

Metropolis and its Underbelly: Calcutta's Criminal World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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This article reflects upon the world of crime in colonial Calcutta during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. In course of its development as a metropolis par excellence, the physical structure of Calcutta underwent certain significant changes. There was a spatial distinction between the European and Indian population with the White Town, which accommodated European population and the Black Town, constituting mostly both rich and poor Indians. When the later found themselves alienated within the vibrant social life of Calcutta, they ended up in the dark and shabby lanes in the Black Town of the City. This article focuses on this doubly marginalized section of the poor victims at the hands of both European masters and their Indian counterparts, who indulged in criminal activities for their survival.

Keywords: Calcutta, Black Town, Crime, Urbanization, Underworld

Crime is neither urban nor a modern phenomenon. It is as early as human society. In ancient Indian society, we find references to crime, criminal codes etc. For example, there is a mention of thieves and robbers in Rig-Veda, who were referred as *Tayu* or *Staya* and *Taskara* respectively.¹ Prior to the arrival of the British and making of Calcutta, we find reference of crimes like dacoity, which were quite in number in the rural areas of Bengal. However, it is the change in the trend of crime that came to the forefront with changing values, changing material culture and exposure to the immense wealth and resources of the city, in short the entire pattern of urbanization played an important role in earning Calcutta the title of 'centre for notorious activities.' Certain drawbacks of urbanization has been stressed on by Shaw and McKay, who argue that poverty, residential mobility, bad housing, weak social relations as a result of ethnic heterogeneity in an urban set up leads to social disorganization and disruption of ethnological ties and moral values. This social disorganization leads to unstable relationships with neighbourhood. A greater number of offenders will brew in such areas as a result of socio-economic and moral decline.²

In Calcutta too, such determinants of urbanization had left the social life of the city questionable in terms of security, in spite of its material affluence. The rapid growth of the city of Calcutta attracted a huge mass of migrants, from multiple ethnicities, to participate in the economic life of the city. While some of them were lucky enough to find themselves a means of survival, the unfortunate mass of migrants, when they failed to find even a menial job for themselves, turned towards various unlawful activities to earn money. The anonymity of the city further proved beneficial to these outlaws, who had built up their shelter in the dark and narrow streets of the Black Town

that posed a complete different picture from the glamour and vibrancy of the city proper. Calcutta's criminal world was thus formed in the underbelly of the city, from where these offenders operated in different areas of the city. Criminal activities of various types and intensity gradually increased in Calcutta while the city was in making. Intensification of such acts of crime was seen throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, a certain type of which has been focused below.

Dacoity, Housebreaking and Burglary

A pre-colonial affair, dacoity or gang robbery had long disturbed the social scenario of rural Bengal. We find references of dacoity (*dakat* in local parlance) in Bengali literary works, folklores etc. Although, long existed in the Bengali society, first recorded reaction on dacoits of the English government was found in 1772, when the 'Committee of Circuit' from Kashimbazar addressed Bengal dacoits as 'Race of Robbers' who are born to and raised as robbers, unlike those in England, who are mere victims of circumstances.³ The areas which were most notorious for dacoity within the city were Shobhabazar and Baithakkhana, two most crowded areas in the Black Town of Calcutta. During the mid-18th century, Baithakkhana, near modern day Sealdah was one such area with a huge Banyan tree, surrounding which the English and the other European merchants and administrative workers along with Indian middlemen, *gomasthas* and *munshis* used to gather for trade and commerce related discussions during the day. At night, however, all those roads which led to Baithakkhana, were dangerous to avail as dacoits in groups of thirty-forty moved around those roads.⁴ By the early 19th century, dacoity had become a serious problem with a sudden rise in number causing a major setback to the economy. This led the colonial government to take drastic steps to curb dacoity completely in the region. In course of this, a committee named 'The Thuggee and Dacoity Department' was formed in 1836 that passed one after another Acts between 1836-48 for suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity, headed by Sir William Sleeman. Although dacoity seemed to have reduced in Calcutta after that period, we still find certain occurrences of dacoity in the latter part of the 19th century. For instance, the case of Bagmaree, Manicktollah in northern Calcutta, which took place on 29th September, 1872, where the owner Jodoo Nauth Shamunto was looted off property valued at 800 rupees by fifteen men armed with *latthies* and torches.⁵ The judiciary filed this case under dacoity. In June 1874, the Officiating Commissioner of Police in Calcutta, S. Wauchoppe made a remark regarding the criminal population of the city and its suburbs-

