# Reading the Legend of Paan Singh Tomar in the Light of 'Social Banditry'

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**ABSTRACT**

*'Social Banditry' is a term coined by the prominent British historian and writer Eric Hobsbawm. The phrase implies that bandits, who are seen by the law and authority as criminals and a threat to the law and order of society, are regarded by their sympathisers as 'Robin Hoods' with a 'noble' cause. Since the publication of his seminal work Bandits (1969), Hobsbawm's social banditry model has furnished the students and scholars of banditry with some viable tools to evaluate the lives and shenanigans of bandits across the world. The present paper has, too, made an effort to see the life and bandit career of the notorious Chambal dacoit Paan Singh Tomar in the light of Hobsbawm's enduring analysis. While presenting the encountered bandit's short biography, it is worth mentioning that this research article has also attempted to understand the ethos and politics of those formidable badlands known as the Chambal Beehad, which once have been a safe haven for numerous ferocious dacoits.*

Passionate men turning to rugged terrains, jungles and mountains to challenge their surrounding law, order and society through a violent but organised mode of rebellion, bandits have been with us since long ago. The famous Marxist author Hobsbawm used the concept of social banditry to argue that these countryside outlaws, whom the state and law regard as criminals, are not necessarily all evil. Regardless of their dreadful actions, they "are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported." (Seal 3)

Hobsbawm developed his analysis on bandits while surveying the lives and stints of many popular brigands such as Ned Killy, Guiliano, Billy the Kid, Panch Villa, Lampio and similar other outlaws from various ethnicities and socio-political background. The writer, in his significant findings of the study, observed that how celebration and idealisation of these bandits among their people are found to be at variance with such figures' actual life, yet they "have continued to be seen as heroes by many, even if they remain villains to some." (Seal, 3)

In the twentieth century, the Chambal belt saw many dangerous dacoit gangs. These fearsome bandit gangs proved to be a severe threat to the peace and stability of the region. Most of

these bandits preferred for themselves the title of *Baghi* (rebel), as they regarded themselves as victims of an unjust society that had forced them to tread the path of outlawry. These bandits-cum-rebels believed that as justice had been denied to them by the custodians of law, they took upon themselves the task of claiming it. Paan Singh Tomar's tale, too, contains the quintessential materials of this popular Chambal narrative, making his case worthy of study.

Paan Singh was born in 1931 in Bhidosa, a small village of Chambal. Like many other boys of the region, his desire to join the Indian Army, in addition to animpressive physique, soon procured him a post in the country's armed force.

His talent to run fast soon caught his senior officers' attention, and in a short time, Paan Singh became a national athlete. He won dozens of awards in steeplechasing competitions, including his remarkable record of being a national runner for no less than seven years. However, this steeplechaser had never thought that the gnawing badlands of Chambal would be his final track which he will only tread to finish this race of life.

Deputy Commandant Raghunandan Sharma, one of the senior police officers of the Chambal ravines, who spent his youth chasing and hunting dacoits, in response to a question by the renowned American journalist Mary Weaver who inquired: "Why does someone become a dacoit, other than prestige?", replied: "For the majority of dacoits, land is the key: they fight for it, kill for it, die for it, in the ravines."

Sharma was not wrong in his conclusion, for land is indeed regarded as the other name of honour in Chambal. From Daku Man Singh to Daku Malkhan Singh, and even Phoolan Devi, the 'Bandit Queen' of India, it had been primarily a conflict over some land that induced them to rebel. And so did it happen with Paan Singh.

It all started with a dispute over a small piece of land. Upon retiring from the army in 1977, Paan Singh returned to his village to continue with the family profession of farming. He had inherited a small piece of ancestral land. However, Bhawar Singh, an influential *zamindar* (landowner),who was also Paan Singh's distant relative, had illegally encroached on Paan Singh's property, denying his relative's right to access his own land.

A *Panchayat* (village council) was called, and the district collector, owing to Bhawar Singh's family's influence in the village, gave a verdict in his favour. Pampered Bhawar Singh to further humiliate Paan Singh's family, gave his son a severe beating in full public view. Moreover, to inflict additional salt on Paan Singh's wounds, Bhawar and his men charged in

his home with guns and sticks, thrashing Pan Singh's old mother to unconsciousness when he did not find anyone else there. Paan Singh had served the nation, his faith in the system retook him to the door of law, but the police's cold response only increased his disaffection.

The Chambal Police's high handedness has been a significant reasonfor persuading individuals to rebel and take the law into their hands. Sharma, too, admits this corruption in the police department apologetically "if the system gives you no justice, then you take justice into your own hands. And, I am very sorry to say, many become dacoits because of the high-handedness of the police: police beatings, police inefficiency, fear of the police." (Weaver) It is said that when a disillusioned Pan Singh returned from the police station to his home, his mother implored his manhood and exhorted him to avenge her *beizzati* (humiliation), and Paan Singh picked up the gun while turning to the harsh ravines.

*Bandits*, the most significant contribution of Hobsbawm to the study of banditry, classifies bandits into three types— The first one are 'the noble robbers', who happen to be typical Robin Hood kind figures, while the second type are the ancient warriors or classic guerrillas whom the author calls 'Haiduks', and the third and the last kind are, the formidable 'Avengers'.

