



Stereotyping ‘Criminal Image’ of Meos of Mewat in Colonial Northern India: An Analysis

of British Administrative cum-ethnographic Works

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Abstract

During the late 19th century, the term ‘criminal tribe’ became the common propagation in British India to classify Indian population. Meos of Mewat are also one community who were also referred as criminal tribe in Punjab and United Provinces during British India. This paper will critically examine how and what grounds colonial administrator cum-ethnographers justified and rationalized construction of Meos criminality. This paper will also examine how British ethnographic works on the basis of selective perception and evidence, de-contextualised text and colonial knowledge, justified the construction of Meos criminality. This paper will further scrutinize the role of Meos participation in revolt of 1857 and how it became the instantaneous reasoning for Meos criminality for the British rule. In the end, this paper is going to discuss about the various other British ethnographic works on the Meos that are contradictory to the stigmatized criminal image of Meo community.

Keywords: Meos, Mewat, Criminal Tribe, British Ethnographers, Mina, 1871 Act.

During the late 19th century, the term ‘criminal tribe’ became the common dissemination in British India to classify Indian population. This term refers to those Indian populations who were involved and committed to the organized commission of non-bailable offense. To control and surveillance of these groups or gangs the British government introduced various criminal tribe Act that classifies them as an ‘inborn criminal.’ The first Criminal Tribe Act enacted in 1871



and extended largely to North-western Provinces. It went through various modifications in 1897, 1911, 1919 and 1924. In the 1924 act, all the amendments acts were merged and extended to whole India. Meos of Mewat are one community who were also referred as criminal tribe in Punjab and United Provinces during British India. This paper will critically examine the on which grounds and basis British ethnographers cum-officials justified Meos criminality.

Area of Study and Community

Historically Mewat is a very important area of northern India. This area and Meo community is known for its unique social, cultural and political hostility against various states in Indian history. Amir Ali rightly said that the “Mewat, or land of Meos, does, find a place, a conspicuous one in the history of northern India during the three centuries of Muslim rule preceding the Mughal Empire. During those times Mewat constituted a distinct geographical as well as a political entity.”ⁱ

Mewat is not an administrative division and is therefore, not indicated on any map or in government records. The Meos claim that the name of the area-Mewat has been derived from the name of their community and this claim is generally accepted by the non-Meos too. In fact, there seems to be no reason to doubt this claim also. In fact, present-day usage the term ‘Mewat’ has come to mean, ‘where the Meos live’. Because the extent of the area is conterminous with the settlement of the Meos, there is no fixed boundary of Mewat.ⁱⁱ Currently, Meos are spread into Alwar and Bhartapur district of Rajasthan and Gurgaon and Mewat district in Haryana and some tehsil of Uttar Pradesh. A Meo poet has rightly described the area of Mewat and its population.

इतदिल्लीउतआगरो, अलवरऔरबैराठ ।

कालोपहाड़सुहावणो, जाकेबीचबसेमेवात ।

नूतोसारीजातही, बसांएकहीसाथ ।

(अपर) मेवघणीतादातमे, नूबाजेमेवात ॥

The scholars have different opinions about the origin and Islamisation of Meo society. I am not going to discuss about origin and Islamisation in details in this paper. But, Meos claims that they



belonged to the *Ksatriya* caste of the Hindu order and that their origin can be traced to Suryabansis, Chandravansis, and Agnikulsof the Rajput nobility glittering with such appellations as the Tomars, Yadavs, Chauhans, and Rathors.ⁱⁱⁱ In social reality also they were considered as upper caste and even the Brahmins participated in their marriage functions up until the early 20th century. They had a *jajmani* relationship with both the Hindu and Muslim services caste till recently. In the case of Meos of Mewat also there are various interpretation regarding when and how they embraced Islam. But it is evident from various sources that their process of Islamisation over a long period of time and various forces played significant role in their process of Islamisation.

Stereotyping ‘Criminal Image’ of Meos and British Ethnographic works

H. Bhabha defines about the term stereotype in particular and argued that “Stereotyping, in particular, is based on selective perception and information and consequently results in the biased assessment of others.”^{iv} In the colonial setting, Bhabha submits that “the stereotype is the major discursive strategy of colonial discourse, it is a form of knowledge that oscillates between what is already known and what is always in place, and something which must be constantly and anxiously repeated in order to sustain its credibility.”^v Similarly, colonial ethnographers, justified Meos criminalisation during colonial rule on the basis of selective readings, information and decontextualized of text. Now, this paper will critically examine the how and what grounds the British ethnographic works justified and rationalised the Meos construction of criminality.

