

GANG WARFARE, STATE FRAGILITY, AND GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM IN RAJANPUR'S KACHA REGION (1980–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper systematically examines the historical, socio-economic, and political factors that catalyzed the emergence and ensured the persistence of organized gang warfare within the geographically isolated Kacha region of Rajanpur, Southern Punjab, Pakistan, between 1980 and 2018. The core argument posits that the Kacha's unique, challenging terrain and historical governmental neglect created a sustained power vacuum. This void was readily exploited by criminal syndicates, whose structural permanence was guaranteed through reciprocal relationships with feudal power brokers, corrupt elements of the state apparatus, and regional politicians. These illicit ties transformed the gangs from mere outlaws into entrenched socio-political actors, fundamentally undermining the writ of the state and destabilizing community life. The research analyzes pivotal gang incidents, the shift in criminal strategies, and the disastrous social and economic consequences experienced by the marginalized local populace, providing a nuanced perspective on frontier governance and chronic state-society disconnect in rural Pakistan. This investigation offers vital insights into the multifaceted process by which localized criminality evolves into a challenge to national security and governance.

KEYWORDS: Gang Warfare, Kacha, Rajanpur, State Fragility, Feudalism

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The Kacha region of Rajanpur, situated along the formidable Indus River in Southern Punjab, stands as a profound testament to the consequences of chronic state fragility and geographical determinism in South Asia. This remote, water-logged, and densely forested territory has, particularly between 1980 and 2018, become infamous as an epicenter of entrenched gang violence and organized crime. The conflicts that plague this region are not random outbursts of banditry; rather, they represent a highly organized, systemic challenge to legitimate authority (Niaz 2017). The violence is deeply woven into the socio-political fabric, impacting every facet of local governance and the daily lives of the marginalized populations residing there. This situation necessitates a rigorous academic inquiry to dissect the root causes and enduring dynamics of this regional instability.

The central thesis of this essay is that the enduring presence and persistence of gang wars in the Kacha region of Rajanpur, spanning the period from 1980 to 2018, is fundamentally driven by a confluence of geographical isolation, deep-seated socio-economic deprivation, and the political complicity of local elites and state actors. This nexus of vulnerabilities transforms mere criminal activity into a complex challenge of governance, wherein the gangs function not just as criminal entities but as alternative power structures. This essay argues that state failure to address historical neglect—both in terms of socio-economic uplift and consistent law enforcement—created the fertile ground in which these syndicates flourished, establishing a permanent architecture of criminality that actively compromises national security and regional stability.

The debate surrounding organized crime in peripheral regions often centers on either

purely socio-economic models (poverty creating crime) or state-centric models (corruption enabling crime). However, the case of Rajanpur's Kacha demands a more integrated perspective. The unique environmental factors of the Indus Riverine area—the 'Kacha' land itself (Jawad, 77)—offer an unparalleled sanctuary, providing a physical shield against state intervention. This geographical advantage synergizes with the structural weakness of democratic institutions and the entrenched influence of tribal and feudal elites. The subsequent analysis will demonstrate how this synergy allows gangs to transition from simple bandit groups to sophisticated actors capable of forging inter-provincial links, establishing sectarian ties, and actively engaging in large-scale organized crime such as kidnapping for ransom, thereby escalating the conflict beyond localized feuds.

Global literature on gang formation frequently highlights socio-economic and cultural determinants, providing a crucial comparative framework for understanding Rajanpur. Research on gangs in other contexts, such as the United States, emphasizes the complex interplay of poverty, social interaction, and the quest for identity and belonging that draws young individuals into gang life (Allender 2001). This pattern resonates strongly with the Kacha experience, where pervasive unemployment and lack of opportunities offer a bleak future, making the economic and social structure of a criminal organization an attractive alternative to the systemic deprivation of mainstream society. Furthermore, the analysis of gang activity in Canada introduces important concepts regarding comprehensive anti-gang strategies, particularly distinguishing the limited effectiveness of

suppression against the more lasting impacts of prevention and intervention (Linden 2010).

