

Underworld in Calcutta/ Kolkata 1946 – 2002

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The present article chronicles the dynamic world of crime in Kolkata from 1946 to 2002 through changes in the socio-political landscape of the city. This gory world of crime cannot be analyzed through western discourses. It has its own indigenous nature, structure, values and mode of operandi. The article discusses few salient features of this world such as criminal-politician nexus. The article discusses how traditional crimes such as dacoity, robbery gave way to heinous crime such as kidnapping, extortion and murder. The article discusses the new trends of crime such as 'supply syndicates' that have mushroomed in different parts of Kolkata.

Introduction

Kolkata has always been regarded as the citadel of art and culture. But it has a vicious underbelly too. It may be pointed out that crime and its nuances are not the flavor of the season for the academia in West Bengal though there are few exceptions. Basudeb Chatterjee,¹ Sumanta Banerjee,² Debraj Bhattacharya,³ Sugata Nandi⁴ have written on the underworld in the nineteenth and early twentieth century respectively. However, till now academicians have not made an intellectual endeavour to chronicling the hitherto unexplored world of crime from either sociological or criminological perspective in the post colonial era. In this paper the author has tried to chronicling the dynamic world of crime in Kolkata from 1946 to 2002, through changes in the socio-political landscape of the city. Eurocentric theoretical approaches to explore the causes of crime and criminality range from Lombroso's genetic determinism (as opposed to the notion of free will) to socio-psycho-environmental factors that lead to such criminal behavior. Noted French sociologist E. Durkheim was of the opinion that when the social norms of solidarity fails an anomic condition prevails. R. K. Merton built upon Durkheim's proposition of the concept of anomie in his analysis of deviance and crime. According to Merton anomie develops when there is a disjuncture between culturally defined goals and socially approved means available to individuals or groups. Marxists have propagated a view that crime emerges solely out of capitalist domination of society where the upper class exploit the weak. In the 1950s-60s sociologists traced deviance and their relationship to crime the way they are labeled by the establishment. In the Indian context it is necessary to debunk the oversimplified unilinear relation between poverty, starvation, and crime, though they are closely related. There is a need to scratch below the surface to establish a contextual, integrative, holistic perspective that includes multiple intersections of other dimensions such as class, religion, gender, poverty to analyse the underworld of crime.

The decade of 1940s

Kolkata has its own history of crime, tales of gangs, lust for power, mafia's game of supremacy, internecine warfare, and *supari* killing (contract killing). The decade of 1940s may be regarded as a watershed in Kolkata as it witnessed the end of the Second World War, the man made Great Famine of 1943, and partition of the country on religious lines followed by an unprecedented wave of communal riots. Poverty had reached the zenith as thousands of hungry people from all parts of Bengal province flocked to Calcutta for a grain of rice leading to overcrowded city, poverty, squalor and squatter. Refugee camps swelled up. The number of unemployed workers escalated as jute industry stagnated. The tertiary sector failed to meet the demands for jobs even for the lower middle class. The wartime scarcity coupled with inflation rate deprived ordinary class of people of many daily necessities. Hunger and desperation drove rootless impoverished population to resort to crime such as dacoity, burglary and theft. The men usually became casual domestic servants, porters, sweepers, hawkers, rag-pickers and rickshaw pullers; the women became domestic helpers and often turned to prostitution. Others took to petty crime, while still others became *goondas*.⁵ Unable to find employment, these unskilled people often fell in with criminals and shoddy dealers and reinvented themselves as contract henchmen for dishonest businessman and dubious political groups. As a lumpen proletariat involved in various protection rackets, they could be hired to break strikes, sabotage picket lines or infiltrate a political march and turn it to mayhem. Uprooted and unemployed, they were a destructive force without scruples.⁶

By 1946, Calcutta was on the 'edge of a volcano'.⁷ On 16th August 1946, the Muslim League gave a clarion call for establishing Pakistan through 'Direct Action'. Mobilization along communal lines had started as leaders from the world of organized politics—the League on the Muslim side and the Hindu Maha Sabha and some congressmen for the Hindus.⁸ The Calcutta district of the Muslim League published a detailed program for a grand rally at the Calcutta Maidan. An image of Mohammad Ali Jinnah with a sword in hand was published.⁹ On the morning of 16th August, incidents of stabbing and rioting started in the city. In this orgy of violence and murder the 'external' *goondas* were hired, supported by political leaders from both the religious communities comprising of various social groups, ranging from the marginalized section of the society to habitual criminals. An IB report contains details of how the Muslim League National Guard recruited 'volunteers' from the 24 Parganas, Hooghly, and other outlying districts. In one of the League's pre-Direct Action Day, Bengali leaflets entitled *Mugur* the following clarion call was given: those who are thieves, *goondas*, those without the strength of character and those who do not say their prayers all come to the Direct Action Program. The shining gates of heaven have been opened for you. Let us all cry our victory to Pakistan, victory to the Muslim nation and victory to the army which has declared a *Jehad*.¹⁰