This paper submits that British ethnographers rationalised and justified Meos criminality in mainly three grounds, firstly, most of British ethnographers clubbed the Meos with Meenas or Minas (largely on the similarity in the social structure and Sasbadni Mina and DariyaMeo marriage legend) and labelled them as a ‘robber tribe’ and the ‘boldest of the criminal classes’ and viewed them as ‘thrifless and extravagant’. Secondly, early Persian accounts of Delhi Sultanate particularly MinhajSiraj and ZiyauddinBarni works were the major sources of the historical image of the Meos as ‘robbers’, ‘highway robbers’, and ‘lawless,’ for British



ethnographic works during the 19th century Thirdly, the manner Meos resist British rule in revolt of 1857, justified them to labelled Meos as ‘criminal tribe’. Now, it will be important to discuss such issues in details.

In Mewat, the first British ethnographic data on the Meos of Mewat was collected by Major P.W. Powlett in the form of Alwar Gazetteer. Powlett was the one who held positions in the military, police, and British administration. He was first ethnographer who writes about Meo-Mina origin that

The Meos claim to be of Rajput origins but there are ground for believing that many spring of the same stock as the Minas. The similarity between the word Meo and Mina suggests that the former may be a contradiction of the later. Several of the respective clans are identical (Singal, Nai, Pundlot, Dingal and Balot), and a story of one DariyaMeo and his lady Sasbadni Mina seems to show that they formerly intermarried. In Bolandshar (Bulendsahar) a caste called Meo Minas is spoken of in the settlement Reports' which would seem further to connect the two.^{vi}

Further, most of British administrators-cum-ethnographers largely cited Powlett's work to describe the similarity between the Meo and the Mina communities. For example, Major General A. Cunningham, who visited Mewat in 1880s attended one function in FerozpurJhirka and reported that “the story of Darya Khan Meo and Sasi-Badni Mina was a very popular one. Their song was sung at every marriage by the Mirasis or bards. He claimed that one result of this affair had been the discontinuance of marriages between the Meos and the Minas, which previously had been common. He further stated that whatever truth there may be in the story, the people generally referred to it as the cause of the discontinuance of marriage between the Meos and the Minas, which up to that time had been common.”^{vii} He also claims this legend proves that Meos must have been a cognate race with the Mina. M. A. Sherring, who wrote many texts on tribes and castes of India, also remarked that “the Meos intermarried with Meena families until lately so they belong to the same race.”^{viii}

Similarly, Rajputana Gazetteer stated that the origin of Meos is doubtful as “they claim descent from the Rajput races of Jadon, Kachhwaha, and Tunwar, and they may have some Rajput blood



in their veins. But they are probably, like many other similar tribes, a combination from ruling and various stocks and sources; and there is reason to believe them very nearly allied to the Minas, who are certainly a tribe of the same structure and species.”^{ix}Rajputana Gazetteer mentioned that the “Meos had twelve clans and pals, the first six of which were identical in name and claimed the same descent as the first six clans of Minas. Intermarriage between both was the rule till the time of Akbar, which owing to an affray at the marriage of a Meo with a Mina, the custom was discontinued. Finally, their mode of life is, or was, similar, as both tribes were once notoriously predatory.”^x

Rajputana Gazetteer also for the first time acknowledges that ‘some Meos have Rajput blood’. But, as far as the Meo-Mina same structure and species is concerned, this colonial understanding is based on three aspects or arguments. First, it is said the Meos have some clans that are identical in name to the Mina tribe. Second, it claimed that they had marital relations until Akbar, which discontinued after Dariya Khan and SasiBadni mina episode. Third, this marriage legend, which was associated with two zamindars and became very popular in oral traditions, became the actual event in British ethnographic records.