"as there must be in every city, there are numerous classes of professional robbers and thieves in Calcutta. Many of these, as might be expected, leave Calcutta for the *mofussils* and I hear of their performances in every part of Bengal..."⁶

While there was a significant drop in the event of dacoity, British pride of doing away with banditry was constantly challenged by such mere one or two incidents of dacoity and informs about the momentous of such criminal activities. The early 20th century witnessed one such event, wherein a group of men were brought under arrest by the Howrah Government Railway Police with the help of railway ticket-checking staff. The alleged men boarded Ranchi Express from Howrah from where they were constantly followed by a C.I.D. officer down till Midnapore, where they were taken into custody. Implements required for house-breaking were found in their possession.⁷

Once, dacoity could be suppressed to some extent, we find certain other forms of crimes that

came to the forefront. Incidents of house-breaking, pick-pocketing, thieveries were few such which had increased all of a sudden during the 19th century. House-breaking, known in the local language as *Sindh-kata* refers to digging of a narrow space in the wall for entry into the house using some sort of weapon. These incidents, though not new to Bengal, just got specialised in the city and also increased in an alarming rate. Perhaps, the suppression of dacoity had certain connection with the growing rate of other modes of stealing! Of course, colonial government could suppress many of these dacoit gangs, however, once these dacoits disguised their identity in the anonymity of such a highly populated city, it was easier for them to survive in the underbelly of the city by using their personal skills of robbery in doing some individual operations like housebreaking and burglary. With the suppression of dacoity by 1848, we find an increase in cases of housebreaking from an average of 57 to 169 and thefts from 1446 to 2180 within two decades of 1851-71.⁸ There were various categories of these house-breakers. Mr. S. Wauchope, the Officiating Commissioner of Police of Calcutta tried to categorise these professional offenders in local parlance in a letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal.⁹ According to his record, *kormo* or business was a term that was used by all class of the criminals engaged in a similar line of dacoity. He mentioned about the class who were identified as *Bombateah Dakat* or river dacoits. The *Bombateah* dacoits, wrote Wauchope, had their headquarters in Calcutta who robbed boats in the Sunderbans on their way to their homes up the river. In 1852, Wauchope was given particulars about almost hundred such dacoities of which only two had been reported.¹⁰ *Phoot Burglary* was another such category which he discussed. *Phoot* is coming from a local Bengali term *photo* which means a quick spurt. No wonder this category of burglars had the calibre to do away with their job very quickly. In 1872, there were 116 such cases of *phoot burglary* taking place in Calcutta alone and 119 in the suburbs.¹¹ There were other such categories like *Ghat Marree*, who stole articles or cloths left on the banks by the riverside, *Bazar Tanna* (*tanna* refers to snatch), *House Tanna* or *Othageera* who stole cloths, copper etc. from agency houses, markets and companies; *Baur Jharra* or thieves who stole ornaments from persons, especially women and children.