Within the South Asian context, the literature pivots toward the profound influence of deep-rooted cultural and familial norms on criminality. Studies examining youth gang involvement in the region point to the promotion of hyper-masculinity, patriarchal structures, and a 'Jatt mentality' as key cultural factors that inadvertently foster an environment conducive to gang formation, particularly among young men seeking power and status (Kandola 2019). Crucially, localized studies, particularly those focused on the adjacent Kacha area of Sindh, underscore the critical role of powerful local elites and feudal lords (Sardars) in supporting and exploiting dacoit and bandit groups for political and personal gain (Sahito 2005). These regional studies are indispensable, as they highlight that the Rajanpur phenomenon is not unique, but rather part of a contiguous, historically rooted pattern of lawlessness across the Indus Riverine plains where powerful non-state actors leverage geography and social custom to maintain parallel power structures.

This paper adopts a qualitative, historical-empirical methodology, informed by the foundational approach used in examining large, complex criminal organizations. Specifically, it draws methodological insights from the study of historical criminal networks, viewing the gangs not as isolated phenomena but as structured, well-organized entities with strong social, political, and economic ties to influential groups within the broader society (Dickie 2004). This methodology allows for the construction of a detailed historical narrative of gang warfare in Rajanpur, tracing the evolution of these groups from local bandits to sophisticated syndicates capable of challenging the state,

ensuring a comprehensive view of the conflict's progression and permanence.

The empirical foundation of this thesis is constructed from a diverse range of primary sources, including official police reports, archived newspaper accounts, and indispensable oral sources collected from community members, gang affiliates, and local informants (Khalilani 2023; Gorchani 2023). A rigorous content analysis was performed on police records and media coverage (Daily Times 2013), carefully identifying patterns of gang activity, their methods of operation, and the reported responses of law enforcement. Crucially, oral interviews provide the human dimension, offering context and insight into the social dynamics, tribal loyalties, and the tacit support mechanisms that often remain undocumented in official accounts. By triangulating data from official documents, journalism, and personal testimonies, this research moves beyond simplistic narratives of mere criminality to provide a rich, nuanced understanding of the socio-political reality of the Kacha region.

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM

Rajanpur's tumultuous history, marked by shifting political control and tribal resistance, establishes the fundamental conditions for contemporary lawlessness. Historically labeled as *Yaghistan*, or the 'Country of Rebels,' the region has always existed on the fringes of centralized state authority, even dating back to its founding in 1732 (Akhtar). The settlement of Baloch tribes, such as the Mazari, Gorchani, and Khosa, from Seistan into the plains between the Indus River and Mount Suleiman created a culture where armed resistance and internal conflict were deeply ingrained. The very identity of these

Baloch tribes was historically entwined with military prowess and a readiness to fight, a characteristic noted even in early colonial records (Fryer 1876, 66).

The British colonial encounter further cemented the region's peripheral status and the institutionalization of local power brokers. Despite aggressive military actions—such as the campaigns led by Brigadier Hodgson and Chamberlain in the 1850s, which resulted in significant tribal casualties and the burning of villages (Paget 1906, 106–124)—the British realized the impossibility of complete military subjugation (Minchin 1869, 3–4). This led to the adoption of the 'Sandeman System,' a policy that essentially co-opted tribal chiefs (Tumandars) by funding and empowering them to manage law and order, creating a semi-autonomous governance model (Hatto Ram 2018, 345–46). This colonial legacy of delegated authority laid the groundwork for the later political manipulation and complicity that would define the relationship between the state's local agents and criminal elements.