Many leading scholars on Meos of Mewat questioned the British administrators-cum-ethnographers reasoning of the relationship between the Meos and the Minas. For Instance, Partap Aggarwal argued that “the relationship based on the similarity of their names is quite weak.”^{xi}He further commented that “identical *gotra* names of the Meos and the Minas do not essentially indicate the close relationship between the two. He also stated that if we examined the circumstances under which that marriage alliance took place, we would know it was accidental and an unusual event. It certainly does not indicate that the Meos and Minas intermarried as a practice.”^{xii}

ShailMayaram also attempts an alternative reading of Dariya Khan that “the narrative signifies the juxtaposition rather than the interpretation of two groups of culturally distinct people, Meos and Minas.”^{xiii}Mayaram highlights that this legend is the romantic theme of separation- reunion



rather than the politics of alliance and feud and the marriage of Dariya khan and Sasbadni Rao is more like an alliance rather than a sign of kinship.^{xiv} More recently, SurajbhanBhardawaj observed that Rajasthani records do not attest to the event mentioned above. For Bhardwaj “the story proves neither of the two arguments-that the Meos and Meenas once belonged to one ‘race’ and thus had matrimonial relations, and that these relations were terminated after a single decisive conflict. Apparently, this story was popularised by the region's bards (*mirasis*) because it was associated with two important *zamindars* and involved a large number of Meos and Meena. That the Meos and Meena did not belong to the same ‘racial’ stock is also evident from several 17th and 18th-century documentary references to *hasilgharecha* made by the Meos for entering into marriage ties with not only the Meenas but also other castes such as Jats, Ahirs, Gujjars, Telis and Bhats.”^{xv}

What is more important to note that early British ethnographic work on Meo-Mina common origin further associated with their predatory and criminal activities also. For instance, R.V. Russell who was a British civil servant and known for his role as superintendent of ethnography mentioned in the context of Meos that the “Muhammadan branch of the Mina tribe belonging to the country of Mewat. They were also formerly robbers by occupation, and though they have improved they are still noted cattle-lifters.”^{xvi} The Gazetteer of Bharatpur also concludes that the mode of life of both “Meos and Minas were similar, as both tribes were notorious predatory.”^{xvii} William crook also linked Meos with Mina and mentioned that an important branch of these robber tribes is that of the Meos, or Mina. He further mentioned that the Meos in the Punjab, are the “boldest of the criminal classes, leaving their villages in gang which sometimes remain absent for a year at a time. They have agents and fence, in all the largest cities of Central and Southern India, and commit robberies throughout the Deccan.”^{xviii} So, it is clearly evident from above that British ethnographic work justification for Meos criminality based on Meo-Mina similarity in the social and tribal identity of the Meos and the Mina. Second, many British ethnographers are not able to differentiate between the two different communities and used same term Meo/Mina simultaneously.



Secondly, Indo-Persian accounts were the major sources of the historiographical and ethnographic image of the Meos as ‘robbers’, ‘plundering thugs’, and ‘lawless,’ for British ethnographic works during the 19th century. For instance, Powlett in Alwar Gazetteer for the early history of Meos and Mewat depends on various volumes of Elliot and Dowdson, Brigg’s translation of Ferishta, and some other Indo-Persian accounts. Powlett writes that “Meos were during the Muhammadan period of power always ‘notorious’ for their turbulence and predatory habits. They have become generally well-behaved but they return to their former habits when opportunities occur.”^{xxix} Sir Charles Aitchison, former Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, also mentioned that “Meos or Mewatis as predatory races, thieves and cattle-lifters, the turbulent people who were ever a thorn in the side of the Muhammadan Government and have given much trouble to ourselves.”^{xxx}

On the similar lines H.A. Rose also quoted the early Persian accounts and remarked that “Mewatis were notorious throughout the Muhammadan period.”^{xxxi} Gurgaon District Gazetteer 1883-84 also commented on the similar ways and writes that for an account of the early history of Mewat, it can be gleaned from the Mahomedan historians. The salient points of the history were the turbulence of the Mewattis, who relying on the strength of their hill retreats, plundered the country far and wide whenever the central authority was from any cause temporarily weakened; the severe measures from time to time were adopted to repress them.^{xxii} The similar view was continued even in the first half of 20th century when S.T. Hollins in his compilation on the criminal tribes in Indian particularly in united provinces and mentioned that “The Mewatis were always a turbulent people, and frequent reference to their lawlessness and daring will be found in the pages of Indian history.”^{xxiii}

So, it is clear that Meos classification as a criminal tribe was based mainly on similarities between Mina and Meos in their social life and common ancestry. Most of the British ethnographic works largely revolved around the common origin of the Meo-Mina relationship and the portrayal of Meos in a criminal image in Indo-Persian accounts of medieval India. But, ignore the great transformation among Meos as during the 13th century to 17th century. This was



the time when Mewati people organised themselves into a political state. Further, this was also the time when Mewati people went through the process of Pesantisation and become major zamindars during the Mughals.

