

SarvaiPapanna: The Social Bandit Fighting Against Imperial Authority

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Abstract

SarvaiPapanna also known as Papadu or SardharSarvaiPapanna Goud (died 1710) emerged as a significant figure in early 18th-century India, embodying the complexities of resistance against imperial and local authority during a time of political upheaval. Regarded as a freedom fighter and folklore hero, Papanna's life and exploits are captured through a blend of oral ballads, historical accounts, and scholarly interpretations. Described as a "social bandit," he is noted for his Robin Hood-like actions and his dual rebellion against both the Mughal Empire and local zamindars. Born into a Telugu toddy-tapping caste, Papanna's initial rejection of societal norms set the stage for his rise as a notorious bandit leader who conducted raids, captured forts, and amassed wealth and followers, primarily among the landless peasantry. His pivotal raid on Warangal exemplified his bold defiance of Mughal authority amidst the empire's disarray following Aurangzeb's death. Despite his ascent to power, Papanna faced unyielding opposition from hegemonic forces, culminating in his capture and execution in 1710. His legacy, preserved in popular culture and folklore, highlights the dynamics of class, caste, and rebellion within historical narratives. Papanna's life illustrates the struggle for agency amid destabilizing socio-political changes, remaining a complex symbol of resistance and heroism in Indian history. This paper examines Papanna's life, exploits, and the historical context in which he operated, drawing solely on the provided source material to understand the nature of his movement, the sources of his support and opposition, and his ultimate fate.

Keywords: SarvaiPapanna, Social bandit, Dual rebellion, Mughal Empire, Local authority, Folklore, Political resistance, Historical narrative, Peasant uprising, 18th century India.

1. Introduction

SarvaiPapanna (died 1710), born simply as Papanna, rose to prominence in early-18th century India. He is remembered as a **freedom fighter** and a **folklore hero**. Historians have offered different perspectives on his role; Barbara and Thomas Metcalf described his deeds as "**Robin Hood-like**," while Richard Eaton considered him a prime example of a **social bandit**. A social bandit, as defined by Eric Hobsbawm, is a "peasant outlaw whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions". J. F. Richards and V. N. Rao referred to Papanna's actions as a "**dual rebellion**," a term also adopted by the Metcalfs, highlighting his challenge to both imperial and local chiefly authority.

Papanna's life unfolded during a tumultuous era when the Mughal Empire extended its influence into South India, a period marked by rising tensions between the Muslim ruler Aurangzeb and his Hindu populace. Towards the end of his life, the political landscape became even more unstable following Aurangzeb's death

in 1707, as a power struggle for succession ensued, which Papanna exploited to enhance his fortunes. Papanna was eventually captured and executed in 1710.

2. Sources of Information

Much of what is known about Papanna comes from **quasi-historical sources**. His exploits are primarily documented in **ballads** that have been passed down through generations and are still sung locally. Evidence from these ballads has been collected in the context of studying folklore and linguistics. In addition to folklore, there is also the work of **Khafi Khan**, a contemporary chronicler who based his writings on official reports circulating within the Mughal Empire. This combination of folk traditions and limited official accounts provides the basis for understanding Papanna's story.

3. Historical Context

Papanna was born in the 17th century into a Telugu family belonging to a caste whose traditional occupation was **toddy tapping**. While the specific toddy-tapping caste is uncertain, Eaton believes he was a **Gowda**. Other scholars, like the Metcalfs, focus only on the occupation itself. Eaton notes that numerous castes recite Papanna folklore, suggesting his actions and the support he garnered were not solely based on caste identity. Some ballad versions indicate his family may have held positions unusual for their caste: his father possibly a village headman, his brother a minor army commander, and his sister married into considerable wealth.

Papanna's family resided in the **Golkonda region**. His birthplace may have been Tatikonda, a village located about 40 kilometres (25 mi) southwest of Warangal. Historically, the Golkonda region was ruled by Hindu maharajahs until 1323, after which it came under the control of Muslim sultans. Following the breakup of the Bahmani Sultanate, Golkonda was ruled by the **Qutb Shahi dynasty**. This dynasty inherited a region with an established social structure, including warrior-cultivator groups and chieftains, and a shared use of the Telugu language and literature. Sultans like Ibrahim Qutb Shah (r. 1550–1580) fostered positive relationships with Hindu society and customs, even patronizing them, and invested in infrastructure like irrigation projects. This approach helped cultivate a relationship with the native population, including the **Nayaka chieftains**, who were known for their "ethic of courage and steadfast loyalty to their political overlords".

