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Sultana Daku: The history of the myth that surrounds an outlaw

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Abstract: An elusive daredevil, a defiant rebel, a noble robber who robs from the rich and give to the poor a dreaded brigand, and a trigger happy dacoit, and, these are some of the essential characteristics that make up the heroic outlaw tradition. Sultana daku, the famous outlaw of colonial period, came from the notorious bhantu tribe which was famous for robbing and terrorizing people in 1920s United Province (present Uttar Pradesh). The bandit was finally captured and hanged in 1924. Social banditry as stated in *Bandits* (1969), Eric Hobsbawm's masterpiece, is a reality that motivates certain forms of political resistance to oppressive regimes within peasant societies (Bandit 2000). Sultana daku is also regarded as one such Indian bandit, whose legend, over the course of time has been revived, celebrated, and sold through various forms of media outlets. Though there are very few primary historical documents, accessible to common masses, which deal with Sultana's life history in detail, but it was his myth blended with facts and fiction which intensified and gave birth to an ongoing afterlife. From fiction to movies, the popularity that the figure has gained is an apt example of the powerful role that oral tradition could play in making any myth powerful. In the proposed paper, I have tried to make an effort to encapsulate the essential elements which characterizes the figure of an outlaw, with special reference to Sultana daku. I have also tried to trace back some sources in oral tradition, which were crucial in making Sultana popular. Lastly, I have also attempted to present a brief history of Sultana, and the myths and realities that surround his figure.

Keywords: Sultana Daku, Outlaw, History, Myth.

The outlaw tradition is a long lasting, widespread and complex tradition. It has existed in most cultures in one form or other. The Noble Robber is supposed to be a Robin Hood character who robs from the rich and gives to the poor. A charismatic hero who is hailed among the masses as the



friend of oppressed, and feared among the ranks of the oppressors, who consider the former as a threat to the society and power structure. The predominant narrative suggests that it happens to be an oppressed peasant or a poor individual who is forced by the enviroing conditions to rebel against the wielders of power. The outlaw is believed to be a man of principles who follows a rough moral code embedded in tribal, cultural or regional tradition. Many perceive him as a man of justice and honor; a brave man who is believed to live by his word. India has a long history of the brigand tradition, the ravines or beehad of Chambal were once known to be a sanctuary for the dreaded outlaws.

From the awe inspiring Mohar Singh to the precocious Phoolan all of the outlaws shared a love-hate relationship with people, society and state they belonged to. In a report that appeared in Hindustan Times, Mohar Singh, one of the most dreaded bandit of Chambal said that he never bothered poor. Hari Singh Parmar, a former dacoit who surrendered in 1996 claimed to have distributed funds for the poor girls who cannot get married due to poverty. Malkhan Singh, another 'reformed' dacoit said emphatically: "No one dared harass a woman in my time. Even now when I hear of crimes committed against women, my blood boils. Dacoits have gone from Chambal, but has crime been checked?" (Banerjee 1). Bandits seldom considered themselves as dacoits, they believed that it was the injustice and unfair treatment meted out to them, which had triggered them to pick guns: "We weren't dacoits. We were baaghis (rebels)," (Banerjee 1) said Malkhan Singh, who continues: "There were 100 bighas of land that was the property of a temple in the village. Some people in the village wanted to take over the land. When I protested, they started implicating me in all sorts of false cases," (Banerjee 1) he says: "I was harassed and became a baaghi" (Banerjee 1). Balwant Tomar also blames society and the system for creating outlaws. "There are three main 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 1)

The making of outlaws comprises several recurring motifs that work in combination to produce and perpetuate this tradition. Bandits are born in historical conditions when an individual or a group



consider themselves to be the victims of oppression and unfair treatment. It is also the perceived injustice meted to them by those who are in power and authority which further aggravates the feeling of disillusionment and insecurity in them.

