

Police and the People in Colonial Bengal: Special Reference to Princely State of Cooch Behar (1860-1900)

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At the time when the British began to rule India, the duty of maintaining law and order was vested in Zamindars who were required to maintain a quota of troops to suppress internal disorders and to deal with theft, robbery and other crimes. But this system could hardly function effectively as the growing power of the East India Company in Bengal. The rates of crime began spiraling upward after the famine of 1770, and the general state of law and order declined day by day.

In this situation, the need of an organized police system was felt as essential component of the structure of colonial rule in Bengal. The demilitarization of the Zamindars, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, enabled the company to establish governmental monopoly over the legitimate instruments of Coercion. But the use of army for maintaining law and order was financially burdensome and impolitic and also the violent social turmoil that engulfed the British Country side had somehow to be contained within manageable limits, the steps taken by Lord Warren Hastings to foster genuine political authority have failed. Lord Cornwallis was called upon to redesign police system in colonial Bengal.¹

Cornwallis was convinced that the abuses of the power to maintain law and order by the Zamindars “So disgraceful to government, so ruinous to commerce and indeed destructive to all civil society” needed to be remedied.² So Lord Cornwallis decided to strip the Zamindars of their policing duties and passed the “Regulations for the police of the Collectorships in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa” in 7 December 1792.³ According to the terms of the Regulations, the Zamindars were required to discharge their police establishments and to divest them from their power of maintaining law and order. The powers relating to police were to be vested in the Government who was to exercise it through the Magistrates. The Magistrates were directed to divide the districts into police jurisdictions comprising an extent of not exceeding ten coss square. Each police jurisdiction placed under a new officer called Darogah comprising a Jamadar, a Bakshy and a few Barkandazes to be paid by the Government. The Darogah was to be appointed and supervised by the Magistrates. All paiks, Chaukidars, Negahbans and other descriptions and castes of village watchmen were declared subject to the orders of the Darogah. But the power of appointment and removal of village watchmen were left to the Zamindars. Thus, the demilitarization of the zamindars having in the main been carried through, Cornwallis found it necessary to provide for an adequate structure of authority which would help the company to maintain law and order to the extent necessary for the public safety of the company.

Before 1860, the heavy crimes common in Cooch Behar due to the absence of an organized police system. One of the most important missions of the old commissioner was the reform of the police of the state of Cooch Behar. Although Mr. Ahmuty established two thanas in the interior of Cooch Behar but the state of the police was all along an infamy of Cooch Behar. The pay of the Darogah was only Rs.7 – 8 a month, and a Burkandaz had to get Rs.2 – 4; and the whole cost of the police establishment did not exceed Rs.8,000 a year. Even these pittances were often not paid before 1864 in Cooch Behar. For the old rule in Cooch Behar was that the Magistrate and his subordinates received no pay from the state but were supposed to pay themselves out of the fines and institution fees. If there was a surplus it was paid in to the Majudat or Reserve Treasury and if there was a deficiency the establishments were not paid. This system, strange as it was worked very disastrously on the appellate court, where there were very few fines or fees

and as a consequence that the pay of its establishments was sometimes 12 or 13 years in arrears. In 1864, Colonel Haughton initiated the reform by appointing a Darogah for the kotwali on Rs.100 a month and establish five Thanas namely 1) Kotwali, 2) Dinahata, 3) Mekligunj, 4) Giladanga, 5) Bhabanigunj and four Faris or out-posts namely 1) Syamgunj, 2) Changrabanda. 3) Shingimari, 4) Khagribari in the State of Cooch Behar.⁴

The new police system was established in 1866 by Colonel Bruce. Captain Hedayat Ali was for some time in-charge of the police. In February that year Moulvie Anwarooj Zuman, an Inspector from the Bengal Constabulary, was appointed as the head of the Cooch Behar police. In the course of the next year the organization of the new police was in full force and appears to have been completed by the end of the year 1866 - 1867. Excepting the superintendent and the Inspectors, the pay of all ranks was the same as in the Bengal police and the cost was about Rs.40,000 a year. The force was gradually strengthened till 1873 - 1874.

