, perhaps an hour or two of the day. His assistant had a very easy life. There was nothing thought of but hunting, racing, the pleasure of the table, music and dancing. The station was the

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<sup>3</sup> Shyam Sunder Katare, *Pattern of Dacoity in India: A Case Study of Madhyapradesh*, Delhi, 1977, p. 1. In the present work I have used the word dacoit, the anglicized form of daku and dakat. Besides I have uniformly used this spelling of dacoit, though, in official records this spelling had written differently like decoit, dekoit etc by various magistrates of different districts and officers of criminal department.

resort of the gay from every part of the country.”<sup>4</sup> This comment indicates the indifference and neglect or ignorance of the magistrates towards the situation of the interior. The year as the observer mentioned was, however, not the only year when *dacoity* got momentum. Before that year, 154 *dacoities* were reported by the police. His writing becomes more interesting when he observes “I left it to attend the judge on the circuit. I returned to it within a few months, appointed to assist the magistrate. I found 1700 prisoners in gaol, three magistrates employed jointly in restoring tranquility, and nothing but robbery and murder to be heard of.”<sup>5</sup> This comment reconfirmed the fact that the local administrator was in a complete state of ignorance of what was going on in the interior of the district.

This observation reflects the indifferent attitude of colonial officials until and unless the situation was becoming alarming. This writer further observed and very correctly that the state of this Zillah was discovered by a thoughtless exploit of the dacoits; in attacking a European; that caused enquiry; and enquiry disclosed the whole scene of villainy and violence. On this point he was absolutely correct. He is correct in the sense that the attack on a European by the dacoits was indeed thoughtless exploitation; and unless this attack was not on a European the enquiry had seldom been held and the real internal condition of this district in surfacing might have been delayed and the general inhabitants had to endure the atrocities of the dacoits. Even the dacoits of this period themselves thought that the attack on Mr. Faddy brought them into confinement in the prison. Gangaram Sirdar who was apprehended from Gaya confessed while communicating with the magistrate that “his [Biswanath Sirdar] folly has brought us all to the Gallows; had it not been for attack on Mr. Faddy, you [the magistrate Elliot] would never have been appointed, and we might have gone on with impunity.” It is interesting that Gangaram also understand that he might have been safe if he attacked a native as his confession went on “...for the attack of a native, is only the thought of a moment, and the storm is soon blown over,...and has only been brought on a little sooner by the rashness of Bishennauth.”<sup>6</sup> However this *dacoity* had changed the scenario in this district. Government machinery had to be on alert since then.

This dacoity under discussion was an attack on the house of Mr. Faddy, an indigo planter who was very active and co-operative in apprehension of the dacoits.<sup>7</sup> This attack was held in the leadership of Bishwanath, the famous sirdar dacoit of Nadia. This case was most graphically reported by the then acting magistrate of this district, H. Shakespeare in 1808. According to this report on 27 July 1808, Faddy’s house was surrounded by the dacoits at 4 o’clock in the morning. His *chowkidar*

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<sup>4</sup> *Literary Panorama and National Register*, May, 1817, p. 226-27

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Letter from the Magistrate of Nuddea to Dowdeswell, the Secretary to the Judicial Department, dated 25 October, 1809, *BJCP*, 17 November, 1809, No. 20

<sup>7</sup> J. H. E. Garrett, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Nadia district*, Calcutta, 1910, p., 29-30