The region most affected by the violence was a densely populated area of the metropolis – the sector bounded on the south by Bowbazar street, on the east by Upper Circular road, on the north by Vivekananda Road, and on the west by the Strand road or roughly speaking the police stations of Jorasakho, Taltola, Park Circus, Entally, Amherst Street, Bowbazar, and Manicktola *bustees* were the most vulnerable spots. Those which won particular notoriety included Kalabagan,

Rajabazar, Watgunge, Mehdibagan, Nikaripara, Manicktola, Zakaria Street, Ram Bagan, Lalbagan and Sova bazaar.¹¹ The Muslim crowd composed of men from the lower social strata such as the *Kasais* (butchers), of central and north Kolkata as well as the *Khalasis* (dockworkers), masons, and hackney carriage drivers.¹² The Chief Minister Suhrawady addressed this section in their *bustees* on the night before the Direct Action Day and this encouraged them to sharpen their weapons.¹³ It was clear the *goondas* had linked with the world of organized politics. The Hindu rioters comprises of *goalas* (the dairy-men), the darwans (doormen), the coachmen, the garoyans (drivers) from the coal depots, the tailors, boatmen and petty traders, sweepers, rickshaw-pullers, *durwans* of government offices, business establishments, scavengers, domes, petty shoe-keepers, goldsmith, kalwars (artisan dealing with scrap metals) as well as local thugs and petty criminals. Once the riot gained its own momentum, it was this section of the society, the actual men on the spot, who emerged as the organizers of violence. The contemporary press referred to this development as ‘strangers taking the lead’. People who would not normally dream of having any acquaintance with goondas now accepted their leadership. Gopal Chandra Mukhopadhyay emerged as one of the saviours of the Hindu community. During his childhood, Gopal was named ‘*Patha*’ (goat in Bengali) because his family ran a meat shop in College Street. As a part of his business, he had to regularly interact with the Muslim traders. On the morning of 16th August 1946, thirty-three years old Gopal left for his shop as usual, from Bowbazar *moor* (avenue) to Harrison Road (presently Mahatma Gandhi road). There were slogans of *lark-ke lenge Pakistan* (We will fight and take Pakistan)! Then he heard two *goalas* (milkmen) had been killed in Beliaghata and riots have started in Bowbazar.¹⁴ Coming from a family with a revolutionary background he did not believe in Gandhian non-violence. He raised Bharat Jatiya Bahini, a ‘private army’ trained in the use of explosives and firearms,¹⁵ to protect Hindu people from the Muslim League attacks. He recruited Basanta, a musclemen from Beadon Street to repulse the Muslim League mob.¹⁶ According to Gopal Mukherjee’s own submission the Bahini had at one point 400 activists.¹⁷ As the news of the Hindus being killed reached him, he assembled his men and ordered them to retaliate and answer brutality with brutality. They were joined by the Hindustani speaking non-Bengali *goalas* from the Janbazar area, each armed with a *lathi* (bamboo stick). He instructed volunteers for one murder committed, they should commit ten murders. Gopal himself had procured two American made 0.45 bore pistols along with some grenades from the American soldiers posted in the city.¹⁸ Some of the weapons used by his men were procured during the Quit India movement. During the riot Gopal, known as Gopal ‘*Patha*’ / Gopal *Gunda* and *Bharat Jatiya Bahini* were hailed as saviours and heroes. Like Gopal ‘*Patha*’, there were local toughs such as Jugal Chandra Ghosh, who also had some men at his disposal and belonged to the city’s middle classes. He ran a wrestling club at Beliaghata area and the Miabagan *basti* (slum). Jugal Chandra raised money from the neighbourhood sawmills, factories and *Khataals* (diary shed) and distributing it among the attackers. He had links to certain political leaders of the city and knew the Hindu Mahasabha Secretary Bidhubhusan Sarkar as well as the Congress affiliated trade unions (INTUC) leader Suresh Chandra Banerjee. Ghosh’s anger against the Muslim League flared when he saw the dead bodies from the first day of rioting. According to him, ‘I saw four trucks standing, all with dead bodies, piled at least three feet high;

like molasses in a sack... that sight had a tremendous effect on me'.¹⁹ They carried out retaliatory attacks in the Beliaghata area and the Miabagan *basti* (slum settlement). According to him 'one murder would fetch ten rupees and a wound would bring five'.

