
**Interpreting The Crime and Corruption in Post-Colonial Kolkata
(1947-1967)**

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***Abstract:** Independence and partition was an incident of both delight and tragedy. After independence, had Kolkata turned into a better place? Or corruption and crime were running parallelly. This paper primarily focuses on the crime and corruption of post-independence Kolkata. Even before independence, there was corruption and criminals in Calcutta. On the contrary, freedom has not been able to change the mentality of the people in the criminal world. Pre-independence conditions created new criminals and created a situation of corruption in the post-independence period. Therefore, the struggle for independence and the killing of Bengalis could not change the criminal and corrupt mentality. This paper also tries to explain how much independence has changed the nature of crime and corruption at that time. This paper intends to explain how a city that was the capital before Delhi had turned into a cradle of crime and corruption and how ordinary citizens were involved.*

***Keywords:** Black marketing, Crime, Corruption, Kolkata, Partition, Post-independence*

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Introduction

After a Long Fight for almost 200 years against the British, India became independent. The Independence of India brought an atmosphere of happiness to the minds of millions of Indians but came at the cost of a long political struggle and many Indian lives. But due to the rigid mindset of

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some people, India was partitioned and the happiness of independence was pale to some extent. Within a few days, millions of people lost everything they had and turned into refugees. So, the independence and partition of India were both an event of happiness and tragedy. The night of independence was the night of the festival for the citizens of Kolkata. People from every section of society wanted to enjoy the night of independence. Many of them carried the national flag and wore Gandhi caps on their head. Besides Kolkata, the people of the suburbs celebrated the day of independence with patriotic songs and delivering emotional speeches. The atmosphere of Independence Night is known from a text:

‘On 15th August, the whole town looked very festive and gay. The national flag was hoisted on all the government buildings as well as all public places and in almost all the important localities. Trams and buses were very crowded with people who went on shouting 'Jai Hind'. People greeted one another, both Hindus and Muslims.... they all looked happy and cheerful’¹

Though Hindu Mahasabha and Communist Party of India (CPI) protested against the partition and refused to take part in the celebration of independence. On 31st August 1947, some notable Muslim businessmen from Chitpur arranged a conference at the grand hotel. Gandhiji and H.S. Suhrawardy attended the conference. At this conference, Gandhiji was called "The Greatest Architecture of Indian Independence" ² Apart from that the president of this conference Haji Shamsuddin donated 1001 Rs on behalf of the Muslim businessman to reconstruct the temple which was destroyed in the riot.³ But when communal violence broke out again, Gandhiji started a hunger strike. He broke his fast after 73 hours as there was no more communal violence. At this time various leaders of Bengal signed a conditional agreement with Gandhiji. It *said* – ‘We pledge to Gandhiji that now that peace has returned to Calcutta, we will never again allow communal riots in the city, and will try to prevent it by dying’.³ *But in the context* of independence, the common man began to become disillusioned very quickly. It was written in the *Masik Basumati* (Bengali Literary Magazine) –‘This is not the freedom that the Congress has given us’ ⁴ *Mukti* (Bengali Literary Magazine) wrote – ‘On 15th August, political independence came to India. This freedom is not exactly what we wanted it to be’ ⁵ India's independence was unable to fulfil the aspirations of the common people. The expulsion of the British from this country would radically change the lives of every human being, which was a fantasy. The people of Calcutta slowly realize that. The history of Calcutta at that time proves that crime and corruption with the British did not leave Calcutta after independence.

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Corruption and The City of Joy

In the Opening Address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah said – ‘One of the biggest curses from which India is suffering—I do not say that other countries are free from it, but, I think, our condition is much worse—is bribery and corruption’.⁶ *Such* remarks by the leader of the neighbouring country about India prove that India was not free from corruption at that time. Since mid-September 1947, there has been a shortage of food in India. As a result of the black market, the price of rice multiplied, and the rationing system in Kolkata collapsed.⁷ According to a report, rice prices rose by 86.8% at that time.⁸ Between December 1947 and July 1948, the price of vegetables increased by 50%, Fruit prices rose 92%, dairy product prices rose 20%, Fish prices rose 24%.⁹ Clothing prices rose 200%.¹⁰ When the supply of clothes from other provinces to West Bengal ceased, there was panic among the people of Calcutta. Taking advantage of this opportunity, some unscrupulous mill owners artificially created a shortage of clothes. As a result, the price of cloth increased.¹¹ Civil Supplies Minister Prafulla Chandra Sen acknowledged that the Government's deregulated policy had led to an increase in black marketers and smugglers.¹² At this time, people realized that one of the reasons for the sudden rise in prices of all commodities was the black-marketing. According to a report, the cost of living for the common people in the Calcutta area was three times higher than in 1938.¹³ In October 1947, and the then West Bengal government issued a notification asking for an account of the assets of the employees. The notification further stated that government employees would not be allowed to participate in gambling and the share market.¹⁴ So it can be said that government employees may also have been involved in corruption apart from the common people. An anti-corruption unit was set up in 1947 to curb corruption. Thirty government officials were appointed to this unit.¹⁵ But despite all this, corruption and smuggling could not be stopped. The Kolkata Police Commissioner admitted that he could not take any action due to a lack of proper law.¹⁶ The West Bengal Black Marketing Bill was passed in December 1947. This law provided for non-bailable punishment. The law states that if a government official neglects his duties, he will be punished. But sadly, some of the then Congress leaders were also involved in this corruption. Besides, at that time, helpless people from East Bengal wanted to come and live in Calcutta. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the price of land suddenly increased at that time. One of its aims was to make a little more money from endangered people. Besides, there was corruption in renting houses in Calcutta at that time.