fled immediately. Mr. Faddy and Mr. Liddiard, a European priest were overpowered by the dacoits. A servant of Faddy was cut to pieces, his gardener and peon severely wounded. His house was plundered to the smallest articles and the value of the plundered property was about rupees 5000. The gang comprised about 150 to 200 dacoits. The most disappointing point to the magistrate was that, after accomplishing the crime, the robbers fled in "open day without any fears of being taken."<sup>8</sup> The investigation into that *dacoity* case revealed the horrible situation of this district. *Dacoity* with violence and murder was so frequent that the local administration could not cope with it. Repeated request for increasing of *burkandazes* and even for military intervention manifested the local administration's nervousness and anxiety. H. Shakespeare prayed to the government for increasing of additional *burkandazes* in the district and also recommended for the enhancement of number of *burkandazes* for the *thanas* of Haskhali and Doulatgange.<sup>9</sup> In the November of 1808, the Governor General in Council ordered that a company of *sepoys* from one of the regular battalions be deployed in this district for apprehending dacoits. Even before that the magistrate had to send *sepoys* for apprehending dacoits. In the month of June, 1808 a gang had assembled into the house of Pitumbar, a notorious dacoit, in the vicinity of the Santipore intending to commit robbery. After receiving information, the magistrate H. parry sent a party consisting of one *Subedar*, two *Havildars*, Two *Naibs* and thirty two *sepoys* for apprehending the dacoits.<sup>10</sup> The *sepoys* surrounded the house where the dacoits assembled but surprisingly, they did not surrender; instead they come out of the house and commenced firing with spears and turbuars on the *sepoys*. This encounter in which three dacoits were killed by the *sepoys* reflected the indomitable spirit of dacoits of this period.

#### Intensity and Extent of Robber

Apart from the above *dacoity*, numerous reports of robbery with murder were pouring in from the interior of the district. Many lengthy letters had been sent by the then magistrate and Judge John Elliot. All these letters very clearly stated that law and order situation was in worse condition and the district was overrun by the sirdar dacoits. There were 4270 villages<sup>11</sup> in 1809, in this district and few villages escaped from depredations of *dacoity* and it would not be an exaggeration to say that three-fourth of the Zillah (district) villages had experienced the evil of gang robbery. These facts seem to be true if we consider the number of dacoits who were active in perpetration of robbery in Nadia. There were no less than 100 noted dacoits operating in 1808. Even the whole of village were said to be consisting of dacoits and since the year 1803 no less than 688 proclaimed dacoits were active with their gang in

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<sup>8</sup> Report of H Shakespeare, Magistrate of Nuddea, 29 September 1808, *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 1 October 1808

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 1 July, 1808

<sup>11</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 22 September, 1809

this district.<sup>12</sup> <sup>17</sup> It was almost difficult to pass from one village to another without the experience of highway robbery. It was also very difficult for carrying the revenue in cash to the collector's treasury. There was not an individual among *sadar amlah* and *zamindari* officers who did not avow that even in Krishnagar and Guary a day hardly passed without 3 to 7 occurrences of *dacoity* and burglary. The shroffs could not venture to keep money in their houses and *muffussil* remittance however trifling were instantly on its arrival deposited into treasury. Hence it may be presumed what was the situation in various distant villages of the district.<sup>13</sup>

Nadia district was divided out among the sirdar *dacoits* in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Four or five sirdars were the actual rulers of this district<sup>14</sup>. They were the masters of the district as acknowledged by one of the magistrates in his report in 1809.<sup>15</sup> Numerous gangs were infested in the district. The most notable among them were the Bishwanath and Buddeah's gang and Gangaram's gang. Bishwanath, Buddeah, Shyam Das, Goluck, Kasinath and Pitumbar when united were really formidable. Although many of them operated in the neighboring district still Nadia was the principal seat for these gangs. Here are mentioned some gangs in the magistrate's report who were very active not only in this district alone but also in the neighbouring districts.<sup>16</sup> Raghunath Sirdar was active in Burdwan, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Natore and Jessore redistricts. Shyam Sirdar with a large gang operated in Nadia and Jessore and used to commit dacoity jointly with the Raghunath's gang. Soobul Sirdar used to commit his perpetrations in Nadia, Rajshahi and Murshidabad by land and water. Thakur das and Goberdhun's gangs operated in Nadia and Jessore and frequently joined with Raghunath's gang by land and water. Shumser Ali and his sons were notorious dacoits and operated in the north eastern region of Nadia. Shumser was known as 'karbourer' of the dacoits. He particularly robbed and plundered the merchants.<sup>17</sup> All these gangs of robber had operated with virtual impunity of detection and punishment in this district. In the report of *Nizamat Adalat* indicates that the robberies were frequently committed in the several districts of Bengal. In the period from 1803 to 1806 the maximum number of *dacoities* was committed in the five districts. These districts were Backergunge, Burdwan, Dinajpore, Jessore and Nadia.<sup>18</sup> In case of *dacoity* with murder,

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<sup>12</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 11 February, 1809