Burglary, by the end of the 19th century and beginning of the early 20th century took a shift from petty cases of housebreaking to breaking into shops, departmental stores and also jewellery stores. The Annual Police Report, which we find in the work of Sumanta Banerjee, indicates that the primary victims of the burglars were the propertied class. Jewellery shops and their houses were the major targets. One such burglary took place in the shop of All India Hosiery Manufacturing Company, at Lindsay Street on August, 1918. Valuables like warm jerseys, penknives and various other articles were found missing. A parcel of red woollen fisher-caps was found torn open on the floor and its contents scattered everywhere. A door on the south room of the shop was found to have been forced from the hinges, making sufficient space for a man to enter the room. Burnt matches found on the floor of every room indicating that the thieves must have moved about lighting matches in search of valuables.¹² A similar case within just two months, took place in a cloth shop at Wellesley Street on 29th October, 1918. The assistant in-charge of the shop, Madrassi Embroidery Sarie Company, had padlocked the shop on the previous night of the robbery. The next morning, when he came to open the shop, he found all the padlocks broken, and valuables which

contained very costly embroidered saris, worth a considerable amount were stolen.¹³ Within three weeks of this incident, the Madrassi Embroidery shop was burgled for the second time on 20th November, 1918. The robbery was carried in a similar pattern and this time saris worth of Rs. 500 was stolen. After a hasty inquiry by the Taltollah Police with assistance of the C.I.D., most of the stolen property was found in the shop of a modi and in total eight arrests were made in the case.¹⁴ Such audacity and confidence of these offenders was undoubtedly the result of the technological advancement, which introduced to this class of offenders new equipments and methods to break into their targets, thereby making them experts in their *kormo!*

Pickpocketing

Another type of crime that flourished amidst the crowd and bright daylight was pickpocketing. It was one of such crimes which were very much urban and non-cognizable in its nature. Pickpocketing had drastically increased in the City during the 19th century. Pickpockets, generally referred to as *pocket-maar* in Bengali, is one such class that would very discreetly slit pockets or bags of people and slide money or other valuables out of it in a crowded area of the city. They mostly chose crowds in order to avoid suspicion and also to make their work easy, as crowds could be an easy distraction for the victim. Moreover, once their job was done, they could also easily disappear in the middle of the crowds. Naturally, an overcrowded metropolis in the 19th century, Calcutta proved to be a very suitable place where these breed of offenders could spread their tentacles. The area they chose would therefore mostly be around the commercial centres, railway stations, bazaars etc., where there would be huge crowds dealing with money. The pickpocketing as believed by R. Reid, who served as Superintendent in the Calcutta Detective Department during 1875-76 was the earliest ventures of young boys in the world of crime, who soon found themselves expert in such operations and proceeded further to commit crimes of more wicked natures. According to Reid:-

“the most successful school of training young criminals in Calcutta was the landing and shipping ghats along the Strand Road. Here may be seen batches of idle boys, some of them not more than four or five years of age, learning the A.B.C. of a criminal profession. They commenced by collecting scattered grain and seeds at the ghats, which found a ready sale at the shops of receivers of stolen property. The next step in advance of this simple process was ‘bleeding the bags’, an operation at which some of the boys became very expert.”¹⁵

Reid tells us about one such incident of pickpocketing where two very young boys stole a Municipal Tax Collector off Rs.300, near Chitpore road in a broad daylight of afternoon after chalking out a plan. While one of them pretended to fall in a fit, causing a commotion, as a lot of people including the tax-collector ran to offer assistance, the other boy managed to sneak amidst the crowd, slit open the bag and run away with the money at an opportune moment!¹⁶ S. Wauchope, the first Commissioner of Calcutta Police during the second half of the 19th century, gives us another such case of pickpocketing, where a sircar was stolen of 500 rupees. The victim, as stated by Wauchope:-

“started with Rs.500 in notes and a handkerchief in his pocket; that to prevent the money being stolen. He kept his hand in the outside of his pocket the whole way,

and yet when he reached Colootollah, the money was gone.”¹⁷

Wauchope further describes about how three boys followed him until they reached a crowded street where the two of them began to bustle against his umbrella arm so as to tire him. At last when he shifted the umbrella to the other hand, within a flicker of that second, his money was extracted by the third boy. Both the incidents gives us a clear impression of their professional expertise and how these experts were breeding in the innermost lanes of the city, in a separated world of their own where there were alcohol shops, smoking dens, and brothels for the entertainment of these outlaws.