Among the Muslims the most noted name as well as highly active during the Calcutta Disturbances of 1946 was Habibur Rahman alias Habu / Habu Goonda or Sheik Habu. He was known as 'the terror' of the Lalbagan *bustee* in Sovabazar. He engaged in illicit trafficking in petrol, which was being rationed since the time of the Second World War.²⁰ He was also an active Muslim League worker and seemed to be regarded as the author of a leaflet entitled 'Muslim League Direct Action Plan'. In the aftermath of the disturbances, his actions became the objects of both praise and derision. He was found among the leaders of a well-organized procession that tried to march through Cornwallis Street on the Direct Action Day. Habibur Rahman died on road fighting with a knife in each hand. Due to his eminent role and position he occupied in the League hierarchy, the *Dawn*, the Muslim League mouthpiece, projected him as a local hero who had bravely fought a desperate battle and sacrificed his life for the cause of Pakistan.

According to one estimate, among the 3,553 arrested on rioting charges by the first half of September there were at least 402 known goondas.²¹ About 2,924 goondas - 1704 Hindus and 1,192 Muslims has been released at the end of 1946 and many of them were believed to have committed most of the arsons and cold-blooded murders.²² Tucker notes in August, 'it was unbridled savagery with homicidal maniacs let loose to kill ... maim and burn. The underworld of Calcutta was taking charge of the city.'²³ It was a 'pogrom between rival armies of the Calcutta underworld'.²⁴

The decade of 1960s / 1970s

By the 1960s the gulf widened between the rich and the poor. By the late 1960s and early 1970s the socio-political landscape of the city was disturbed. The economy was on the verge of collapse. The trade union militancy and factory lock-outs escalated. The industrial sector was spiraling downwards; there was total unwillingness of businesses to invest in West Bengal. Food prices soared compelling people to refrain from buying consumer goods, which hit production, thereby escalating the unemployment problem. The government failed to restore order in the city as well as the state. Charu Majumdar, the leader of the Naxalbari movement ordered his Naxalite followers to kill policemen and their informers, a repressive apparatus of the state machinery, in broad daylight along with small businessman, government officials and college teachers, which led to the murder of a vice-chancellor by a young boy. For the next year or so the city was an arena for guerilla warfare. To curb the disorder the military took over parts of Calcutta with shoot at sight orders. Police informers, scrabs, professional assassins, and various other sorts of bodyguard of private property stalked around bullying the citizens. Streets were littered with bodies of young men riddled with bullets. The lumpen proletariat/ anti-social elements had got associated with this movement, especially during the later stages of the movement. The *goondas* took advantage of the situation and in the name of political activism started to vandalise and loot anything that could be interpreted as being part of the establishment. They also disposed of opposition gang members under cover of political assassination.²⁵

In this decade political society developed as distinct from the civil society. There was a huge

increase in the population of the big cities, caused mainly by migration from the countryside, created explosive social conditions marked by political unrest, crime, homelessness, squalor and disease. In these decades there was a proliferation of developmental and welfare schemes for the burgeoning poor population within the urban life. This large section of urban poor was not at equal footing with the legitimate citizens of the civil society as their lifestyle and livelihood were based on the violation of the legal order of the society. Yet this section has to be 'pacified' because they provided relatively cheap labour and services to the city's economy and 'cared' as they could jeopardize the social order by threatening the well-being of the legitimate citizens of the civil society. The politics of governmental administration of welfare schemes for the poor produced an entirely new field of competitive mobilization by political parties and leaders. This subaltern local population came under the protective canopy of political leaders to evade punitive action by the authorities and also to be the beneficiaries of government policy. Competitive electoral mobilization of the poor in the 1970s and 1980s afforded them new strategic resources. They could now exercise, at least threaten to exercise a choice.²⁶ If one leader or party could not get things done for them, they could threaten to switch sides and vote for rival party in the next election. One such noted hoodlums of this decade was Hemen Mondol.