Meos in Revolt of 1857 and the Construction of Meos Criminality

The Revolt of 1857 in the Mewat region and Gurgaon district arose from a combination of high land revenue demand, execution of Nawab Shamsuddin, lack of adequate irrigation, periodic famines and droughts, mortgages, indebtedness and land sale. More importantly, the high levels of mortgage and indebtedness helped build up the anti-British feelings among the Meos of Mewat. Therefore, Meos of Mewat actively participate in revolt of 1857 and challenged British rule very valiantly. Mewat region was one of the crucial places in the neighbourhood of Delhi, where the 1857 revolt took a popular character due to the common people's involvement in the rural and urban areas. The Mewati people, particularly Meos, sacrificed their lives and raised their heads against British rule.

The Revolt of 1857 has been the most debated theme in modern Indian history. A vast literature exists on various perspectives and dimensions of this theme. This paper investigates this theme in the context of how Meos participation in revolt of 1857 become major immediate cause for construction of their criminal image in British India. Because Meos in pre-1857 British records were hardly mentioned in the administrative reports regarding the lawless and criminal activities. But, after the Revolt of 1857 and the active participation by the Meos, they had become a concern for the administration. It is also evident from the British perspective on the Meos participation in the Revolt of 1857; as violent and criminal image of Meos established by the colonial states. For instance, Watson and Kaye conclude that

The Mewatess have not by any means a good reputation as a tribe. They are, according to a local report, like the Goojurs, thieves and cattle stealers, and have the vices of Mohmedans without the virtue of Hindoos. They further added that in the mutiny and rebellion, in some districts, especially around Agra, they were more troublesome even than the Goojurs, adding to their original 'evil disposition the



bloodthirstiness of the Mahomedan fanatics'. In the latter particular they were led on by their own priests, who are for the most part ignorant and very bigoted, and on the occasion in question, preached the '*jihad*' or holy war to their followers exciting them against the Christians and Hindoos of these localities. Their acts of rebellion were, however, quickly suppressed and the tribe resumed its usually peaceful employment.^{xxiv}

Powlett too remarked about Meos participation in revolt of 1857 that "they assembled, burnt state ricks, carried off cattle, etc. but did not succeed in plundering any town or village in Alwar. In British territory they plundered Firozpur and other villages, and when a British force came to restore order, many were hanged."^{xxv} W.W. Hunter describes the anarchy of that time as follows:

In Rohtak and Gurgaon anarchy reined unchecked, Gujars and Meos plundered with impartial hand, respecting the king's Government no more than our own. Convoys of his treasure were attacked; the Delhi King's officers were robbed and beaten; and his letters were torn into fragments and thrown in the face of his messengers. Old feuds, some of which had lain dormant since the days of the Mughal Emperors, were revived and fought out. The country people, however, bore the English no special ill will, and as soon as Delhi fell, the districts rapidly settled down.^{xxvi}

The Punjab District Gazetteer also commented that "Meos, after attacking Sohna, started looting and plunder as they did at other places."^{xxvii} What is more important to note is that the British perspective of the 1857 revolt established the Indo-Persian image of plunder, dacoit, and lawlessness of the Meos. Ethnographers like William Crook goes further and states that "the popular idea of them is quite in unison with their history: *Pahlelat, piche bat; dekhi tori Mewat; pahligali, piche bat*, are common proverbs, which mean that, in dealing with a Mewati, you had better kick or abuse before you do business with him; and his blood-thirstiness- *Meoka put barahbaras men badlaletahai*"the Meos brat take his revenge when he is twelve years old" his toughness-*Mevmara jab janiye, jab tija ho jaye*;" Never be sure that a Meo is dead till you see the third-day funeral ceremony performed."^{xxviii}

Meos participation and their hostility against the British in the Revolt of 1857, above mentioned proverbial speech, rationalises the severe violence and actions taken against the Meos by the



British State to suppress the 1857 rebellion in Mewat. Further, the Meos characterisation as ‘violent’, ‘predatory’, and ‘turbulent’ and ‘blood thirstiness’s in proverbial speech justify the British construction of Meos ‘criminality’ and subjugation in the late 19th century. It endorses not only the oral narrative of Darya Khan and Sasbadni Mina, but British ethnographers used the proverbial speech to construct antiquity of Meo criminality. While the British use the proverb to criminalise them, Meos contextualises the above-mentioned proverbs to demonstrate their character as a brave, resilient and warrior community.