Paan Singh's profile exhibit many traits of 'Avengers'-the third category of Hobsbawm's bandits. Avengers are the revengeful warriors who, "feeling terribly wronged, strike back without restraints against their tormentors. As Eric Hobsbawm has suggested the very identity of the avenger is closely tied to the ability to 'prove that even poor and weak can be terrible.'" (Arquilla 242)

A vendetta was soon unleashed by Paan Singh's newly made gang, leaving three dead bodies, including that of Bhawar Singh. However, the end of his enemy did not end his "race".Paan Singh had become cognizant of the bitter fact since taking the path to the ravines that "the race once he had started on the track of enmity, would only end with the termination of his life." (My Translation, "A Dacoit with golden feet")

It were the late 1970s, and the Chambal badlandswere rife with dreaded bandits. It was when the ferocious bandit gangs of Malkhan Singh, Fakkad Baba and Phoolan Devi were active in the region. Paan Singh's gang was new in the ravines. To establish it, he needed arms and money, and "the only way for that in the ravines was dacoity, abduction and ransom money." Abductions of the rich and affluent ones coupled with some couple of face-offs with the police soon made Subedar Paan Singh's group listed as 'A-10' in the police files.

Successfully employing his military skills and army experience, Paan Singh had turned his group into a small yet powerful irregular unit in a short time. However, the days of Subedar's glory were short-lived. The notorious massacre of nine innocent Gurjars to avenge the death of Matadin, Paan Singh's dacoit brother who, he thought, had been killed because of a piece of information passed to the Police by the Gurjar head of the village, shook the state government. Arjun Singh, the then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, vowed to get the bandit leader captured dead or alive.

It was said that "Death in the ravines came from the stray bullet. It could also come from the gun of a traitor or from a police trap" (Mukherjee and Singh 311). The Dalits of Rathiankapura, a village on the route between Bhind and Morena, traded with the police to aid them getting Paan Singh's location in exchange for a piece of land, ten thousand rupees and four jobs for their children in the police department.

The deal struck, and it was on 1st October 1981 when Paan Singh and his gang halted Rathiankapura for a stay, a full prepared special force got assembled in no time with all its troops armed and positioned to surprise the gang by laying a deadly ambush.

A fierce gunfight soon ensued. The force had surrounded the whole village while the bandit group tried every means to find a safe passage from the place. However, the fatal mistake of the assumptive Subedar of swearing at the troops on his megaphone made the whole encounter a piece of cake for the troops. "You dogs who drink thin lentil soup, run away! This is *Subedar*Paan Singh Tomar of Bhidosa. You will all be killed!" (Mukherjee) came the haughty dacoit leader barking on his mic. The bellowing quickly disclosed the gang's hideout in the village, but the gang was still resisting while frequently shifting its positions.

Around half past midnight, Mahendra Pratap Singh Chauhan, the police officer leading the encounter, "sensed a rustle in a cluster of bushes farther afield. He ordered Havaldar Tribhuwan Singh of the SAF to fire in that direction." In light of the following morning, the Police found ten dead bodies,amongst which one was of Paan Singh.

It would be apt to requote here the words of Balwant Singh Tomar, the survived cousin of Paan Singh, who was fortunate to escape the last encounter with Police in which his leader was killed: "'There are three mains reasons for someone becoming a *baaghi* – one, the village *Pradhan*, two, the area *Thanedar* and three, the *Patwari* of the area. If these people deliver justice, no one need become a *baaghi*.'" (Banerjee).

*Pradhan* (head of a village), *Patwari* (a government official who maintains records regarding the ownership of people's land), and above them, the *Thanedar* (Police station in-charge) are government officials who are responsible for a just and unbiased running of law and order in rural villages. However, the tragic beginnings of Paan Singh, Phoolan and hundreds of others like them betray the loopholes, flaws and corruption of a biased system, which became a primary inducement for these villagers to seek being at the helm of justice for themselves: "Banditry develops from an unjust social order and is not just a law and order problem, a fact that even the government acknowledges, at least on paper." (Mukherjee and Singh PostScript). All the same, what could rationalise the unlawful murders, abductions, violence, raids and above all, the terror that the reign of bandits causes in a civil society? When even the stints of bandits like Paan Singh,who were once themselves victims of injustice, are put to scrutiny, they recount a period of fear and violence. Hobsbawm, in his treatise, has made some insightful observations tracing the rationale behind this radicalisation among these armed rebels:

> But even when such rebels triumph, victory brings its own temptation to destroy, for primitive peasant insurgents have no positive programme, only the negative programmeof getting rid of the superstructure which prevents men from living well and dealing fairly, as in the good old days. (75)

To 'destroy' and eradicate anyone who dares to challenge the bandit's authority has been the secret de Polichinelle of most bandit groups worldwide. Thus the rifles report and all the nine Gurjars are heaped down instantly, for they are believed to be damned police informers by Paan Singh's gang. Abductions, ransoms are pursued freely by such gangs, for it is the right of a bandit to rob the rich. Yet despite all the odds, the *baghi* bandit is continued to be glorified and celebrated among his adorers. His life and lore does not cease to provide an 'inspiration', always "available to be invoked once morewhenever the need for a Robin Hood should come again." (Seal 173) And therefore their celebration and lionising, too, does not stop, for the *baghis* and bandits like Pan Singh belong to the "remembered history" (Hobsbawm 145), which happens to be more pronounced and relatable than the records and files of the police departments and government officials.

> They are part of the history which is not so much a record of the events and those who shaped them, as of the symbols of the theoretically controllable but actually uncontrolled factors which determine the world of the poor: of just kings and men

> who bring the justice to the people. That is why the bandit legend still has the power to move us. (145)

The crowds of the cathartic movie viewers who cheered at the sight of Subedar Paan Singh chasing Bhawar Singh with a .315 Mauser in his hands, and eventually bringing his arrogant nemesis on his knees where the once-powerful landlord now implores the bandit to spare his life, however, had little concern about rest of the history. The scene and the subsequent reaction of the masses that had turned out to make the titular drama a big hit provides much validity to the insights of Hobsbawm, foras per the latter, living in a corrupt and unjust society where voices of the oppressed weak go unheard, while the oppressive boasts on the patronage of influence and power, the bandit legend possesses an irresistible "power to move us."

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