Hemen Mondol and the Gourbari fiasco

The thickly populated industrial area of Gourbari in North Kolkata was a safe haven for anti-socials. Gangs forcibly extorted money, smuggling, breaking into railway wagons and illicit distillation had come to be accepted as a sordid fact of everyday life of the middle and the working class people of the area. Hemen Mondol was the leader of the gang, engaged in controlling and preying on the community. For Hemen and his gang of fifteen became a terror to everyone in the locality of about 55,000 people. Hemen regularly extorted money from businessmen as also other individuals. The Gourbari mass movement was sparked off by an incident that epitomized the fear under which residents of that area had to live. Few young men entered a local cinema theatre after an altercation with a ticket blackmarketeer. While the film show was in progress, a gang of hoodlums barged into the theatre, dragged the youngsters outside and started beating him. As news of the incident spread, men, women, and children of Gourbari came out into the streets in hundreds to protest against such a blatant act of gangsterism. Initially it was a lady who initiated the resistance movement against Hemen and his gang members. Hemen and his gang members assaulted Labu Babu. Labu was wellknown for his humanitarian activities in the Gourbari area. One of his activities was the establishment of a free coaching centre for poor students. This centre enhanced Labu's popularity which made Hemen jealous. Hemen asked Labu to close down the coaching centre. Since Labu refused he was brutally assaulted and even prevented from being taken to a doctor. At this stage, the aforesaid lady intervened, and brought a doctor. This act of defying Hemen surprised everybody. The terrorized resident made a desperate effort to break the mafia rule in that place. Other women of the locality came forward, which compelled the *bhadralok* of the area also to raise voice against Hemen. They formed *Shanti* (Peace) Committee. In the face of massive public appeal from the residents, the police were compelled to arrest Hemen Mondol, the kingpin of gang operation in the area with the active assistance of the *Shanti* Committee.²⁷

The murder of police officer V.K.Mehta

A very gruesome incident took place in the morning of 18th March 1984 at the Garden Reach area where the 'subjects' of crime challenged the administration. The area is not only dominated by a number of closed and sick units leading to large-scale unemployment but is also very close to the dock areas of Khidderpore. A flourishing market of smuggled goods has sprung up-controlled by a powerful mafia with the help of a group of corrupt police officers. The then Deputy Commissioner of Port Division, V.K.Mehta, IPS, invited the wrath of this nexus by relentless raids and seizure of smuggled items. There were efforts to have him transferred. When this failed, a trap was laid to lure him into the maze of narrow lanes of Garden Reach and liquidate him. Communal disturbances broke out at Fathepur village road under the Garden Reach police station and its adjoining area which falls within the Port Division of Calcutta Police on 18th March 1984. On getting information of the disturbances, Shri V.K. Mehta, went there along with his security guard Mokhtar Ali. Strangely the rest of the force under senior police officers like deputy commissioner (headquarter) did not think it necessary to follow them but remained on the main road. When the police personnel tried to restore peace and normalcy, they were attacked by riotous mob with brick bats, bombs and other lethal weapons. The security guard Mukhtar Ali ran into the house of a private individual at Dhanketti, while the deputy commissioner Mehta ran into the house of Abdul Latif Khan, a constable attached to Calcutta Police, at G.222 Battikal Second Lane. The rioters spotted the cops. The deputy commissioner in order to save himself from the fury of the chasing mob got into the bathroom of the house of Abdul Latif Khan but a few of the marauders pursued him upto that place. When he revealed his identity as the deputy commissioner, some of them (assailants) were not sure whether he was the deputy commissioner or not. They all caught him and Nasim @Naso hit him with an iron rod on his head, and his helmet fell off. Puttan and Akhtar also dealt blows on him with deadly weapons. Hadis Khan, one of the prime witness of this case, had seen the assailants inflicting two blows with an iron rod on the head of the deputy commissioner of police, the first blow caused his helmet to slide off, but the second blow fell on the head of the victim. In the cauldron of communal delirium these young, impulsive communal frenzy goons acted in a rage of fury. Finally at 4 p.m. the force entered the bylanes and found the bodies of Mehta and his guard Mokhtar hacked to death by the riotous mob. Subsequently the charred body of Mokhtar Ali was found in an open space near the premises where he took shelter. Sri Mehta's body bereft of his uniform was found floating in a drain near premises no.F/59, Attabag, with multiple injuries on his body. The heinous killers mutilated their corpses, stripped them off, tethered them and tried to incinerate the dead bodies which succeeded only partly as the bodies remain charred. A hunt for Mehta's murder was launched. The thirty-eight years old Idris, few smugglers and some dishonest businessmen and a section of the police force were thought to be the prime suspect. On March 27th, Idris was arrested from Dumraon village in Bihar and produced in court the next morning. At 8.22 pm. on March 28th, Idris was 'brought dead' to the medical college hospital by the investigating officer Saroj Kumar Mukherjee and others.