<sup>13</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 9 March, 1810

<sup>14</sup> *Allen's India mail, and Register of Intelligence for British and Foreign, India, China and all Parts of the East* (hereafter *Allen's India Mail*), Vol. XIV, January-December, 1856, p. 603

<sup>15</sup> Letter from the Magistrate of Nuddea to the Secretary Judicial Department, 25 October, 1809, *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 17 November, 1809

<sup>16</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 19 January, 1810

<sup>17</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 9 March, 1810

<sup>18</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 19 June, 1807

Nadia gained first place with 67. In total *dacoity* crime Dinajpore stood first with 678 and the number was 615 in Nadia. Still after this period this crime did not decrease in Nadia at all. In 1808 it reached its peak with 329 robberies committed in Nadia.<sup>19</sup> Out of 329, 30 were committed with murder. In that year Nadia witnessed an extreme lawlessness.

The government took many harsh measures in curbing this crime but *dacoity* did not stop. Owing to the suppression measure of the Government it was temporarily halted. From 1818 onwards 10 to 12 *dacoities* were regularly reported by the district authorities. From the middle of 1840's it again gathered momentum and almost reached the height that was earlier. Numerous gangs again infested the district. The *thanas* of Santipore, Ranaghat, Suksagar, Kaguzpukeria and Gobarang were most affected by *dacoity*.<sup>20</sup> There were also several well-known gangs operating in the *thanas* of Krishnagar, Hatrah and Nuddea (Nabadwip). Many gangs whose origins were in the neighbouring districts also committed their depredation in Nadia. Notable among these gangs were Gour Shikari gang and Keramdi Shikari gang of Barasat, the gang of Nepal and Gopal Dome of Hooghly and Calcutta lathirah gang. Even in the year 1857-1858 when the robberies were decreasing due to the operation of the suppression of dacoity commission, the *thanas* like Bagdaha, Doulutgange, Damurhoda and Hurdee were infested by dacoits. The statements made by several gangs have shown that they committed a number of *dacoities*. Haru Sirdar's gang committed 14 *dacoities* between the periods 31 march 1846 to 2 october 1850.<sup>21</sup>

A peculiar form of crime that infested in Nadia district was river *dacoity* or water robbery. This was prevalent but little recorded. Nadia was a district which has many great rivers. Rivers like Bhagarathi, Mathabhanga, Churni, Jellingee, Ichamati, Padma and many others run through this district. These rivers were the principal connecting waterways from Calcutta to the Eastern Bengal and Upper India. Hundreds of boats loaded with various goods throughout the year used to pass through these rivers. The security of these river routes was not great in this period. Successive magistrates repeatedly reported about the insecurity that existed in the river ways of this district. Robbers used to plunder boats virtually at will. The Armenian merchants residing in Calcutta and carrying on trade in clothes, silks and other articles brought from Kasimbazar were subjected to repeated attacks by the river dacoits near Plassey.<sup>22</sup> On the Bhagarathi and Padma an immense quantity of goods and other properties were plundered every year by the villagers residing

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<sup>19</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 11 February, 1809

<sup>20</sup> Correspondence Relating to the Suppression of Dacoity, in *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government* (hereafter SRBG), No.18, p. 17

<sup>21</sup> SRBG, No, 21, Appendix-F, p.xlii

<sup>22</sup> Radhamadhab Saha, *The Administrative Development in a Bengal District, Nadia, 1780-1833*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calcutta, 1977, p. 145

on the banks of these rivers. Mr. Imlach, an indigo planter, was murdered by a gang of river dacoits headed by Bishwanath Chakraborty and Mohon Kundo, on the same river in 1822.<sup>23</sup>