The geographical identity of the *Kacha* is the primary physical determinant enabling the gangs' resilience. Defined as the sandy, fertile, and often flooded land existing *within* and immediately adjacent to the Indus River (Jawad, 77), the *Kacha* is characterized by dense bushes and challenging, variable terrain. This environment provides the dacoits with secure hideouts, effectively negating the surveillance and access capabilities of conventional law enforcement. This natural barrier prevents the state from establishing consistent writ, fostering a perception among both the local populace and the criminal elements that the area is truly outside the state's direct control.

The *Kacha*'s unique geography is not merely a hideout; it is a strategic asset. The riverine nature of the land, which connects the three provincial borders of Punjab, Sindh, and Baluchistan, makes it an ideal transit and staging ground for criminal operations (DPO Rajanpur 2018–2019). This connectivity allows gangs to execute crimes in one province, such as kidnapping, and quickly retreat to an adjacent province, exploiting jurisdictional seams and leveraging tribal connections across political boundaries. This strategic advantage, rooted in the land itself, transforms localized criminal activity into a problem of inter-provincial security, far exceeding the capacity of local police stations (Sahito 2005).

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC FOUNDATION OF GANG RECRUITMENT

The socio-economic conditions of Rajanpur provide the inexhaustible supply of manpower necessary for the perpetuation of gang warfare. Pervasive poverty, coupled with one of the most acute education crises in Pakistan, creates a marginalized youth population with severely constrained legitimate opportunities (Fryer 1876, 62). Many local people prioritize agricultural work and animal husbandry over formal education, a choice compounded by the lack of political demand for improved social infrastructure (Shahid 2016). This vacuum of opportunity channels young men towards criminal networks where economic subsistence and a perverse form of social status are readily available.

Gang membership, in this context, offers not just survival but also a distinct social identity and a route to recognition. The prevalence of tribal culture, where the carrying of arms is considered an "adornment" and accumulated police reports

(FIRs) are viewed as marks of pride, reinforces an ethos that valorizes conflict and defiance (Fryer 1876, 62). This cultural milieu integrates seamlessly with the gang narrative, providing a sense of belonging and protection that the state has failed to offer (Kandola 2019). The path of criminality, therefore, is tragically less a deviation from norms and more an understandable response to socio-economic despair and a hyper-masculine culture.

The psychological draw towards gang life is further illuminated by the phenomenon of honor killing and tribal feuds, which often act as initial catalysts for long-term criminal careers. Major gang figures, such as Murida Nukani, began their descent into banditry after committing an honor killing and fleeing to the mountains to evade justice (Khalilani 2023). These initial acts of violence, often rooted in personal or family vendettas (Subhani 2017), compel individuals to seek the security and arms of established gangs, providing a perpetual stream of hardened recruits driven by a need for protection and revenge. This mechanism demonstrates how personal tragedy is weaponized into organized crime.

The gangs deliberately cultivate a symbiotic relationship with the local community, utilizing economic deprivation for recruitment and operational support. While the gangs are feared, they also provide economic benefits to their "facilitators" by acquiring land or supplying modern weapons in exchange for shelter and intelligence (Gorchnani 2023). This cycle ensures that, despite law enforcement efforts, the gangs have an early warning system and community cover, often leading to the failure of police operations and generating widespread public distrust of state authorities (Khan 2016). This local reliance transforms the criminal

economy into a shadow governance structure.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PATRONAGE: POLITICAL AND FEUDAL TIES

The persistence of the Kacha gangs is fundamentally dependent upon an institutionalized architecture of political and feudal patronage, which provides immunity from consistent state action. Local power brokers, traditionally referred to as Sardars or tribal chiefs, view these criminal groups not as a threat but as instrumental tools for maintaining and exerting political supremacy (Awan 2016). By offering tacit support, hideouts, and negotiations for their release, the chiefs essentially subcontract violence and intimidation, reinforcing their hold over their constituencies and intimidating rivals.