There are some common traits which are common in constituting the outlaw hero tradition; Graham seal paraphrases them in his excellent essay; “The outlaw hero is forced to defy the law—or what passes for it—by oppressive and unjust forces or interests (usually governments and/or local power-holders)” (Seal 74). Seal further states that the outlaw hero enjoys the sympathy of poor and oppressed class, he “kills only in self-defence or justified retribution rather than wantonly or capriciously and does not attack or harm women or the otherwise vulnerable” (Seal 74). Moreover, the outlaw loots from the rich and distribute it among the poor, the man is elusive; it is not an easy deal for the authorities to catch him, and at the end he dies a death of a gallant fighter rather than a coward who surrenders (74).

In fine, it could be said that anywhere, anytime an individual or a group of people believe themselves to be unjustly treated, or they find their identity, culture or tradition under attack, then in all probability, the Outlaw Heroes arises and continues to be celebrated.

Sultana Daku: The Indian Robin Hood

Sultana, The swashbuckling bandit who put the frighteners on people and government in twenties of colonial India was a defiant rebel who lived on a code of honor. Sultana was finally captured and hanged by the British government in 1924. In the past decades this Robin Hood type figure’s legend has been revived through different forms of myth and media, and he stands today as one of the most celebrated outlaws in the history of India. However, very few relevant sources are to be found related to his life and history; for the most part they are oral narratives, an amalgam of myth and history that have popularized and perpetuated the myth that revolves around his figure. Arguably the only primary account available about the outlaw’s short roving life, subsequent capture and hanging is Jim Corbett’s *My India*. Jim Corbett, the famous hunter, naturalist, author and conservationist who lived in jungles of Kumaoun and shared a deep loving relationship with the poor villagers of the region. Corbett had entitled a chapter Sultana: India’s Robin Hood in his book *My India*. Corbett, owing to his familiarity with the intricacies of the jungle and region, was hired



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for catching the bandit by Freddy young, a sharp British officer. Hence, this paper has focused mainly on the account of the rebel as presented in his book.

Sultana was a bandit from the Bhandu tribe who terrorized United Province (now Uttar Pradesh) in 1920s of British raj. Bhandus were notorious for robbery, theft and other crimes. The tribe was categorized as criminal tribe by British government. The people of this tribe were kept under strict supervision and restraint. Government had confined this tribe within the four walls of Najibabad fort under the charge of the Salvation Army. Zealous and high spirited Sultana one night escaped from the prison and with a band of around 100 well-armed youth became the most dreaded dacoit of the region: “This imposing gang, whose declared object was dacoity, led a roving life in the jungles of the Terai and Bhabar, their activities extending from Gonda in the east to Saharanpur in the west, a distance of several hundred miles, with occasional raids into the adjoining province of Punjab” (Corbett 98-99).

Government under the charge of Freddy Young, a keen young officer, sanctioned the creation of Special Dacoity Police force to catch him. Sultana after a tedious game of hide and seek was finally caught and hanged to death on July 7, 1924. The fearsome Bhandu bandit had several charges ranging from robbery to murder against him, due to which the region stood in awe of Sultana, however, his scorn for the colonial power, sympathy and support for the poor and needy, faith in uncompromising tribal principles, and respect for women established his image in the form of a noble robber who is remembered even after almost a century of his death.

Having known what it was to be poor, really poor, during his long years of confinement in the Najibaabad fort, sultana had a warm corner in his heart for all poor people. It was said of him that, throughout his career as a dacoit, he never robbed a piece from a poor man, never refused an appeal for charity, and paid twice the price asked for all he purchased from small shopkeepers”(Corbett 100).

Corbett has also narrated an incident when Sultana and his band went for a robbery in a village. The bandit demanded ten thousand rupees in addition to the licensed gun of the rich man, which were produced before him in no time, contended with the booty Sultana returned without any



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further disturbance or harm. However, other day Sultana came to know that his lieutenant Pehalwan had abducted rich man's daughter, displeased dacoit rebuked Pehalwan severely and the bride was sent back unharmed, along with some suitable compensation for the inconvenience. Another instance which exhibits Sultana's gentleness is when he spared the life of Jim Corbett and Freddy Young, despite the ease and opportunity that he did have to shoot them as they were in point blank range of his rifle. Corbett concludes his account of Sultana with a poignant note filled with admiration for the bandit, and a wish for a more lenient justice for the man whom he calls "India's Robin Hood" (Corbett 90).

