

Coercion and Control: Case Studies of Police Torture in the 19th Century Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: *This research paper investigates the practice of police torture in the 19th century colonial Bengal. This study reveals systematic methods employed by police officials to extract confessions from the persons who were suspected to have committed crimes. This article focuses on some notable incidents of police torture like the brutal treatment of Ramdurlabh Roy, the abuse and death of Kartik Podder, and the prolonged torture of Munshi Sheikh illustrate that abusive techniques were used to intimidate and coerce suspects. The analysis exposes how administrative indifference and judicial impunity, reinforced by class biases and corruption, enabled these abuses to persist even when prominent evidences of malpractices had been found. Apart from that, this article argues that coercive police practices were sustained for upholding colonial power structures.*

Keywords: *Bengal, Coercion, Colonial, Governance, Police, Torture, Violence etc.*

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Introduction

In the mid-19th century, colonial Bengal witnessed the systematic use of police brutality to maintain control over the population and suppress dissent. In Europe, reformers advocated for the incarceration and reform of the offenders which signalled a move away from inflicting pain towards controlling the behavior of the offenders.¹ But the colonial administration in Bengal not only relied on legal and bureaucratic structures to assert its authority but also resorted to physical coercion and torture as a measure to extract confessions and enforce subjugation. This research explores the dark facets of colonial policing in Bengal, revealing

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how torture became an institutionalized tool within the broader mechanisms of colonial governance.

From the works of historians and various archival records it is observed that police officers, often under the tacit approval of higher authorities, employed brutal techniques to break the will of detainees. Documented cases reveal several methods such as severe beatings, prolonged deprivation of food, and the use of inhumane practices that sometimes led to extreme form of bodily harm. This research seeks to reconstruct the historical trajectory of police torture in colonial Bengal by analysing official archival records and contemporary literature. By situating individual cases within the larger framework of colonial administration, the paper illuminates the ways in which the deliberate infliction of pain inflicted on the prisoners not only to extract confessions but also to reinforce existing social hierarchies and the oppressive colonial order. The methods of torture, as this study reveals, were deeply intertwined with the broader objective of subduing the colonized and consolidating state power through fear.

Literature Review

In his seminal work 'Authority and Violence in Colonial Bengal: 1800-1860, Ranjan Chakrabarti has focused on the methods of torture inflicted upon the prisoners in jail in the 19th century Bengal. He has shown several instances of torture inflicted by the police like some were ill-treated when they refuse to pay bribes to barkandazes which was a custom at that time. They were whipped. One prisoner was moltested by a darogah's pet dog.² The prisoners also received severe beatings if the darogahs had personal animosities with others. Prisoners were left in the jails without food if they failed to complete their assigned task. The darogahs also extorted money from the prisoners in jails but if he fails in his mission, he severely ill-treated that person. Those who gave in to their demand escaped this ill-fate.³

Basudev Chattopadhyay has argued that the darogahs frequently resorted to torture in order to obtain confessions from the suspected persons. He mentions a dreadful case of torture occurred in Murshidabad for obtaining confession from a person named Ramdurlabh Roy who was suspected to have committed dacoity.⁴ He narrates that, 'As a result of the horrid treatment which he received and subsequent detention at the thanah to evade detection the fingers and toes of the poor victim rotted off, and he is left a cripple and a pensioner on the bounty of the government for life. The fingers and toes of the man were first tied together and wedges being driven between them to the greatest extent of tension he was laid out on his

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back in the sun-this not producing the desired effect his hands and feet were dipped into boiling water, then the ligatures were unloosened and bandages dipped in oil, tied round the fingers of both hands and toes of the left foot and lighted, and this not forcing him to confess, he was as if to prevent any hope of recovery detained several days at the thana without any remedies being applied, and when brought in by the orders of the Magistrate to whose knowledge the case had been brought, his hands and feet were in a state of mortification and ultimately his fingers and toes rotted off.”⁵

