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Sultana Daku lived and died long before I was born. He was hanged on July 7, 1924. Amazingly, as children we'd somehow heard this magical name. How it had filtered from the UP Terai to a village near Amritsar long after his death surprises me. The Punjab peasantry, of which I am one, knows and romanticises dakus. Folk songs exist on the exploits of Jagga daku. My school and college holidays were spent in Shivpuri, MP, in badlands along the Chambal. Daku Maan Singh was the Robin Hood of that area in the '50s.

I read the story of Sultana, glued to it for two nights. The sal forest, grasslands, pristine rivers, the tigers, the deer, and the bird life are all painted in great detail. So too is the life of Bhantus, Bawarias, Sansis, other tribals of the rural north. The Bhantus—their culture, mores, ethics, concerns, and struggles—have been portrayed with great knowledge and sympathy. Sultana's derring do, his cold courage and compulsions, the strict tribal code, are all bought out with understanding. I am impressed with what Sujit Saraf, from IIT and Berkeley, has achieved in this book. He has a keen eye for the land, the country, and the people. And such sympathy for someone as misunderstood as Sultana. Must be read.

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