This period of mutual respect led to Golkonda becoming an **extremely wealthy region**, exemplified by the construction of Hyderabad. However, troubles emerged by the 1630s. The Mughal emperor in Delhi, Shah Jahan, began demanding tribute from the Qutb Shahi sultan and later sent his son, Aurangzeb, to the region. Aurangzeb ultimately conquered Hyderabad in 1687, making Golkonda the **last independent sultanate annexed by the Mughal Empire**. The Mughal conquest brought about significant changes that generally reduced the influence of those who had been prominent in Golkonda. Furthermore, the conquest either caused or coincided with a period of severe hardship between 1686 and 1690, including **crop failures, famine, and cholera epidemics**. In the post-conquest era, Aurangzeb heavily taxed Golkonda, extracting its wealth to fund projects elsewhere. This historical context of economic hardship, social disruption, and changing political authority provides the backdrop for Papanna's emergence.

4. Exploits: Rise to Prominence

Papanna's story begins with a rejection of his traditional caste occupation. He **refused to work as a toddy-tapper**, which was one of his early acts of defiance against societal norms. It is speculated that the potential higher status of his father, brother, and sister, compared to his own caste position, might have contributed to his unwillingness to accept the restrictive ritualized norms. Further indicating his departure from caste

restrictions is his marriage to a woman who was the sister of a *faujdar* (military governor), a position she likely did not hold if she were from a toddy-tapper caste.

In the 1690s, Papanna committed a pivotal act: he **stole money and property from his wealthy widowed sister, assaulting her in the process**. Using these stolen funds, he constructed a **hill-fort at Tatikonda**. Here, he began to assemble a group of men who were willing to engage in banditry. Their initial targets were traders using the route between Hyderabad and Warangal, a major commercial artery. However, their activities caused such disruption that they were driven out of Tatikonda by the local **zamindars** (hereditary chieftain-landlords) and *faujders*. The opposition from *zamindars* became a recurring theme in Papanna's life, stemming from the **destabilizing threat** he posed to society and, crucially, to their vested interests in inherited lands and the power derived from controlling local militias.

Papanna then moved over a hundred miles to Kaulas, where he briefly worked for a *zamindar* named Venkat Rao. His inclination towards banditry resurfaced, leading Venkat Rao to imprison him. Within months, however, Papanna and other prisoners were freed by Rao's wife, who hoped this act of compassion would improve the health of her sick son. After his release, Papanna relocated to **Shahpur**, near his original base at Tatikonda. Here, he established another hill-fort and again recruited followers for his bandit activities.

During this period at Shahpur, Papanna escalated his activities to include the **kidnapping of women**. The outrage caused by his actions led to petitions being sent to Aurangzeb to intervene. An imperial force was dispatched, but its *faujdar* was killed in fighting. The task then fell to **Dil Khan**, the deputy-governor of Hyderabad. Dil Khan initiated a **siege of the Shahpur fort**. The siege was successful, forcing Papanna to flee, and Khan destroyed the fort. However, Papanna and his men soon returned. While Khan was back in Hyderabad, Papanna rebuilt the Shahpur fort, this time constructing it with **stone**, making it much stronger than the previous structure. He then conducted campaigns to capture other local forts, **enhancing his reputation as a potential regional warlord**.

Another imperial attempt to suppress Papanna occurred in 1706, led by Dil Khan upon his return to the region. Khan even employed another bandit, likely Riza Khan, to challenge Papanna, but this attempt failed. A year later, Dil Khan personally led a considerable force to Shahpur and laid siege for about two months. However, this siege ended not through military victory but through **bribery**. Papannabribed **Dil Khan** to lift the siege, demonstrating the shifting dynamics of power and corruption in the region.