Miajahn has described an incident of torture inflicted by the police on an innocent person which resulted in his death. He was the direct eye-witness of that incident. The details of this case are worth mentioning here. A dacoity took place in a rich man's house name Kartik Podder. Miajahn in the name of conducting investigation, brought him to the thana and confined him in a room. Here many prisoners were tortured to confess their misdeeds. An arrangement made between Miajahn and others that to hold Pratap Ganguly guilty of dacoity, it was necessary for Kartik Podder to name the two lathials⁶ of Pratap Ganguly. Choku, a jamadar of that thana asked Kartik Podder to mention the name of two lathials so that Pratap Ganguly could be sent to Magistrate's court. But Kartik Podder refused to do so as he was scared of Pratap Ganguly because he was a rich zamindar and an influential person and could do him much harm if comes to know about this. Choku got enraged and tortured him brutally and eventually Kartick Podder died. All of the police officers got scared. Miajahn said if a labor or a koolie died, it would be not the matter of worry. As Kartick Podder was a rich man his death in this manner could be fatal for the police department if the exact news reached the ears of higher officials. They decided that in report it would be written that Kartick Podder reached thana in good health. But suddenly he got senseless before the darogah and two barkandaz and he died immediately after this. Miajahn also asked Bonai Fakir to bribe the surgeon so that he should write false report. The surgeon acted to that manner and written that Kartick Podder died of heart attack.⁷

Girish Chandra Bose narrated a case of torture in which he directly participated. Once he arrested a sirdar dacoit named Munshi Sheikh. Munshi confessed his crime and sent him with his 'Ekrar'⁸ to Plamer, the Magistrate of Krishna Nagar. As Munshi refused to acknowledge his Ekrar, Palmer sent him back to the Thana. Girish Bose was annoyed as well as angry as Munshi was sent back to the Magistrate for two consecutive days. He ordered his Burkundazes to give him a good amount of beating so that Munshi Sheikh acknowledges his

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ekrar. But Munshi Sheikh didn't do so. Girish Bose paid him a visit and asked him the reason behind doing this. Munshi Sheikh replied that he was aware of the rule and according to the existing rule he should be now in jail custody and there nobody could torture him no matter whether he confessed his misdeeds or not. If his associates confessed their crimes and told the police his name, no judge, Magistrate or police could do nothing against him till he gave the trace of the stolen properties. But the Magistrate was repeatedly sending him to the thana which is contrary to the existing rule and Girish Bose's Burkundazes are tormenting him. Therefore, he would not acknowledge his Ekrar and Girish could do whatever he wishes.⁹

Girish Bose got overwhelmed by Munshi's dare and he ordered his Burkundazes to torment him and beat him so that he acknowledges his 'Ekrar.' Girish Bose said that he is feeling ashamed to narrate what he did to Munshi. He committed much sin by doing this. He didn't give him any food for two days except beating. Girish Bose said it is preferable to be a destitute rather than become a police officer.¹⁰

Girish Bose said Munshi Sheikh he did not want to torture him. As the Magistrate would not agree to send him to jail custody till, he acknowledges his 'Ekrar', Girish was compelled to take this way. Therefore, Munshi should acknowledge his 'Ekrar'. Munshi replied no darogah or Magistrate could force him to do this by torturing him. He showed Girish the different marks of torture in different parts of body which were inflicted on him by the Darogahs. One darogah of Jessore burned the flesh of his knee by pressing on his knees 'Tamak er Gul.' Another darogah of Pabna embedded (what is the English word of 'Kata') in his nails. Still, no one could compel him to acknowledge his 'Ekrar'. Munshi continue to say he was at that time under his control and as he heard his fame and he would now see, '*Chor boro na Daroga Boro?*' Hearing his Girish Chandra finally asked his Barkandazes to refrain from torturing him.¹¹

Colonial Policing and Judicial Impunity in Bengal: Archival Evidence of Systemic Torture and Administrative Negligence

The administrative reports of this period highlight the failure of the senior officials to take decisive steps against corrupt officers. Instead of taking measures to secure their punishments, the authorities either ignored the brutality of the police and the severity of the cases of police torture or dismissed the cases by declaring that the guilty officer could not be punished as there is no sufficient evidence to convict him. These cases highlight the

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inefficiency of police which in turn reveals that they used coercion to extort confessions and Magistrates often ignored the seriousness of the case and the testimonies of the victims. This section will deal with some notable cases of police torture and wrongful confinement of the persons who were suspected to have committed crime.