From the beginning of the year 1873- 74, considerable reduction was made in the police force of Cooch Behar. The consequence of this reduction was disastrous. For the lack of a sufficient number of head-constables, ordinary constables had to be employed in the investigation of important cases, which created discontent amongst the men and enabled the temporary constables to commit irregularities with impunity. So the efficiency of the police was greatly decreased. But this state of affairs could not continue long. Accordingly in the following year (1873-74), a scheme was submitted for increasing the police force.

Till the year 1875, there was nothing in the nature of a rural police or Chowkidars in Cooch Behar. The necessity for such a body hardly existed among the primitive people of the state who do not live in villages but in detached homesteads. Over each of which the Dewania reigned as civil head of the company and adjusted disputes among his relatives and dependents. But with the introduction of the Land Revenue Settlement and the consequent greater security of hereditary rights, as people began to accumulate money and household property and as they became more exposed to the descriptions of petty- malefactors, the want of a village watch, which in Rangpur and Jalpaiguri had long been established, came to be more and more felt. This was brought to the notice of the Deputy Commissioner in 1876 by some petitions, which began to come from the chief of inhabitants of a few Taluks praying for investing the Chowkidars, to be nominated and paid by them with police functions and a badge as the symbol of office. This prayer was granted and other Taluks followed suit year after year. Feeling the importance of this body, the "Cooch Behar Village Chowkidari Act" was passed in 1893-94 and the number of Chowkidars in the state came up to 1,577 at the end of the year 1899-1900.⁵ To encourage better work a system of rewards has been started for the Chowkidars.

In 1885, the Town or Municipal police was organized with one Jamadar and 23 Chowkidars for the town of Cooch Behar at a cost of Rs. 1776. This has since expanded to the mufasil town such as Haldibari, Mathabhanga, and Dinahata. The Municipal police is under the superintendent of police.

With the establishment of the new police system, many cases were brought to light. Cooch Behar is just now in a state of transition. The Cooch Beharis lived on the products of their fields, selling what they did not require to itinerant paikars and buying their cloths and paying their rent. But increased facilities of communication are now beginning to attract outsiders to a country where just, tobacco and rice are cheap and abundant. The Railways system have opened the country to Bengal and North Western provinces which lead to come a professional criminal tribe called Burwars, natives of Gonda and Oudh, who are in the habit of visiting Cooch Behar for thieving purposes.⁶ Merchants are selling and opening ware- houses and their capital is beginning to flow into the country. Consequently increased of crime will surely follow. In 1872-73, Mr. Smith, Deputy Commissioner, gives some valuable statistics which are enabling us to compare the state of Cooch Behar as regards the prevalence of crime with the neighboring district of Jalpaiguri. He wrote that the criminal work in Cooch Behar is more than double of what it is in Jalpaiguri.

The following table shows the fluctuation of crime during the five years from 1874 to 1879:

Crime	1874-75	1875-76	1876-77	1877-78	1878-79
Dacoity	11	6	1	2	3
Robbery	3	3	3	2	1
Ordinary theft	397	727	746	838	736
Lurking house trespass	314	34	13	6	8
Murder	3	2	1	4	2
Culpable Homicide	...	2	5	1	6

Source: Annual Report 1878-79, Cooch Behar state press.1903

Mr. Dalton in his retrospect of the British Administration of Cooch Behar, write in the beginning of 1884,ha the following on the condition of crimes in the state of Cooch Behar-“The earliest record we have of the number of dacoities in any one year in for 1865-66, when there were 12 cases .In 1867-68,there were 16 and in the following year 14.In 1869-70,there were 7 and in 1870-71 , five only. In the famine year of 1874-75 the number rose to 11. In 1875-76, six dacoities occurred ; but during the year a patrol system was organized and the return for 1876-77 show one dacoity only.In 1881-82,there were four dacoities ; in 1882-83 two only and of late years very few of the dacoities reported have been committed by organized gang of dacoits. Some of them can be more technically called dacoities being house-trespass committed by five or more persons. Serious offences against the persons, cases of rape, kidnapping and adultery are the most common. Most of the murders which take place in Cooch Behar have their origin in domestic intrigue or connubial infidelity. It is very rarely that murder and robbery are found in conjunction.”⁸

In short there is very little heavy crime in the state now though it compared so unfavorably with Jalpaiguri when Mr. Smith wrote his report in 1873. The total number of cases of all descriptions which occurred in 1882-83 approximate in a singular manner to the number reported exactly 10 years previous, the figures , being 2224 for the former year and 2244 for latter . Considering the increase in population and in the wealth of the people, the result is most satisfactory, for while it is quite certain that the number of petty crimes which are brought to notice, must have increased considerably that the fact in itself proves that serious crime has been effectually repressed.