This complicity extends deep into the state apparatus, where corrupt elements within law enforcement and the administration become indispensable allies to the syndicates. The case of the Chotu gang, whose leader Ghulam Rasool disclosed the names of police officers assisting him upon his surrender, graphically illustrates the extent of this penetration (Awan 2016). The support ranges from providing intelligence on planned police operations to supplying weapons seized from other criminals, thereby transforming the state's security infrastructure into an engine for organized crime. This dual-sided betrayal—where both feudal lords and state agents protect the criminals—is the greatest barrier to eradicating gang activity.

The inter-provincial geographical advantage is matched by an inter-organizational political network. Gangs in Rajanpur forge ties with militant, sectarian, and separatist groups across Punjab, Sindh,

and Baluchistan, most notably the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) (Mazari 2016). These alliances are mutually beneficial: the militant groups gain sanctuary and logistical support in the Kacha's secure hideouts, while the gangs receive a massive influx of sophisticated weaponry, including rocket launchers, significantly enhancing their operational capability against state forces (Shahid 2016). This escalation in firepower moves the conflict far beyond traditional dacoity and into the realm of organized insurgency and counter-state warfare.

The phenomenon of gangs influencing judicial and political processes further solidifies their structural power. Examples of gang leaders, such as Baba Lowng, threatening a special court judge to secure an acquittal demonstrate their willingness and capacity to challenge the judiciary's writ directly (Ahmad 2021). Furthermore, the history of successful negotiations between local chiefs, the police, and the gangs—often resulting in the honorable release of criminals or the cessation of operations in exchange for hostages—erodes public faith in the state's ability to enforce justice (Daily Times 2023). The state's perceived weakness becomes the gangs' greatest strength, fostering a culture of impunity and normalizing criminal activity as a viable political path.

CASE STUDY I: THE REIGN OF THE BOSAN GANG (1980–2000)

The early phase of the research period, particularly the 1980s and 1990s, was heavily defined by the terror of the Bosan Gang, which spanned both Rajanpur and Muzaffargarh districts due to their strategic location along the Kacha area of the Indus River (Press release 2016). Led initially by figures like Majeed Bosan and later by

notorious members such as Tariq Bosan and Munir Jatani, this gang became the embodiment of the lawless frontier, establishing an environment where citizens feared for their lives and property even during daylight hours. Their activities were the benchmark for the subsequent generation of organized crime in the region, focusing intensely on kidnapping for ransom and high-profile robberies.

The Bosan Gang's operations highlighted the critical role of informant networks and the ensuing cycle of betrayal and brutal revenge. The murder of police informer Ismail Gopang, along with his entire immediate family, by Akhtar Lashari demonstrated the gangs' extreme ruthlessness and the dire consequences for anyone seen to cooperate with state authorities (Jatani). This act served as a chilling deterrent, cementing the public's reluctance to assist the police, thereby providing the criminals with operational security guaranteed by terror. The spectacular nature of their crimes, such as the ambush of a police van on the Indus Highway to free Munir Jatani, resulting in the martyrdom of two police constables, showcased their evolving capacity to directly confront and overwhelm law enforcement (Lashari).

The ultimate dismantling of the Bosan Gang's leadership, specifically the killing of Ghulam Nazik (Duddy Bosan) and later Ghulam Ali in police encounters between 2003 and 2008, illustrated the required intensity for police success (Bakht Ali). These operations often required joint efforts between Rajanpur and Muzaffargarh police and were heavily reliant on informants, yet they were frequently thwarted by the gang's ability to use the Kacha's riverine landscape for swift escape. While these encounters temporarily disrupted the gang's hierarchy,

the underlying conditions of geographical sanctuary and political patronage remained unaddressed, ensuring that the void was quickly filled by new or emerging syndicates, such as the Chotu Gang.