Case of Nundo Kumar Ghose, Sub-Inspector in 1864

In Faridpur, Sub-Inspector Nundo Kumar Ghose and Head Constable Nawaj Khan were caught torturing a person named, Alimuddi who was suspected of committing a theft. He was severely beaten and his fingers were found so tightly that they were swollen. His face bore the marks of injuries. The District Superintendent of Police suspended the Sub-Inspector Nundo Kumar Ghose. The other police officers who equally participated in torturing the persons tried to put the entire blame on the latter.¹² Although the Sub-Inspector was convicted under Section 330¹³ of Indian Penal Code, the other police officers got minimum punishment.

Police torture Case in Meherpore in 1865

The police torture case in Meherpore¹⁴ in 1865 involves the maltreatment of Madhub Karigar¹⁵ who was arrested in charge of dacoity by Inspector Ishur Rai. Madhub was initially released but later he was rearrested and presented before Deputy Magistrate M.G. Elphinstone before whom Madhub Karigar confessed his crime. Subsequently, Inspector Boidonath (or Baidyanath) Mookerjee of the Detective Branch of Police requested that Madhub be handed over to him for 48 hours to get additional information. Before Boidonath Mookerjee, Madhub retracted his confession and said that his confession was obtained through torture. It was at this point, Mr. Elphinstone noticed that Madhub has sustained severe injuries particularly dislocated wrists. After this Madhub was released.¹⁶

Madhub accused Ishur (or Ishwar) Rai of torturing him with the help of Barkandazes.¹⁷ However, instead of launching immediate investigations, Elphinstone merely reported the matter to the Magistrate and expressed doubts regarding method of obtaining evidence against the suspected persons. When the case went to the Sessions Court, the Sessions Judge acquitted Ishur Rai stating that whether the torture took place after Madhub's initial confession or when he was under the custody of Detective Department is not clear. The Magistrate has said that prompt actions were not taken by Mr. Elphinstone immediately after the complaint lodged by Madhub was the key reason why crucial evidence was lost. The

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Magistrate also remarked that although Ishur Rai got acquitted from the charge of torturing Madhub Karigur, he could be still punished for misconduct for detaining Madhub beyond the permissible time. However, the District Superintendent was reluctant to initiate further proceedings arguing that the ordeal of standing trial had been a sufficient lesson for Ishur Rai.¹⁸

During the trial, the court emphasized the importance of cross examination and other evidences. One witness named Enayet Karigar who had been detained along with Madhub, said that Madhub had encouraged him to support his allegations. Another individual named Mohanund Mundul (Mahanand Mandal) in whose premises Madhub was allegedly confined, denied witnessing any abuse. The Sessions Court found it suspicious why had Madhub initially remained silent about his injuries and raised allegations a week later. The Sessions Judge thought that Madhub was framing Ishur Rai to escape his own charge of dacoity and he dismissed the case and discharged Ishur Rai.¹⁹

This case reflected deep flaws in the colonial administration of police. The reluctance of officials like Elphinstone to take immediate action allowed officers to destroy evidence and escape punishment, while lack of thorough investigation weakened the merit of the case. This case illustrates the challenges faced by the victims of police brutality in securing justice, especially when their credibility was questioned due to pre-existing criminal allegations.