The following table shows the fluctuation of crimes during the five years from 1878 to 1883 :

Crime	1878-79	1879-80	1880-81	1881-82	1882-83
Dacoity	3	...	2	3	2
Robbery	1	2	...	5	...
Murder	2	2	2	6	2
Culpable Homicide	6	2	2	1	...

Source: Annual Report 1882-83, Cooch Behar state press.1903

In 1882-83, Mr. Munro, who was deputed under orders of the Lieutenant-Governor to inspect the Cooch Behar police, visited every Thana and Out-post in the state, made several valuable suggestions as regards the equipments of the police. He expressed himself as satisfied on the whole but he reported that the greater

portion of accoutrement of police being old and rotten. On the basis of his report, new accoutrements were produced at the end of the year and are now being served out. Before 1871, the Rajgans or the kinsmen of the Maharaja do not appear to have been subject to the jurisdiction of the criminal courts of the state. In August 1871, owing to a disorderly behavior of a principal Rajgan, Colonel Haughton extended the jurisdiction of the Deputy Commissioner to the trial of offences committed by a Rajgan under certain restrictions. In 1897-98, this privilege of the Rajgans was withdrawn and His Highness was pleased to order that in criminal cases no distinction should in future be made between Rajgans and other persons.

The following table shows the fluctuation of crimes during the five years from 1880 to 1885 in offences which actually occurred in some of the principal classes:

Crime	1880-81	1881-82	1882-83	1883-84	1884-85
Dacoity	3	3	2	4	3
Robbery	...	5	3
Murder	2	6	2	2	3
Culpable Homicide	2	1	...	1(a)	1

Source: Annual Report 1884-85, Cooch Behar state press. 1903

- (a) This case was reported as murder but the session's court decided it as culpable homicide. It was entered as murder by mistake in the last year's crime return statement

For the maintaining law and order, addition and alternations in the police organization of Cooch Behar continued to be made time to time. In 1890-91, a small detective department was established by way of experiment at an annual cost of Rs. 600. The original proposal was that the man employed was to be paid for their work by results but experience showed this to be impracticable. So, His Highness was pleased to appoint two officers on a fixed salary of Rs. 20 and 10 respectively. These men worked under the immediate direction of His Highness and were not employed, as anticipated, under the orders of the departments. In the year of 1897-98, a scheme for the reorganization of the police adopted in Cooch Behar. From that time the Thanas and out-posts have been limited to their present number, namely, the five station of Kotwali, Fulbari, Dinahata, Mathabhanga and Mekhligun;⁷ and the independent out-post of Shitalkhuchi. By this reorganization, with an area of 1307 square miles and a population of 5, 78, 868, souls, the state thus has almost 1 police to every 9.5 square miles of its extent and 4225.3 souls of its population.⁸

After the installation of an organized police system, heavy crime gradually decreased. During the first five years, from 1883-84 to 1887-88 the number of dacoities was 18; in the quinquennial period it came down to 14; and in the following period ending with 1897-98, it further decreased and stood at 11. Under the scheme of the reorganization of police, the bordering out-posts were abolished in that year. In the next two years alone 10 dacoities occurred, the number in 1899-1900, namely eight. The total number of cases of all descriptions ranged between 2,000 and 4,000 a year from 1883-84 to 1887-88, between 2,300 and 2,800 from 1888-89 to 1892-93 and between 2,000 and 2,500 during the next quinquennial period. In 1898-99, it came up to 2,500 and 2,575. But on the whole, the number of cases has not thus much increased.

Notes and References

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8. *ibid.*, pp. 314-315.