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At this time, the business of adulterated mustard oil was booming in Calcutta. In June 1949, the Health Department of the Calcutta Corporation conducted an expedition and seized 1000 mounds of adulterated oil. A peeved editorial in Amrita Bazar Patrika observed: 'A report has been published in the Amrita Bazar Patrika to the effect that 'an intensive drive was carried on by the Health Department of The Corporation of Calcutta on Tuesday, the 28th June, to find out the presence of argemone oil in mustard oil.' The report further stated: A large number of samples of mustard oil were tested on the spot. Over 1000 mounds of mustard oil showing the presence of argemone oil were seized in various parts of the city.' Then follows the concluding sentence of the report: 'The health officer is of the opinion that adulteration of mustard oil with argemone is not extensive.' When was this so-called 'intensive drive' carried on? Certainly not before the publication of the report in the local press, based on the results of tastes made at the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, that adulteration of mustard oil with argemone seeds had resulted in a large number of cases of epidemic dropsy. Was the Health Department of the Corporation sleeping all the time? Should not the report of adulteration had emanated from the Corporation Health Department instead of from the Hygiene Institute? The public should like to know how many samples of adulterated mustard oil were examined by the Central Laboratory of the Corporation and whether the Corporation gave any previous warning of such adulteration to the public. It is said 1000 mounds of adulterated mustard oil have been seized. Has this quantity been destroyed or is it being safely deposited somewhere to be utilised again at a suitable opportunity? What action has been taken against the dealers whose oil has been found to be adulterated? Then again what justification the health officer had when he said that adulteration was 'not extensive'? But why talk of mustard oil alone? Is there anything today, we mean of course foodstuffs, which is not adulterated in some form or other? The national health is being rapidly undermined, diseases are rampant, early deaths are frequent, the young hopefuls have no health, no stamina and no vitality. Are not all these traceable largely to adulteration of foodstuffs? What have the Government and the Corporation done to stop this adulteration? The dealers and merchants' resort to adulteration for sheer pelf. They are deliberately murdering the nation in fact; they are the most vicious murderers the world has seen. How are the authorities dealing with these traders? Should not a part of the blame be shared by them? A few months ago, several bags of flour mixed with soap-stone were seized in Calcutta. Dr. Prafulla Ghosh was then the premier of West Bengal. Much stir was created for a day and for a day only and nobody heard anything about it thereafter. Is this the way administration should be carried on? Health was almost a neglected subject in the British regime. Should it be so when we have our own

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Government? Should the health authorities continue to play with human lives? They need not wait to be prodded by newspapers into action. The initiative must come from them. If the existing law regarding adulterated foodstuffs is deemed defective and inadequate the Government should come forward with an ordinance. Apathy in high quarters in a matter of such national importance will be considered an intolerable crime.’¹⁷ Knowing about the Calcutta Corporation's campaign, many oil mills started advertising their ‘pure’ mustard oil.¹⁸ Debesh Sen's speech at Calcutta *Maidan* on the occasion of the second anniversary of independence raised the issue of smuggling and corruption. He said: ‘Promise today that we will not operate a ship that carries smuggled goods, We will not drive a car that carries smuggled goods, We will close the smugglers' factory.’¹⁸ *West Bengal Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy* gave a stern reply in the assembly against corruption. He said ‘I for one am an enemy of corruption, whether a Congressman or a non-Congressman does it. Anyone who is guilty of corruption has no place in any civilized society.’¹⁹ Smuggling was also written in contemporary literature. ‘Across the country, smuggling has become a profession and an addiction for many gentlemen.’²⁰ Besides, Chandi Lahiri²¹ and Laxman's cartoons also reflect post-independence corruption.²²

Crime and Criminals in Post-Colonial Kolkata

Although the country was independent, the violence of criminals in Calcutta did not decrease. Different people were involved in various criminal activities at that time. There were various criminals at that time such as thieves, robbers, gamblers, pickpockets, smugglers, etc. No human being becomes a criminal after birth. Society and the surrounding conditions pushed him or her into the world of crime. The riots before independence gave birth to many criminals. Santosh Kumar Pal²³, Dinabandhu Dutta,²⁴ Laxminarayan Paul,²⁵ Bhanu Bose,²⁶ Krishna Bahadur Nepali,²⁷ Satya Priya Bhattacharya,²⁸ Sachindranath Mitra,²⁹ Punit Goala,³⁰ Chittaranjan Guha,³¹ Ajit Kumar Banerjee,³² Salil Kumar Majumder³³ was among them. Lack of economic prosperity led many to enter the world of crime. Brajendranath Sarkar,³⁴ Chitta Pal,³⁵ Rabindranath Das,³⁶ Rahul Amin,³⁷ Adhir Pramanik,³⁸ Indu Bhusan Goswami,³⁹ Ranajit Goala,⁴⁰ Bhulu Das⁴¹ were among them. Besides, robbery was known at that time.⁴² Other crimes at the time included selling stolen goods,⁴³ looting gold jewellery,⁴⁴ snatchings,⁴⁵ The criminal world of that time is also known in Bengali literature.⁴⁶

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Because of anti-social and fear of riots the groom used to come by ambulance to get married, after the wedding, the bride would leave in a military truck.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Society is never made up of just good people. Society is made up of a mixture of good and evil. Post-independence Calcutta was no exception. There will be no corruption and criminals in an independent country, it would be wrong to think so. Even before independence, there was corruption and criminals in Calcutta. On the contrary, freedom has not been able to change the mentality of the people in the criminal world. Pre-independence conditions created new criminals and created a situation of corruption in the post-independence period. Therefore, the struggle for independence and the killing of Bengalis could not change the criminal and corrupt mentality. Their character and nature were the same.

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