On 1st April 1984, the then chief minister Jyoti Basu tried to give police a clean chit by declaring in the state assembly that Idris was mercilessly assaulted in the Lalbazar lock-up by co-prisoners who held him responsible for police action against them. The incident created shockwaves in the

city and the public outcry compelled the then Left front government in power to setup a judicial enquiry headed by Justice S.C.Deb. The Deb Commission held the police responsible for the death of Idris in Lalbazar lock-up. Idris was 'silenced forever', the report notes 'to shield some corrupt businessmen and some police officers who were giving protection to smugglers – or that he was intentionally killed to avenge the murder of V.K. Mehta.'²⁸ The above incident for the umpteenth time proves that politician-bureaucrat-criminal nexus exist, as has been pointed out by the National Police Commission report as well as by Vohra Committee report.²⁹

BowBazar bomb blast of 1993

The impact of the Mumbai bomb blast, as an aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992, was felt in Calcutta as on the eve of 16th March 1993. An explosion occurred at and near premises number 267, B.B.Ganguly Street. As a result of the explosion sixty nine people died, others were injured and premises number 267 B.B.Ganguly Street and some building adjoining it collapsed and / or were badly damaged. Mohamad Rashid Khan, the *satta* (gambling) don of Bowbazar had masterminded the Bowbazar blast. He started his career as a bookie in the '*satta*' business and developed a vast network of gambling and prostitution in the city. Due to his money power, he also came close to the ruling left party in West Bengal. Even though his activities were well within the knowledge of the police, but no serious attempt were made to smash his network. Rashid Khan along with his associates was arrested. The Bowbazar blast exposed the nexus between the *satta* don Rashid Khan and local CPI(M) functionaries. A chargesheet was filed against Rashid Khan and section covered included 120B/ 436/326/302 Indian Penal Code, Section 3 and 5 of the Explosive Substance Act, Section 3 and 4 of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. Investigation disclosed that he had engaged his gang members in manufacturing bombs and was stock-piling them for use in communal riots and against rival gangs. Due to the gravity of crime his political connection or money power did not help and he is till now languishing in jail.³⁰

The decade of 1990s

From the 1990s the skyline of Kolkata has changed drastically. The process of urban-recycling and gentrification have changed the city's skyline drastically. Two-storeyed buildings and bungalows have been razed to the ground by bulldozers. Rampant urbanization and globalization gave rise to new infrastructural and commercial opportunities. Urban modernity gets represented by skyscrapers, flyovers and shopping malls. The upper echelon of the society have access to excess of material goods, resources and opportunities and all forms of economic power which gives them access to political power (or be near to it) , they utilize their energy and resources to manipulate the system; trap and exploit the victims mostly the city's poor class. The under dregs are 'lured' by the 'superfluities' of the society.³¹ In their quest for financial gains and upward social mobility, a large section of this society gets trapped and enter the world of crime. The physical and technological resources, financial resources, available to the gangs are far superior and sophisticated than those the police use. These new generations of gangsters are more efficient, mobile, and make use of the political machinery that has to depend on crime and corruption for its sustenance. These gangs are trained in the techniques to intimidate the local population. They soon become kings of protection

rackets in Kolkata's middleclass neighbourhood and bazaars, where they called for 'protection money', known as *haftas* in local parlance from businessmen, shopkeepers, and household by threats of fear and violence. Gangsters by unleashing terror can impose their will on anyone. Witnesses can be stopped from giving evidences, doctors can be forced into giving wrong reports in cases or attending injured gangsters on the run, important evidences can be erased, forensic experts can be compelled to doctor the report, innocent people can be coerced to harbor criminals by creating terror and fear of life. All organized gangs have hideouts for their members to take refuge when they are being hunted by the police.³² One of the interesting gangsters of the 1990s was Mohamad Rashid Alam alias Gabbar. Gabbar launched a large scale extortion racket in the Park Street, Shakespeare Sarani, Taltola, Topsia, Entally, Beniapukur, and Rajabazar area. Gabbar remained in the ruling party's political patronage till May 2001, when he murdered Sanjiv Jhulka nicknamed *Bunty*. The police finally encircled Gabbar inside the GoldStar club at Kankurgachi. Police investigation revealed his involvement in twenty-two cases, including twelve murders. The year he was arrested, he had killed three people in the last six months and had taken the contract for six more murders for rupees fifteen lakhs each. The targets included businessmen, and all those who hired him were based in Calcutta. According to police sources his trademark was firing from a pointblank range and a life in the fast lane with women and wine. Gabbar may be regarded as the 'pioneer' of *supari* killing (contract killing), a style of killing followed and practiced in the Mumbai underworld. Following the lines of the Mumbai underworld—he would start with a *supari* and end in daring daylight shoot out from the close quarters.³³