The factors that precisely contributed to the rise in gang *dacoity* cannot be pin-pointed at a certain point. John McLane said “the growth of gang robbery ...at the turn of the century was undoubtedly a consequence of the Cornwallis administrative reforms of the early 1790s rather than of changes in the economic production patterns.”<sup>24</sup> He expressed further doubt when he said “but these reforms were so complex and affected so many different interests that the problem of discovering the precise causes of increase banditry is a formidable one.” However, the Nadia magistrates were repeatedly, at least in the first decade of nineteenth century, attributed to the changes in production system for rising gang robbery. In the later period this cause became stranger because most of the sirdar dacoits were in the employment of the landlords in this district. It is, therefore, really hard to find a fixed or specific cause for the prevalence of the *dacoity* crime. That the official documents are somewhat perplexed in finding out reason for this sort of crime is proved by indecisive responses from various officials at different times. It is also found that they had never tried to investigate the real factors behind this crime. Because the colonial authorities were preoccupied with their own interests it prevented them from going into deeper areas for finding out the discontent which existed among the rural people right from the beginning of the foreign rule. However, the local officials offered casual explanation occasionally which did not satisfy either the superior authority or the observer of the contemporary events. Henry Oldfield, the magistrate of Nadia, mentioned non-cooperation of zamindaro Gomastas of and rascality of the village watchmen for the cause of the prevalence of the robbery.<sup>25</sup> This tone was almost invariably reiterated by the successive magistrates of this district in the later period.

Most of the district officials in Nadia had repeatedly accused the new land system for the alarming rise of the *dacoity*-crime. Changes in agricultural production system, no doubt, in many ways, contributed to the rising crime graph. This land system gave birth to the new landed class whose sole purpose was to make profit out of the available means. From the large landholders to the smaller one every class of land owner practised coercive method to realize maximum rent from their holding. Tytler who was employed to suppress *dacoity* in the northern part of Nadia wrote “in amounting for *dacoity* or robbery in a Zillah, our first step ought to be, to examine the condition of the *ryots*, and we shall always find, in their poverty and

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<sup>23</sup> *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany*, Vol. 16, No. 91, 1823, p. 81

<sup>24</sup> John McLane, Bengali Bandits, police and Landholders after the Permanent Settlement, *Crime and Criminality in British India*, Anand Yang(ed.) Tuscan, Arizona University Press, 1986, p. 27

<sup>25</sup> Parliamentary Papers of 1812-1813, Vol. ix, pp.52

oppression the chief cause of this evil.”<sup>26</sup> For this purpose, it would be worthy to take a particular account of the condition of the some villages for locating different changes in the management in *Ijara*, *Katkina* and as to the *Khas* lands of the *zamindars*. By this means, a complete view might emerge. In the year 1810, Tytler made an attempt of this kind which presents a fair specimen of the state of that part of the district.<sup>27</sup> According to his survey in six villages the result was that Chundpore village had in 1808 not less than 60 houses, the lands in the cultivation amounted to about 2000 *bighas*. In 1810 it had only 3 houses and the whole land was overrun with jungle and was full of hogs. It had been in *Katkina* for four years previous to its being deserted. The village Cola had 100 houses and 5000 *bighas* of beautiful cultivation. In 1810 it contained 40 houses and the whole land cultivated was not above 200 *bighas*. The principal *ryots* having deserted it, left the houses to be occupied by any that chose to inhabit them. It had been for 10 years in *Katkina*. In another village Juranpore had 250 houses and 7000-8000 *bighas* fertile land. In 1810 it had only five houses of respectable cultivators and 5 or 6 huts were inhabited. The cultivation was reduced to 400 *bighas*, it had been in *Katkina* for 9 years. Another three villages namely Khasipoor, Beerpoor and Tertulberia, the situation was more or less the same. In the opinion of Tytler, all these things happened due to the oppression of the *Katkinadars*. It had driven the *ryots* to commit different crimes for earning their living.

The land of this district was almost entirely sold to the purchasers who were not the residents of this district. They were the speculators and capitalists from Calcutta.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the *ryots*, who formerly had trust in their *zamindars* and regarded them with respect and veneration as the power rested with the landholders, could not build up the same kind of relationship with the new proprietors. Almost the whole of this district had been disposed of, either by public or private sale, the old land holders were no more, and the new purchasers were, for the most part, opulent native merchants who considered land as a means of profit and would part with it at will after they had thoroughly fleeced the *ryots*. These men were, of course, non-residents, and they had chosen their agents for their superior abilities, in cunning and rapacity. The estates have consequently been farmed and under farmed and rack-rented, and the old respectable *ryots* hapless, and oppressed, have either fled from the fields of their forefathers or gradually produced “a counter balancing spirit of opposition”, observed another magistrate in 1814.<sup>29</sup> In the years 1819 and 1820 there was a sudden increase in the number of dacoits and the magistrate and superintendent of police

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Fraser Tytler, *Consideration on the Present Political State of India*, London, second edition Vol. II, 1816, p. 374

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, footnote, pp.375-377

<sup>28</sup> Radhamadhab Saha, *op.cit*, p. 140

<sup>29</sup> Letter from the Judge and Magistrate of Nadia, 1 June, 1814, *Judicial Civil Proceedings*, 12 August, 1817

were quick enough to identify the causes of this rise. They attributed it to the rising price of rice and other daily necessities. They also said that in addition to this factor, release of large number of suspected criminals from custody was another factor for the rise of robbery.