5. Exploits: Peak of Power

Successfully bribing Dil Khan emboldened Papanna. On March 31, 1708, he launched a major attack on the **heavily fortified former capital city of Warangal**. His force comprised between 2500 and 3500 men. The timing was strategically chosen to coincide with the eve of the Muslim celebrations of Ashura, a time when the city walls were expected to be poorly guarded. More broadly, the attack exploited the disarray within the Mughal Empire following Aurangzeb's death in 1707 and the subsequent power struggle. Warangal, which had become a significant commercial center, was **extensively looted**. A key outcome of the raid was the **abduction of many wealthy and influential residents**, who were taken to Shahpur and imprisoned in a purpose-built compound.

The successful raid on Warangal brought immense riches, propelling Papanna to new levels of influence. He used the wealth to **arm his fort and followers with the latest weaponry**. Furthermore, he began to adopt the **manners and style of a raja** (king). He was carried by elite bearers in a palanquin and accompanied by an elite guard when mounted on a horse. While acting like a king, Eaton notes he had effectively become a

parvenu landholder. He raided itinerant grain carriers (Banjaras), seizing their cattle, which he then used for ploughing his own fields. The provenance of his landholdings is uncertain; they may have been taken from defeated opponents, developed from uncultivated areas, or a combination, and he is known to have created at least one new village called Hasanabad.

Papanna's ability to amass and utilize resources, coupled with his actions, suggests significant popular support. His capacity to **raise large numbers of people** for fighting or construction indicates considerable support among the landless peasantry. The sheer scale of his operations, including tending to 10,000–12,000 captured cattle and managing extensive landholdings, also required a large base of support.

Despite his enhanced status, Papanna sought further recognition. On June 1, 1708, he raided **Bhongir** during a Muslim festival. Although many hostages were taken, with incentives offered for capturing females (silver) and those of high status (gold), the raid was less successful than the one on Warangal. An accident revealed the insurgents' intentions, leading Eaton to describe the event as a "fiasco".

In 1709, Papanna took a bold step to gain legitimacy. He attended an **audience in Hyderabad with Bahadur Shah I**, who was starting to consolidate authority amidst the post-Aurangzeb power struggles. Papanna presented the emperor with a display of wealth, aiming to be recognized as a **tribute-paying chieftain**. His efforts were seemingly rewarded with an **honorific robe** from the emperor. This act of recognition, however, provoked loud protests. Influential Muslims whose relatives had been kidnapped were particularly vocal, as were those who were outraged that an emperor would grant recognition to a person of a toddy-tapper caste. Eaton highlights that the robe was perceived as "official acknowledgement of his status as a legitimate, tribute-paying *nayaka-zamindar*," deeply offending landholders claiming descent from ancient *nayaka* families who viewed this as "impudence". Facing this significant opposition, Bahadur Shah I was forced to withdraw his recognition and declared that Papanna would be killed, assigning the task to Dilawar Khan.

6. The Nature of Papanna's Movement: Revolt and Resistance

The sources describe Papanna's activities in ways that resonate with the concept of revolt and resistance against established authorities. The Metcalfs and Richards & Rao characterize his attempt as a **"dual rebellion"**, meaning he rebelled "against both imperial and local chiefly authority". By doing so, he "struck too boldly at the most basic ordering of society" and consequently mobilized opposition from "all those with a stake in the established hierarchies of caste and wealth".

His defiance began with rejecting his traditional caste occupation. His initial targets were traders using a major route, causing disruption that led to opposition from local *zamindars* and *faujdars*. This conflict with *zamindars* persisted because he threatened their control over land, power, and local militias. His later actions, such as capturing forts and challenging imperial forces led by figures like Dil Khan, directly confronted Mughal authority. The raid on Warangal was a direct assault on a major commercial center under Mughal control, timed specifically to coincide with a vulnerable period.

Papanna's adoption of the style of a *raja* and his attempt to gain official recognition as a *nayaka-zamindar* were challenges to the existing social and political hierarchy. While his humble origins made such aspirations audacious in the eyes of the established elite, his ability to raise large forces and control resources like land and cattle suggests a degree of popular mobilization and support, particularly among the **landless peasantry**.