Other popular goons of this period include Dilip popularly known as '*Haath Kata Dilip*. Dilip enjoyed political patronage of a noted Left Front minister, rose to rule the underworld in the district of North Twenty Four Parganas. Dilip had lent a .45 mm revolver to Gabbar. Dilip came to know about Gabbar through his networks of criminal contacts and was in the process of developing a crime nexus with him. It seems that the two were working out a quid pro quo arrangements whereby they would help each other in their respective strongholds. The idea was that by consolidating their strengths, they would have swayed over a larger area and yet not come into conflict with each other. But with the arrest of Gabbar, their innovative strategic plan came to an end.³⁴

Another most dreaded criminal was Mohammad Faiuddin alias Sona. He was also the former aid of Gabbar and was arrested from north Kolkata. According to police sources he appeared far more dangerous than Gabbar. The underworld don turned real estate dealer had amassed wealth worth crores of rupees. Sona was involved as a facilitator and local linkman in the Khadim's vice-chairman Partha Roy Barman abduction case. He had identified Roy Burman and supplied vital tip-off about Roy Barman's movement in Tiljala vicinity. His range of crime included murder, abduction and extortion. Sona had a command over the narcotic business, the nerve centre being Ghulam Zilani Road in Tiljala. He was arrested on the charges of murder of Badsha and Sadiq in 1997 and 1998, but on both occasion he absconded with his intelligence. It was Sona's brain and Gabbar's brawn which brought the duo attracts limelight.³⁵ Sadique Zafar alias *Gudda* was one of the most dreaded gangsters of the city. *Gudda* during the late 1990s and by the turn of this decade was a terror in Rajabazar, Narkeldanga, Bowbazaar, Amherst Street and other areas of central

Kolkata. He too enjoyed the political patronage through his 'swift operations' during elections. He managed to unleash terror among businessmen and made calls for extortion. He had cases of murder, extortion and kidnapping. He will be remembered in the world of crime for his minute planning and ruthless extortion.³⁶

In 1998, the daredevil sharpshooter Sheikh Vinod and his henchmen Kalua, entered into a strategic alliance with Lambu Feroz, with an eye on the lucrative land dealings along the eastern metropolitan bypass in the Tiljala–Topsia–Beniapukur area. Tiljala–Topsia was then in the vice grip of Lulla Bapi, Gudda and Jani.³⁷ The mantle of crime has now passed from *Sashan* Swapan to an equally notorious crime lord Sridhar Das, one of the biggest mafia dons who tried to control the largest chunk of the lucrative real estate business of south Kolkata. He is involved in extorting crores of rupees from real estate promoters and builders. But since he received support from the then leftist political regime even the law enforcement agency dared to go near him.

Global Terrorism and its impact on the City of Joy

The dawn of the twenty-first century was marked by increase in bloodshed as the global *jihad* of terror struck worldwide including South Asia. Aftab Ansari is the chief architect of linking Kolkata with terrorism. Aftab was introduced to Dinesh Thakur, a notorious criminal of Varanasi, by his elder brother Anwar Ahmed, a part time advocate and journalist. Thakur gauged his talents at an early age and made him a member of his gang. Together they committed several kidnappings for ransom. Under the tutelage of his mentor, Aftab learned the intricacies of this trade which included spotting wealthy targets, studying their everyday routine and habits, acquiring 'safe houses' for keeping prospective 'guinea pigs' – the abductees, the traits of negotiating ransom and safe methods of collecting and moving ransom money.³⁸

Aftab was arrested and lodged in Tihar jail where he stayed from July 1995 to November 1998. Tihar jail served as his educational centre to *jihadi* ideology. Among the people he met in jail were Kashmiri militants who narrated him tales of the militant struggles in the Kashmir Valley. He also became intimate with Asif Reza Khan, a young criminal turned hardcore militant from Kolkata, who was linked to Hizbul–Mujahideen, a dreaded terrorist outfit. Asif was serving under Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, and Explosive Substance Act. Aftab and Asif became close friends in prison and this friendship remained till Asif's death. Asif introduced Aftab to the famous dreaded terrorist Omar Sheikh who had a profound effect on the radicalization of Aftab Ansari. He was also influenced by his cell mate Akhtar Hussain aka Hashim Bhai, a hard core militant sympathizer. Aftab was deeply influenced by Akhtar's religiosity and became his close friend. Aftab was released on bail in 1998 in the Asok Vihar extortion case. He, however, had to keep attending court and was in dire need of money to meet his legal expenses. It was during one such visit to the court that he met Harpreet 'Happy' Singh, a specialist kidnapper, who had already carved a niche for himself in the world of crime. He, like Aftab was also in need of money and the proposal from Aftab to work together to kidnap wealthy person was whole-heartedly accepted. Aftab Ansari resumed his career as a gang leader specializing in extortion. Anand Aggarwal, a coal merchant from Varanasi was their first target of kidnapping. The next big target was Niranjana Shah, a Mumbai based wheeler-dealer, who in partnership with Raju Anadkat had sent a consignment