It is more difficult to identify the factors for river *dacoity*. It might, therefore, be inferred that same sort of elements contributed to the prevailing of this crime. Official views were aptly expressed by the report of superintendent of police in 1844.<sup>30</sup> According to the report, the attack used to take place during the night. The dacoits were strangers to the boatmen. Recognition, therefore, was seldom possible. The boatmen proceeded to their destination without running the risk of further loss and there was a delay in informing the police. The report further explained that the boatmen were silent because the loss did not occur to them or their merchants but to the native insurers. Thus they had no interest either in the recovery of property or the conviction of the offenders. The objective of the boatmen was to proceed onwards as fast as possible. This, of course, gave great impunity and encouragement to the increase of this crime.<sup>31</sup> Magistrates also echoed this observation in their reporting on river *dacoity*. They also made remarks about the lack of sufficient number of boats, patrolling of the river police etc.

Whatever the precise factors might be, the impact of dacoities was felt in every aspect of life of people in Nadia. Magistrates' reports indicate that all classes of people, irrespective of caste, religion or creed who had money, had been attacked by the dacoit gangs. This has been corroborated by the confessions and depositions of many dacoits. One of the earliest depositions made by three notorious dacoits of this district in 1809 before the assistant magistrate Mr. Alexander Fraser Tytler clearly prove that they had attacked everybody who had property and money.<sup>32</sup> There are enough indications that dacoits greatly wanted to prevent people from informing the police about their crime. They targeted, therefore, not infrequently, the eye witnesses, the police informers and those whose intentions were to resist them during their operations. The magistrate acknowledged in one of his reports that "the fact of a general murder of the witnesses admits of no doubt."<sup>33</sup> Dacoits murdered Bhirab Napit because he had given evidence against them at Krishnagar in a case of *dacoity* and murder. Bhyrub was tied to a stake and speared and hacked to death by Khodabux Sirdar, Sumboo Bania, Korui Sirdar and others, they kept on exulting over him at the time saying "you give [evidences] against us, and got us confinement, who will save you now". These *dacoits* escaped from prison by breaking

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<sup>30</sup> Judicial Proceedings, 1 April, 1844

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Depositions of Gangaram Sirdar, Para Sirdar, Sumboo Banea and Ramsounder Capally, 15 September, 1809, *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 17 November, 1809

<sup>33</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 19 January, 1810

jail at Nadia.<sup>34</sup>

General inhabitants of Nadia district never felt secured and they had little trust on the government agencies for their protection. In 1809, a group of inhabitants of Krishnagar and Hooghly petitioned to the Lord Minto for their insecurity. The petitioners wrote “owing to the misdemeanors of the robbers, we have been unable to reside our houses from our forefathers we continued to inhabit in these places with security but never met with such injury from the robbers as at present.”<sup>35</sup> In 1834 an interesting letter was sent by a reader to the newspaper *Samachar Darpan* in which he stated that people with some property of Nadia district had no sleep at night in their own home rather they left their house at the dawn of the night for security and safety.<sup>36</sup> In 1852 a group of *zamindars* of Nadia and some other districts petitioned to the Governor General of India complaining that their security was at stake due to the great prevalence of *dacoity* crime. Even the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal concurred with the general feeling of the natives regarding their insecurity and remarked “it has been asserted, and the assertion is very little if at all exaggerated, that in the districts afflicted with this dreadful social evil, no man, with property worth rupees 200 in his house, can lay down to rest at night without the most vivid and well-founded fear, that he and his family will be awakened in the night by the assault of these merciless plunderers.”<sup>37</sup>