The sources also provide insight into the potential motivations and social composition of his followers. Despite being born into a particular caste, Eaton notes that the recitation of Papanna folklore by various

castes suggests his later actions were **not caste-based**. Furthermore, analysis of names in the ballads indicates his group included **Muslims and non-Hindu tribal peoples in almost equal proportion to Hindus**. This evidence contradicts claims that he was solely a "Hindu warrior" and suggests that his movement transcended simple religious or caste divisions. His opposition from the Hindu chieftains who later allied with the Mughals against him at Tatikonda further underscores that his challenge was directed at the existing power structures rather than being a religious or caste-based struggle.

His actions, such as raiding the wealthy and influential, seizing cattle from itinerant groups, and generally disrupting established trade routes, align with aspects of social banditry – preying on those perceived as powerful or wealthy while potentially garnering support from the less privileged. His conflict with *zamindars*, representatives of local landed authority, and his direct confrontations with Mughal forces like Dil Khan and Yusuf Khan, representatives of imperial authority, embody the "dual rebellion" concept.

7. Exploits: Fall and Execution

Papanna's fall began in June 1709. While he was away besieging another fort, prisoners held at Shahpur, including his brother-in-law (*faujdar*), managed to escape and take control of the fort. His wife reportedly assisted them by smuggling files to free themselves from chains. Unaware of the situation at Shahpur, and facing the advance of Dilawar Khan, Papanna prudently lifted his siege and retreated to his base at Shahpur.

Upon reaching Shahpur, Papanna found the situation reversed. His former captives fired upon him using his own cannon. With Dilawar Khan's forces imminent, Papanna was forced to take refuge in the very compound he had built to imprison others. Finding this position untenable and facing desertions from his own men, he fled to the **fort at Tatikonda**. Dilawar Khan then took control of the wealth at Shahpur as instructed by the governor of Hyderabad.

Yusuf Khan, the governor of Hyderabad, dispatched a force of several thousand to besiege Tatikonda. The siege was prolonged, lasting until March 1710. At that point, Yusuf Khan personally took command, doubling the imperial forces to approximately 12,000. He also received significant aid from local landowners, who provided at least 30,000 soldiers (cavalry and infantry). This substantial concentration of support from Hindu chieftains demonstrates their opposition to Papanna, reinforcing that his challenge was to the established order rather than being based on religious alignment.

Despite the massive forces arrayed against him at Tatikonda, Papanna's position was significantly weakened by **bribery**. In May, weary, hungry, and demoralized, his men were tempted to defect by offers of double pay. The final blow came when Papanna ran out of gunpowder, forcing him to flee in disguise. Although wounded, he reached the village of Hasanabad, which he himself had created. However, he was **betrayed by a toddy tapper** and captured by his brother-in-law, the *faujdar* who had been his prisoner at Shahpur.

Papanna was executed a few days later in 1710. Traditional accounts state he was **decapitated**, his body cut into pieces, and his head sent to Delhi.

8. Popular Culture

Beyond the folklore that preserves his story, Papanna has been depicted in popular media. At least one film, "**Sardar Papanna**," directed by Pratani Ramakrishna Goud and starring Krishna, was released in 2006, telling his story.

9. Conclusion

SarvaiPapanna's story, as presented in the source material, is that of a figure who, emerging from humble beginnings, rose to challenge the prevailing authorities during a period of political instability and economic hardship in South India. His actions, ranging from banditry to seizing forts and launching large-scale raids on significant cities like Warangal, demonstrate a deliberate defiance of both the expanding Mughal Empire and the established local power structures represented by *zamindars* and traditional elite. While his motivations and character are interpreted through the lens of folklore and limited historical accounts, Papanna's ability to attract a diverse following and amass considerable power and wealth points to a movement with significant popular support, particularly among the landless peasantry. His ultimate downfall, brought about by a combination of military pressure, betrayal, and the collective opposition of imperial and local elites, underscores the formidable power of the established order when mobilized against threats to the "basic ordering of society" and the "hierarchies of caste and wealth". Papanna remains a complex figure, remembered in folklore as a hero, viewed by some historians as a social bandit, and characterized by others as the leader of a dual rebellion against the forces that governed his world.

10. References

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