of drugs to Canada. In December 1999, the Government of India was forced to release Omar Sheikh, Maulana Masood Azhar and Kashmiri terrorists Mushtaq Zaqr Latramin in exchange for the safe return of the passengers of the Indian Airlines Flight IC 814 that had been hijacked en route from Kathmandu to New Delhi and was held at the Kandahar airport in Afghanistan. It was only after Omar Sheikh was freed that Aftab Ansari slipped out of India in Rawalpindi on a fake passport –issued in the name of Farhan Malik, prepared with the help of Asif Reza Khan’s contacts in the regional passport office, through fraudulent and corrupt means in Nalanda, Bihar. He reached Pakistan via Dubai. He was issued a Pakistan passport, bearing the number J872142, in the name of Safir Mohamad Rana, valid upto the year 2006.

In Pakistan, Aftab Ansari joined the Lashkar-e-Taiba under the tutelage of Azam Cheema. While in Pakistan, Aftab Ansari, Omar Saeed Sheikh, Azam Cheema and others hatched a conspiracy to free some terrorists imprisoned in different jails across India including Harkat –UI- -Jihad-Al-Islami commander Nasrullah Langarial. To execute this plan, Aftab Ansari was constantly in touch with Amir and Asif Reza Khan and asked the brothers to contact Mohamad Arshad Khan, a Pakistani national who was an expert in arms and explosives. The trio also launched a series of kidnappings, abducting top businessman in Kolkata and Gujarat, to fund their *jihad* and recruit more youth for training under Azam Cheema.³⁹

In July 2001, Aftab Ansari and his gang members targeted Partha Pratim Roy Burman, the chairman–cum–managing director of Khadim shoes in Kolkata. He was kept in confinement while the Barman family negotiated with Aftab Ansari in Dubai. Eventually a ransom of rupees four crore was paid to Ansari through ‘*hawala*’ from Hyderabad. Barman was held captive for eight days and then left on the roadside in the Dum Dum area, several kilometers away from his Salt Lake residence. A part of the ransom money collected in this case was used in funding the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. The fact that Aftab gave rupees forty-nine lakhs to Omar Sheikh who passed it on to Mohamad Atta, the mastermind behind the 9/11 terror attack was mentioned in the testimony of John S. Pistole, deputy assistant director, counter terrorism division, FBI, before the Senate Committee on Terrorist Financing in July 2003 at Washington D.C.⁴⁰ Asif Reza Khan was taken into custody by the Criminal Investigation Department of West Bengal Police on 13th November 2001 in connection with the Partho Roy Barman’s kidnapping. He was then taken on transit remand by the Gujarat Police on 27th November 2001 in connection with a case registered at the Malviya Nagar police station and taken to Rajkot for further investigation in Gujarat.⁴¹ According to police sources on 7th December 2001, Asif Reza Khan was gunned down in police encounter near Rajkot as he was trying to escape.⁴² In the last week of December 2001, a meeting was held in the rented flat in Hazaribagh, which was attended by Zahid, Sadique, Nasir and Salim. It was decided at this meeting that a police party should be attacked to avenge Asif’s death and show the government the consequences of confronting *jihadis*. Zahid and Sadique even showed off two AK-47 assault rifles with ammunition clips that could be used for the attack. However the plan was put on hold till Aftab Ansari gave the green signal. On a winter morning at 6.30 a.m. on 22nd January 2002, two motor-cycle borne men had indiscriminately fired with an AK-47 assault rifle at policemen outside the American Centre on Jawaharlal Nehru Road. The policemen