The dacoits and their cruel tortures compelled many rich peoples to leave their residences. In the year 1808 there were eight *lakh* inhabitants in this district and near about two *lakh* and a half of individuals had been compelled to leave their houses because of the excess of *dacoity* and the violent oppressions of the *katkinadars*. According to a magistrate’s report “the rich have been plundered, and many have fled the country and those in moderate circumstances ruined; ... the effects of *dacoiting*.” He very emphatically remarked, “the *dacoity* will not be permanently stopped from occurring until the oppression of the under renters is checked.”<sup>38</sup> The central government did not sit idle after the attack on a European by the dacoits. After the attack on the house of Mr. Faddy, the government and local administration as well took it seriously and adopted measures in its disposal for crushing the dacoits. The government appointed three magistrates with special

<sup>34</sup> Report of Mr. Balquiere, Officiating Magistrate of Nuddea to Dowdeswell, the Secretary Judicial Department, Government of Bengal, *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 12 June 1809

<sup>35</sup> Petition to the Lord Minto by Caleepersud Mukherjee and others, *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 3 June, 1809

<sup>36</sup> Letter of Shib Chandra Singh of Valuka, Chakla Krishnagar, Nadia, *Samachar Darpan*, 14 November, 1835, Brajendranath Bandhupadhyay (ed.) *Sambadpatre Sekaler Katha*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Kolkata, 1384, Vol. II, p. 378

<sup>37</sup> Minute by the lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Correspondence, *SRBG*, No.18, p. 30

<sup>38</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 15 September, 1809

powers. The chief magistrate and judge was Mr. Elliot and three assistant magistrates were employed under him. They were Mr. Blaquiere, Alexzander Fraser Tytler and Mr. Lyndon. They rightly identified that without co-operation of the landlords, especially the under renters, their entire attempt to suppress *dacoity* crime might be gone in vain. So the newly appointed administrators at the very beginning of the operation bluntly warned the landlords and their agents that they should wholeheartedly support the government measures. The chief magistrate and judge, John Elliot ordered the *zamindars* and their agents and *amlahs* to co-operate with the administration for apprehending the dacoits. He also threatened them with dire consequences if they did not give away the information they had. He in his first sitting publicly in court ordered the attendance of all the *zamindari sadar amlahs* and was happy to see hundred present. His declared objective was to notify them about a most arduous situation of the district. He also explained to them what he expected from their constituents in the aid of the magistrate's authority. He assured them that he was armed with sufficient powers to act with determination and effect. He warned them to do their duty and the magistrate would support them to the utmost in securing the dacoits. The *amlahs*, on their part, assured the magistrate that their establishments were ready and willing to do everything in their power, in aid of the magistrate's authority. The magistrate also promised them that they should not be made the prosecutors of dacoits and all such prosecutors should be carried on by the *vakeel* of the Government.<sup>39</sup> The consequence of the measures was that the prosecutors and *ryots* brought every man of avowed bad character.

Such was the spirit throughout the *zillah* that all were in search of the sirdar dacoits proudly claimed by Mr. Elliot. It was an unbelievable environment in the district. As a result, from November 1808 to January 1809, 738 dacoits were apprehended, 92 were apprehended by magistrates, 210 by the *zamindari* estates and *ryots*, 409 by police and 27 by the *goindahs*. The descriptions of dacoits who were apprehended were i) notorious sirdar dacoits-9, ii) petty sirdar dacoits-96, iii) proclaimed dacoits- 10 and iv) dacoits and men without any ostensible means of subsistence and had been connected with the various gangs of the district- 623.<sup>40</sup> His measures created such an environment of fear and panic among the most desperate and notorious dacoits that even a boy with two *ryots* could bring a daring robber from another district to the magistrate of Nadia. The dacoits, to avoid the apprehension, hid themselves in the neighbouring districts. The magistrates sought the government order for co-operation between the neighboring districts. Sumbho Banya was traced at Jessore jail where he was in confinement on the charge of burglary to avoid the search which was made for him. The Government of Bengal ordered the district administrations of Jessore, Dahaka-Jalalpore and Rajshahi to co-operate with Nadia in apprehension of the dacoits. One of the modes of apprehending the dacoits which

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<sup>39</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 11 February, 1809

<sup>40</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 22 September, 1809

was frequently adopted by the magistrates was offering reward to the persons who aided the police for arresting the robbers. The Government took it as a legitimate policy by passing acts in favour of this method. In 1793 the magistrate Redfearn had got authorization from the Governor General in Council for rewarding the persons who were helping in arresting dacoits.<sup>41</sup> Another policy taken by the Government to suppress the dacoits was to destroy the whole gang.