Women Trafficking and Prostitution

With the technological advancements and transportation facilities that added a motion to the city with the crafted and potentially disruptive in nature like human trafficking, especially of young girls, who were brought down to the city only to be sold at the brothels which were sprawling up in the fringes of the black town. Prostitution, in the 19th century had become a thriving business in the metropolis. This was due to certain reasons: the upcountry migrants who had left behind their families and values back home, tended to visit brothels in order to satiate their sexual requirements. Moreover, the new emerging class of Bengali rich, once exposed to such raw money, began the trend of keeping mistresses for themselves, a trend possibly appropriated from medieval Indian rulers who maintained mistresses and dancers within the harems of their royal palaces. The rural Bengali women also faced insecurities around the mid-18th century with the depredations of the Mahratta Raiders (*bargis*) who also started to rape and abduct women in Bengal. Such women, once being raped were referred as *patita* or fallen women, were neither taken back to their respective homes nor were acceptable to the society. Thence, they had no other option but to end up in ‘*patita-nagar*’ or brothels which were springing up in the city of Calcutta, where they could find a source of income to sustain themselves. During the period between 1858-1873, we get to see that a large portion of women migrants from the nearby districts of Calcutta were widows or rejected wives of the lower caste families of barbers, milkmen, *kaibartas* etc. who came to Calcutta to find work. Most of such women, once unable to procure a means of survival, ended up as prostitutes in the budding brothels of the Black Town or into domestic services as maids.¹⁸ According to the Report of the Census of the Towns and Suburbs of Calcutta of 1881, the number of women domestic servants in Calcutta and its suburbs were 21,884 while those women into prostitution numbered 1,22,228 and dancers numbered 111.¹⁹ This data clearly gives one a picture about the expanding market of prostitution in the 19th century Calcutta, which in course gave rise to another type of crime, more intense in nature, which had troubled the social structure of the metropolis-women trafficking.

There are numerous instances where women, even minor girls were kidnapped by these traffickers and sold to the brothels of the Black Town: Kalighat and Sonagachhi were two most infamous red-light areas of the city. In the Annual Reports of Police in Calcutta, in 1872, we find one such case, filed under Section 363 of the Penal Code, in the Chitpore road where the daughter of a Kahar was abducted by three neighbours of the same caste for immoral purposes. All three were caught but two of them were released while one served a term of six months in jail.²⁰ Such

notorious cases of women trafficking only increased in the early phase of 20th century. One of such wanted trafficker during the 20th century was Sreepati who was alleged to be a touring agent of the kidnapping gangs, who used to move from village to village in the guise of a medicine seller with the intention of abducting minor girls and selling them off to the agents in the Black Town. He was finally brought into custody of the police on June, 1918 after being accused of kidnapping two minor girls of age 13 and 15 and selling them off to Lalchand, a resident of Beliaghata in the Black Town.²¹ We also find another such case of a minor girl, kidnapped from a far off region in Mymensingh, (presently in Bangladesh). The minor Phulkumari was procured from her home, brought to Harcutta, in the Bowbazar area of Calcutta from where she was again sold to Rangoon. After falling ill there, she was brought back to Calcutta through the water routes, in jetties.²² This makes it clear how easy transportation availabilities contributed towards such crimes. In fact, railways had become an easy medium of various criminals who indulged in such notoriety and then escaped out of the city. There is one such instance of kidnapping of a minor Chetri girl of 9 years of age who had been trafficked out of her place in Liloah via railway to be sold in Kamarhati, in the suburbs of Calcutta. The accused was arrested by the Railway Police on suspicion.²³