CASE STUDY II: THE RISE OF MURIDA NOKANI AND INTER-TRIBAL CONFLICT

The trajectory of the Murida Nokani Gang (1990s-2000s) provides a clear case study in how deeply inter-tribal rivalry and the feudal system are embedded in gang formation. Murida, a member of the Gorchani tribe, initially fled to the hills following a tribal feud, leveraging the traditional system of tribal protection before escalating his activities to professional banditry (Nokani). His subsequent actions, including the blocking of major roads for large-scale robbery and the kidnapping of a high-ranking government officer, EDO Health, for ransom, marked a significant expansion of the gangs' economic ambition.

Crucially, Murida Nokani's operation revealed the hierarchical nature of the criminal economy. He became a central clearinghouse for the region, with smaller gangs, including the later-prominent Chotu Gang, often kidnapping victims and then selling them to Murida, who managed the ransom negotiation process (Nokani). This structure indicates a level of criminal collaboration that transcended simple feuds, suggesting a degree of organization and profit-sharing across the Kacha and the tribal areas of Baluchistan. His eventual release of the EDO Health officer by order of his tribal chief, Sardar Pervaiz Khan Gorchani, further cemented the notion that tribal authority often superseded the authority of the state in matters of justice and enforcement (Awan 2016).

The persistence of smaller, regionally active groups like the Sohrani gang and the Jaakha gang further complicates the narrative of a single dominant criminal entity. Hashim Sohrani's highly publicized act of killing the leader of Sipah-e-Sahaba in a Rajanpur court, only to surrender and be released six months later, highlights the shocking fragility of the justice system (Dawn News 2003). Conversely, the demise of the Jaakha gang, which had no external support from Sardars or the police, after a sustained campaign by the rival Gopang tribe and a police operation, underscores the difficulty faced by groups without the protective shield of patronage (Daily Pakistan 2016). Their fate confirms that political and feudal complicity is the single most significant factor in a gang's longevity.

CASE STUDY III: THE CHOTU GANG PHENOMENON (2000s–2016) AND STATE CHALLENGE

The Chotu Gang, led by Ghulam Rasool (Chotu), represented the ultimate fusion of organized crime, sectarian militancy, and challenge to state sovereignty. Chotu's origins lay in petty theft and a revenge killing, which quickly evolved into association with the notorious Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Raja 2016). This association provided his Burkani Baloch tribe-based group with ideological cover and access to sophisticated weaponry, allowing Chotu to establish a veritable criminal fiefdom in the Kacha region (Mazari 2016). This group's activities were so brazen that they became a national security concern.

The period of Chotu's ascendancy was marked by open confrontation with the state, moving beyond mere avoidance. The successful seduction and subsequent kidnapping of twenty-five police officers in 2016, following an initial clash that martyred six policemen, became a critical national

flashpoint (Khan 2016). This incident, which saw the use of advanced weaponry like rocket launchers against the police, demonstrated the gangs' superior organization and firepower, forcing a massive, coordinated military and police operation, *Zarb-e-Ahan* (Shahid 2016). The necessity of army intervention for an internal law and order problem revealed the total collapse of local state authority.

The surrender of Chotu and 175 gang members following the army's ultimatum marked a significant but costly victory for the state (Ismaeel/Shaheen 2016). The entire episode underscored the critical role of intelligence—specifically that Chotu was sheltering terrorist elements involved in the 2016 Lahore explosion—in mobilizing a state response commensurate with the threat (Shahid 2016). While the military operation achieved its immediate goal of neutralizing Chotu's direct presence, the extensive size of the surrendering group confirmed the large, deep-rooted network Chotu had established.

LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE AND OPERATIONAL FAILURES

The history of law enforcement in the Kacha region is characterized by reactive, short-lived operations that consistently failed to dismantle the gangs' support structure. The police response, whether against the Bosan, Murida, or Chotu gangs, typically relied on informants and concentrated raids, which were often undermined by leaks from corrupt officers or the superior mobility of the dacoits (Khan 2016). The police frequently suffered high casualties, as seen in the encounters with Murida Nokani in 1995 and the disastrous initial confrontation with the Chotu Gang (Nokani).