But the measures adopted by the magistrates created a huge controversy in the official circle of the East India Company's Government. A large number of persons were arrested on the suspicion of being dacoits. They were confined in jail without being given the opportunity of self-defense. The Court of Circuit severely criticized the district administration for such measures but of no avail. The result was dreadful. Many of arrested persons died in police custody and in the prison. It is very clear from the documents that the torture of the police increased at the time of suppression of the dacoit. In 1806, only 25 prisoners died in the prison. 53 prisoners in 1807 and 86 in 1808 died in prison and 86 prisoners died in the first half of 1809 in the prison at Krishnagar.<sup>42</sup> Sir Henry Strachey, in one of his answers to court queries, gave the following description of the effects of the measures taken at Nadia.<sup>43</sup> "At Nadia were sent in as dacoits, from 20 November, 1808 to 31 May 1809, 2071 persons. Great delay necessarily took place in examination of these persons. I am unable to state the ultimate disposal of this multitude; but I find, that in six months and ten days forty eight had already died in jail; two hundred and twenty eight are stated to be in a course of enquiry or under examination by the magistrate, prisoners not yet examined, 1477. In some resolutions of *Nizam-at-adalat*, the court observe that since preceding December, when there were still 1500 prisoners in Nadia jail, the number has been reduced to 753. This is two years after the death of the 48. Now it is very probable that all these dreadful proceedings had some effect, though innocent men suffered... seeing a great stir made, and that vigilance of police was excited to such a pitch that no man could be secure against being seized by the *goindahs*, and thrown into jail...in this way, I think, the new measures have had some good effect. Indeed it is certain, that in Nadia, at least, many dacoits were brought to justice, whether by ordinary mode or whether they were included in the 2071, I am not informed; at all events, the good done was purchased at the expense of too much evil. Such shocking cruelty, such a monstrous perversion of justice, committed our eye open, and with deliberation the imprisonment of multitudes, the harassing, the subordination of perjury, the plunder, the death of innocent men in jail-these scenes I conceive to be most discreditable to those who permitted them." Strachey further said "*dacoity* itself, dreadful as it is, cannot be compared, in its quantum of mischief, with what was produced by this horrid system."

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<sup>41</sup> Revenue Judicial Proceedings, 15 March, 1793

<sup>42</sup> *Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings*, 25 August, 1809

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XVIII, No. 105, October, 1825, p. 413  
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In spite of such harsh measures which were adopted for suppressing *dacoity* crime, it could not be totally eradicated or subdued by the district administration. From 1840 onwards this sort of crime again came like an endemic. It was rightly understood by the Central Government that *dacoity* would not be eliminated by the district administration alone. So for this purpose, a co-ordinated and collective effort was needed. A number of officials, who were employed in the criminal administrative departments, repeatedly urged the Government for enacting a stringent law for suppressing the *dacoity* crime. They argued that prevailing laws were too weak to punish a dacoit. By the pressure of these officials the Government passed a law known as Act XXIV of 1845. The preamble of this act categorically said that any person who once belonged to a gang of *dacoit*, irrespective of his involvement to any specific case, would be punished. Mere belonging to a gang invited punishment for many persons. By remarkable application of the 'notion of guilt by association' hundreds of dacoits were transported to the overseas territories. In

1852 the suppression of *dacoity* commission was established. Nadia was included under this office in 1853. The suppression of *dacoity* commission, with the help of some native *darogahs*, apprehended numerous dacoits from the district. The famous *dacoits* of this period like Manick Ghose, Nabai Ghose, Kuber Ghose, Bishtoo Ghose, Monohur Ghose, Galakata Haurrish, Nayan Shaikh were arrested. Some of them later became approvers of the police to avoid transportation, others were convicted and transported. Thus *dacoity* crime was temporarily checked but never completely eradicated from Nadia. Many gangs emerged and operated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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