So, it is also evident from above that the role of the Meos in the Revolt of 1857, where they rose against British rule, played a prominent role in their listing as a criminal tribe. Contrary to the British perspective of Meos' participation in s 1857 revolt, Meos remember this rebellion as an act of bravery, courage, patriotism, Hindu-Muslim unity and resistance against British rule. From the British administrative perspective, it shows the Meos history of criminal acts and bloodthirstiness. Even today elderly remember and recount what their fathers had narrated to them about the trees and the spots where their forefathers were hanged and beheaded in the days following the uprising.

British Ethnography and different views on Meos of Mewat

It is important to note that the understanding of the British administrators-cum-ethnographers about Meos was not consistent and homogenous. So, it is important to note and mentioned that the many British ethnographic-cum official and judicial understanding was contradictory to the British larger observation on the Meo community. For instance, O' Dwyer describes the Meos of Alwar as a ‘prolific and prosperous race’ and Mewat is the most prosperous part of Bharatpur states and the Meos the most industrious group.^{”xxix} The Imperial Gazetteer mentioned that “the Meo tribe has laid aside its former lawless turbulence, and the Meos, though still thriftless, extravagant and lazy, now rank among the most peaceable communities of Punjab.”^{”xxx} More importantly, Mr Christie, a judge and the superintendent of police of Gurgaon district, in the annual report of 1882, writes that



I would not classify Meos with criminal 'character'. Crime is not looked upon them as a 'legitimate pastime'. It does not occupy anything like the foremost place in their minds as 'a means of existence'. Roughly speaking, the whole of the two *pargans* of Nuh and Ferozpur consist of Meos, who forms a particularly large tribe, spreading over tract of country in Rajputana. Naturally a pathetic inclined to ease and indolence, unfavorable season and climate variation soon crush their energies and cause them to lose heart, when some (certainly not as a tribe) forced by necessity turn to crime for a subsistence. Even their women enjoy a reputation for industry and virtue.^{xxxii}

Sir John Malcolm also writes in early 19th century that “Mewattis or Meos are ‘stigmatised as robbers and assassins’, but they are at the same time admitted to be faithful and courageous guards and servants to those in whose service they engage.”^{xxxiii} So, the Malcolm also believes that Meos image as robber and theft is a stigmatised. Sir John Malcolm further mentioned that “Mewatties, Patans, Mekranies, Sindhies and Arabs, who are hired on higher pay in their infantry, they have a just reputation for their valour and skills in defending forts and walled towns.”^{xxxiiii}

The Gurgaon district Gazetteer also stated that “in old days of life of the district had been turbulent and stirring, but it now seemed to have settled down into a peaceful and quite routine, the feudatory races had betaken themselves to agriculture.”^{xxxv} Watson and Kaye also noted that “as a race, the Mewattes are one of the finest of the North-West Provinces. The men are tall, muscular, and athletic, capable of great endurance, and have the reputation of being highly skilled in the use of their weapons, both as swordsmen, and marksmen with the matchlock, in which they are instructed from boyhood in their village gymnasium.”^{xxxvi} Thus, it is true that British understanding was not homogenous on the origin and character of Meos of Mewat. Even British judges have a different opinion on the classification of Meos as a Criminal tribe in the Gurgaon district. It is very significant to note that on one side Meos are labelled as ‘criminal’ tribe and another side they are recruiting by the British and local states in infantry and cavalry. This paper also proves that the way British classify Indian population as a criminal tribe is largely based on British understanding on the origin and social structure of Meos that they found similar to Minas and therefore they linked with them and classified them as criminal tribe.



Conclusion

The colonial administrators and ethnographers constructed the criminal image of the Meos by equating them with the Meenas through the story of the marriage of Darya Khan (Meo) and Sasbadni Meena and similarity in the name of the gotra system. The work also shows that the active participation of Meos in the Revolt of 1857 was the immediate reason for the identification of Meos as a criminal tribe. Unfortunately, Meos colonialstigmatised and maligned criminal image still exists. The Meocommunity and Mewat as region has still been unable to shrug off its labels of the criminal tribe. Meos generally believe that it happened because their forefathers bravely resisted the Delhi Sultanate, Mughals and British.

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