Smuggling

Not only just human trafficking, railways and port facilities also contributed to the growth of certain other crimes like smuggling in various commodities. Smuggling is a crime that can flourish in an urban centre that has big commercial dealings, ready markets and places for easy hideouts of stolen commodities. Smuggling too, as environmental criminology suggests, has its own time and space. Activities of smuggling can only prosper near the areas of trade. Various commodities like salt, opium, arms and armaments became products of illegal trade during the 19th century. One very important reason for increase in the activities of smuggling could be the monopolisation of trade of these products by the East India Company that restricted the local dealers of such commodities to continue their trade, leaving no other option to them but to go underground and continue their activities. For example, a sudden increase in the smuggling of arms and ammunitions during the second half of the 19th century, as a result of the Arms Act in 1878 enacted by the Government, prevented people from possessing arms without a license.²⁴ This led to an increased dealing of arms by Indian wholesalers in a secretive way via water routes. A variety of other products too were illegally brought in or exported by a group of smugglers who operated from both the port of Calcutta and the land routes. Calcutta became a notorious centre for activities of smuggling around various ports of river Hoogly. Hoogly River had, in fact, been constantly referred in the records of the colonial government to have facilitated notorious activities of smuggling from within the limits and also outside the port of Calcutta up to the Bay of Bengal.²⁵ From accounts of Reid, we find one such case of smuggling in salt being carried out in a large country boat via river Hoogly between the Armenian Ghat and Mint, where an empty boat of the same size waited to receive the bags of salt.²⁶ This suggests how activities of smuggling were carried in the middle of the river in order to avoid public notice and police suspicion.

Opium too had become an important commodity of smuggling during this period. Denounced as 'drug' by the government, opium smuggling had found a base market in the alleys of North

Calcutta, where various drug joints had sprung up. The Opium Commission of 1883 cited one such case of smuggling wherein a box containing 13 seers of Opium was seized at the Hoogly railway station that was to be transported to Chandennagore.²⁷ Women of the underworld also participated actively in transporting smuggled goods from one place to another. We find the reference of a later day observer in Sumanta Banerjee's work, 'When smuggling is done by women, opium is chiefly carried in their *borkhas*-a sort of loose voluminous garb... Ample and capacious pockets are stitched inside these *borkhas* and it is in these pockets that opium is stuffed'.²⁸

Murders

Of the more heinous forms of crime that came to the forefront of the city were homicides. Cases of a few sensational murders had terrified the city of Calcutta and informed one about a category of criminals, more gruesome in their nature, operating in the City who could even indulge in acts of killing if their interests were not achieved. There were also few of them who committed such crimes as a plain act of revenge against somebody. In fact, of all such crimes that had its den in the secluded lanes of the Black Town, murders appeared to be most heinous in nature and provides us with a better understanding of the gruesome species who ruled the underworld of Calcutta. Although, not that frequent like other forms of crime during the same period, certain cases of murders at intervals actually shook the city of Calcutta and questioned the safety of its people. One such instance was that of the Amherst Street Murder case, wherein the victim, a young lady, was found dead in a pool of blood on 1st April, 1868.²⁹ The case was recorded by the Moochipara section of police. A similar incident, within a few months of the Amherst Street case, took place in the Ezra Street, on 22nd October, 1868 where the body of a Jewess named Sumah was found in the house of her father-in law, Ezekiel Salah Guboy, a respectable merchant.³⁰ These two murders, at a very short interval, was recorded by the government and constant proceedings published in the newspapers reached the common people residing in the city and instilled a sense of terror among them. Daroga Priyanath Mukherjee gives us instances of more such violent forms of murders that were carried out in a well-crafted manner. In one such case of 1892, Priyanath recorded how four men carried out the murder of a dancer for the sake of her ornaments. The dancer, who was a resident of Simla in Mechhuabazar area, was taken to a garden house, on the pretext that she would have to perform in front of a rich *zamindar* from Bangladesh. She was killed and looted off her jewelleries. Three of those men were directly involved in the murder, while the fourth was responsible for misguiding the mother and sister, namely Nritya, a prostitute and Shairab, a dancer respectively, who too were supposed to be present at the garden house where Gourab, the deceased had to perform. The culprits arranged the plot in such a way that they pretended to be the agents of the *zamindar* who would readily pay 50 rupees for Gourab on condition that she would have to be properly dressed and put on all her ornaments.³¹ The deceased was taken by three of the men in one horse carriage, while the fourth men carried the mother and sister in another carriage, which after sometime changed its route. Gourab's carriage, reached one garden house that the culprits had rented, where she was killed and her ornaments taken off.