I could have wished that Justice had not demanded that Sultana be exhibited to manacles and leg-irons, and exposed to ridicule from those who trembled at the mere mention of his name while he was at liberty. I could also have wished that he had been given a more lenient sentence, for no other reasons than that he had been branded a criminal at his birth, and had not had a fair chance; that when power was in his hands he had not oppressed the poor; that when I tracked him to the banyan tree he spared my life and the lives of my friends. And finally, that he went to his meeting with Freddy, not armed with a knife or a revolver, but with a water melon his hands" (Corbett 130).

Afterlife

Sultana's popularity doesn't rest on this simple and lucid account of his life provided by Jim Corbett. In fact, his is arguably the most celebrated Indian dacoit figure in the terms of mythology which only seems to intensify with the passing time. The first Bollywood drama on his life was produced in 1972, in which Dara Singh had played the role of Sultana daku, he was depicted as a defiant rebel of Chambal in the movie who had taken up arms against feudal lords and oppressive government of British. Same century did witness the coming of several folk plays, children tales, and works of fiction in which Sultana was hailed as a hero of poor and a baaghi (rebel) of unjust foreign government. Interestingly, Sultana's legend has even surpassed the boundary of his motherland- his myth triggered several short stories and works in Urdu literature too. We have Sultana Dakuby Mehmood Ahmed Moodi, published around 2010, the novel provides a lengthy and historically fictionalized account of the bandit's life. The novel present a captivating account of



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Sultana in eloquent Urdu where Sultana's birth in Najibabad fort, learning the art of robbery from his grandfather Gulphi, his escape from the fort, and subsequent life as a rebel is portrayed in a fascinating manner .

Then, we have Zahoorul Hassan Siddiqui's Kissa Sultana DakuKa, the date of whose publication is unknown. Intriguingly, the Pakistani writer in his light hearted novella portrays Sultana as a trigger happy Muslimdaku who enjoys killing and executing his enemies in most terrific manners. In fact, some of his own men are tortured to death on slight doubt of spying.

Another purely fictionalized account of Sultana is Chaman Lal's Jungle ka Badshah, Sultana Daku (1935), the work falls under the genre of folk play. Staged by the Parsi Alexandra theatrical company of Bombay in 1935, the drama presents Sultana Daku as a daredevil desperado who lives on robbing and murdering wealthy merchants.

Capitalization on the Bhanu Robber seems to be expanding with the passage of time. In 2012 Bollywood witnessed Gangs of Waseypur, the bloody gangster saga of two families, where the guest role of Sultana Daku as a Robber was enacted by Pankaj Kapur. Another Film Director Rahul Mitra has also announced about his coming movie on Sultana's life which would be an adaptation of Sujit Saraf's novel The Confessions of Sultana Daku, where Bollywood star Randeep Kapoor would be in leading role. Commenting on the film Mitra said: "The approach to the film will not be dark and gory but more like a superhero-drama, where Robin Hood Randeep's character takes from the rich and gives to the poor as India fights for freedom" (Express 1). Apart from the above mentioned Novels and Bollywood movies one could add to the list dozens of folklores, nautankis, and b grade bolly-lollywood Dramas that have also contributed in creating an ongoing afterlife for Sultana.

It could be equally contended that is it fair to go into raptures about an individual who was charged with robbery, dacoity and even murder? Or does this romanticizing of outlawry and banditry worthy of being accepted in a civil society? The answer to this lies in Hobsbawm's seminal hypothesis in which he asserts that it is mythology, more than history which works to produce, perpetuate and celebrate outlaws even after their death.



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