were caught totally by surprise and couldn't react to the demands of the time. The incident killed six of the policemen and injured fourteen others. Mr. Rajeev Kumar, Special Superintendent of Police (Criminal Investigation Department) of West Bengal,⁴³ had received a call at his residence on his landline from one Farhan Akhtar claiming responsibility for the attack. Having heard Aftab's recorded voice during the Burman kidnapping case investigation, Rajeev addressed him by his real name. The caller was surprised and he hung up. Aftab then called *Anand Bazar Patrika*, a daily newspaper in Kolkata, posing as Farhan Mallick, and claimed responsibility for the terror attack. Rajeev Kumar had checked the calling number from the Kolkata Telephone Exchange. It was the same number from which the Barman family had received call for ransom. At that time the caller had identified himself as Aftab Ansari.⁴⁴ The senior cops were convinced that Aftab Ansari and Farhan Malik were the same person. The Central Bureau of Investigation officials had shared the dossier consisting of a photograph of Aftab Ansari, his Dubai mobile number, passport details, with the American embassy and sought their help.⁴⁵ Four days after the attack, Salim and Zahid were injured in an encounter with a Delhi Police team in Hazaribagh in Jharkhand and they subsequently died. In their dying declaration they had pointed out that Aftab Ansari's name in the involvement of the American Centre Attack. Aftab Ansari was arrested at the Dubai International Airport on 23rd January 2002, the day after the Kolkata attack. He was attempting to leave for Islamabad by an Emirates flight and was travelling on a Pakistan passport J-872142, issued at Lahore in the name of Safeer Mahmood Rana. The Dubai authorities had kept under wraps the news of Aftab's arrest from 23rd January 2002 to 5th February 2002. On 8th February 2002 Neeraj Kumar, the Joint Director of Central Bureau of Investigation, Government of India, was given the news that Aftab Ansari deportation has been cleared by the Dubai government. On 10th February 2002, with the help of Central Bureau of Investigation officials he was bought to India.⁴⁶ Aftab is serving life imprisonment at the Alipore Central Correctional Home in Kolkata.

The dark world of crime and criminals in Kolkata from 1946 to 2002 cannot be analyzed through western theoretical discourses. This gory world in Kolkata has its own indigenous, nature, structure, organization, rules and regulations. Local socio-political-economic factors played an important role in the creation of this world of crime in Kolkata. Religious issues played a very important role in the growth, evolution, and expansion of the underworld in Calcutta in 1946. Initially defending and protecting one's own religious community compelled people to take arms. But from 1950s to early 1990s the formation and membership in gangs were based on professional expertise not religious affiliation. Later on from the mid-1990s onwards religious sentiments again started playing a pivotal role in creating the ideology of *jihad* and sustaining it. The actors of this world are heterogeneous as far as their socio-economic background is considered. The criminals start their career at an early age mostly during their early teenage. Majority of them belonged to the lower income group families. It must be remembered that majority of them came from places where opportunities of education and employment were limited. The world of crime opened the floodgates of money and opportunities to this under dreg sections of the society. Also this world of crime is secular since it embraces in its ambit people from different religion such as Hindus, Muslims, Christianity etc. Though the nature, content changed with time, yet the only thread which unites this

world from 1946 to 2002 is the criminal-political /administrative nexus. For example Gopal Mukherjee (alias Gopal *Patha*) himself admitted his links with no other than West Bengal's illustrious Congress Chief Minister Dr.B.C.Roy.⁴⁷ *Haath kata* Dilip had the late Left Front leader Subhas Chakraborty as his mentor. This unholy alliance between the politicians and criminals has actually helped to sustain this world. Criminals are protected by politicians and these criminals help politicians to win electoral vote through the use of bullet and muscle power. As times changed, the nature and modus operandi of crime have also undergone swift changes. Traditional crimes such as dacoity, smuggling, house breaking, robbery gave way to heinous crime such as kidnapping, extortion and murder. Petro bombs have been replaced by contract killing popularly known as *supari* and sharp shooters, who can shoot at point blank range emerged. In past few years 'supply syndicates' have emerged as a major player in the real estate business. These syndicates first emerged in the Rajarhat–New Town regions of extended Kolkata city. Politicians obliged since they ensured an easy income for their young supporters. They aided in the formation of cooperatives for these youths—mostly belonging to subaltern class of landless families whose land was acquired. Each cooperative (commonly known as syndicates) were given a particular area where they had monopoly to supply building materials to all the construction projects. The 'Rajarhat System' has gained popularity and has mushroomed in different parts of Kolkata. Taking advantage of the monopoly, criminals flexed their muscles and forced developers to buy materials at an inflated rate. Realtors have been paying higher prices for either inferior quality or lesser quantity. This trade has turned into a gold rush for the underworld.

This article should not be considered as an end, but beginning for doing further research on underworld in post-colonial Kolkata.

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