In another such heinous murder case, reported by Priyanath in 1895, we find one transgender person was killed by his own two companions. All three of them were residing at a place in

Beckbagan area and earned only by means of begging. The murder was extremely heinous in nature as the body of the deceased was chopped into multiple pieces and thrown into a pond in Bhawanipore area. Police could obtain ten such pieces from the pond near Bhawanipore. When the two culprits were investigated, they agreed to have killed their companion in a fit of fury, caused out of some dispute between them and disposed the pieces of the body in more than one pond in order to misguide the police of the original crime scene.³² The culprits had escaped from their area of operation and reached Uluberia by steamer, where they were traced down by Priyanath. Thus, we find how people, even after committing heinous crimes like murder, could easily escape from the scene without being noticed and disguised themselves in the anonymity of the metropolis.

A data on annual rise in criminal activities from 1871-1872, found in the records of the Judicial Files of the government clearly indicating the nature and frequency of offences in the city of Calcutta has been given below:³³

	No. of Cases	People Arrested	People Convicted	People Acquitted
1871				
Cognizable	4,623	5,518	3,415	988
Non-cognizable	3,561	6,063	3,404	1,445
Total	8,184	11,581	6,819	2,433
1872				
Cognizable	4,731	5,351	3,737	1,286
Non-cognizable	4,744	7,726	5,268	1,852
Total	9,475	13,077	9,005	3,138

Conclusion

Thus we find that as early as the 19th century, Calcutta had become a melting pot of various ethnic groups that existed side by side giving Calcutta a complete cosmopolitan characteristic and also contributing to the economic life of the city. The gradual development of Calcutta over the course of a century indefinitely attracted a huge population from other parts of the country that remained awestruck witnessing the grandeur of the City's jaw-dropping architectural buildings, well-constructed roadways and port facilities, thriving marketplaces that had to offer anything and everything required to live a luxurious life and many more. Such an impression of Calcutta had a deep impact among the Indian masses that wished to participate in the growing prospects of the city, which resulted in a massive influx of people from the Bengal countryside as well as from other parts of the country. The arrival of this class of migrants and their ultimate placement in the backstreets of Calcutta, where from they began to struggle to fit themselves in the mainstream of the economic life of the city, failing which they chose the path of unlawful indulgence to meet their ends resulted in a sudden increase in various criminal activities in the City and its suburbs during the 19th and early 20th centuries. On one hand, while 19th century Calcutta was breeding a class of intellectuals who

were the products of western learning and education, on the other hand, it accommodated these classes of criminals that gave the city defamatory titles and expressions³⁴ for being a notorious centre for criminal activities.

Endnotes:

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22. *The Statesman*, 15 August 1918, Calcutta.
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33. An 18th century couplet about Calcutta- '*Jal, jouchuri, mithyekatha, ei tin niye Kolikata*' (forgery, swindling and falsehood, these three make up Calcutta), in Sumanta Banerjee, *Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in 19th Century Calcutta*. Calcutta: Seagull Books Pvt. Ltd., 1989, p.87.
34. A mid-19th century popular song- '*ajabshahar Kolketa, randibari, jurigari, michhey kathar kiketa*' (strange city is Calcutta. Whores and houses, carriages and cars abound. How fancy it is to lie!), Ibid., p.84.