A key failure was the inability to secure and hold the territory after a successful operation. The geography of the Kacha required permanent outposts and a sustained presence, yet the law enforcement strategy was predominantly focused on temporary search-and-sweep missions (DPO Rajanpur 2018–2019). Furthermore, the reliance on negotiations mediated by Sardars to secure the release of kidnapped officers, as occurred during the 2013 standoff with the Chotu Gang, provided political legitimacy to the criminal element (Daily Times 2023). This cycle of tactical retreat and political compromise reinforced the perception that the state's commitment to the rule of law was conditional and weak.

The operation *Zarb-e-Ahan* against the Chotu Gang proved that only a massive, coordinated, and non-negotiable military presence could defeat the organized gangs at their peak. However, even this success was primarily focused on suppression and failed to institute the fundamental prevention and intervention strategies necessary for long-term stability (Linden 2010). The continued activity of Chotu's network, even after his imprisonment, demonstrates that the institutional roots of the problem—the socio-economic decay and the political patronage—were left untouched.

THE ENDURING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRAUMA ON THE COMMUNITY

The primary victims of the Kacha gang wars are the local communities, whose lives have been permanently scarred by decades of violence and instability. The pervasive fear of robbery and kidnapping for ransom forces the suspension of normal economic and social activity after sunset, severely restricting mobility and commerce (Daily Times 2013). This environment of chronic insecurity has

profound economic consequences, hindering agricultural investment, suppressing trade, and preventing the establishment of essential infrastructure and services, locking the region into a devastating cycle of poverty.

Beyond the physical danger, the gang culture has inflicted deep social trauma by normalizing violence and challenging fundamental human rights. The persistence of honor killings, as a factor that feeds recruitment, highlights the regression of social mores in the absence of state-enforced justice (Subhani 2017). The lack of legal recourse and the visible complicity of local authorities compel people to rely on tribal mechanisms, including revenge-driven feuds, further polarizing communities and perpetuating cycles of violence. This substitution of criminal or tribal justice for state justice reinforces the structural power of the gangs and the local elites who control them.

The collective impact of this instability is the institutionalization of marginalization. The continuous allocation of police resources to tactical operations prevents investment in community policing, education, and health initiatives. The gangs thus function as an inadvertent barrier to human development, ensuring that the local population remains deprived and vulnerable, thereby feeding the next generation of recruits (Raja 2016). The social harmony is perpetually fragmented, making community-based solutions to crime nearly impossible.

CONCLUSION

The gang wars that defined the Kacha region of Rajanpur between 1980 and 2018 are a complex manifestation of the failure of centralized governance at the periphery. This study has established that the gangs'

longevity and power were secured by a powerful triad: the natural sanctuary provided by the Kacha's challenging geography, the socio-economic conditions that provided a ceaseless supply of marginalized youth, and the institutional architecture of feudal and state patronage that ensured their political and operational immunity (Sahito 2005). The progression from localized banditry, exemplified by the Bosan Gang, to the sophisticated, politically-charged insurgency of the Chotu Gang, reflects an evolving threat that demands a fundamental reassessment of state-society relations in marginalized frontier zones.

Moving forward, any enduring solution must shift radically from purely suppressive law enforcement tactics to a holistic strategy rooted in human and infrastructure development. The brief, tactical successes of operations like *Zarb-e-Ahan* must be followed by a sustained commitment to eradicating the underlying socio-economic drivers that make gang life appealing. This requires massive, long-term investment in quality education and vocational opportunities, as well as a political will to decisively dismantle the corrosive networks of patronage and corruption that link powerful local elites and state personnel to organized crime (Allender 2001). Ultimately, the writ of the state will only be restored when it is physically present, economically beneficial, and unequivocally just, offering the people of the Kacha a viable alternative to the structures of violence and fear.

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