Dinajpore (Modern day Dinajpur) Police torture case in 1866

The Dinajpore Police torture case involved brutal treatment of Baharoo by the police and his eventual death. Baharoo was arrested by the police on suspicion of dacoity. Sub-Inspector Koorshed Ally was in charge of the investigation. Soon after his arrest, Baharoo received severe beatings throughout the night because he was not confessing his crime. The next day he was taken to the banks of river Koolik²⁰ and he was already in a weakened state. The police expected that he will lead them to the property which he had stolen. However, the police could not trace the stolen property and they continue to torture Baharoo. He could not endure any longer and jumped into the river. But the police dragged him out of the river and beaten him again. The torture continued till night and then he was taken into another location by palanquin eight or nine miles away. Here he finally died. This incident came into light and the case went to Sessions Court.²¹

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The police's lawyer argued in the Court that Baharoo had health issues and he sustained injuries when he jumped into the river. But multiple witnesses testified that Baharoo received severe beatings from the police. The Sessions Judge found that Baharoo was systematically tortured by the police to extract confession from him and his death resulted from the violence inflicted upon him. The Judge emphasized that Koorshed Ally was directly responsible for the atrocities committed upon Baharoo. The Sessions Judge convicted Koorshed Ali and sentenced him for transportation for life under Section 302²² of the Indian Penal Code. The constables were also dismissed from the service. This case highlighted the common practice of police that they falsely declared that the suspected persons are in the custody of the village chowkidars when it was actually not which allowed them to evade responsibility of custodial deaths and illegal detentions. This case is also a rare instance where colonial court recognized the guilty persons and punished them.²³

Although there was no direct evidence of Inspector Nowlan actively participating in the violence, he was held responsible for this incident as he allowed it to occur under his authority. The Deputy Inspector General of Police held that given his experience as a police officer, it was considered highly unlikely that he was unaware of the mistreatment happening under his watch. The case was investigated by the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, who determined that Inspector Nowlan had failed in his duty by permitting such abuse to take place. His inaction contributed to a miscarriage of justice, reflecting the broader issue of police brutality in colonial Bengal.²⁴

The Inspector-General of Police expressed disbelief that a European officer with a previously strong reputation could have condoned such actions. The case highlighted the extent of corruption and violent interrogation tactics within the colonial police system, where both European and Indian officers frequently resorted to coercion to extract confessions. Inspector Nowlan's failure to prevent or report the abuse reinforced concerns about the lack of accountability within the police force.²⁵

Conclusion

This research paper shows that police torture in 19th century colonial Bengal was a systematic, institutionalized practice embedded within the colonial administration. By thoroughly examining primary archival documents, court records, and contemporary narratives, and complementing these findings with critical insights from secondary literature,

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the study has revealed a pattern of brutal state-sanctioned violence that was designed to coerce confessions and suppress dissent among the colonized populace.

The evidence presented through detailed case studies including the horrid cases of Ramdurlabh Roy, Kartik Podder, and Munshi Sheikh portrays the diverse and inhumane methods employed by police officials. These ranged from severe physical beatings and deprivation of food to more grotesque forms of bodily mutilation, which not only inflicted irreversible physical injuries but also served as a means of psychological domination. Such acts of torture were systematically employed to intimidate suspects and deter resistance, thereby reinforcing the authority of the colonial state.

A critical finding of this research is the pervasive culture of impunity that characterized the colonial judicial and administrative systems. The reluctance of higher officials to initiate punitive actions against the subordinate officials who inflicted the physical abuse over the persons arrested on suspicion was often due to personal affiliations, class bias. This highlights the structural deficiencies within the framework of colonial governance. The judicial system's tendency to dismiss or to neutralize the severity of torture cases further exacerbated the plight of the victims, leaving them with little recourse for justice. This glaring inequality of justice not only perpetuated the cycle of abuse, but also reflected the inherent contradictions that prevailed within the colonial government which claimed to uphold law and order while systematically violating human rights.

Notes & References

¹ For a detailed discussion on this theme see Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1975.

² Chakrabarti, Ranjan, *Authority and Violence in Colonial Bengal: 1800–1860*, Calcutta: Bookland Private Limited, 1997, p.121.

³ Ibid

⁴ Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal*, p.90

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ In the context of 19th century colonial Bengal, a lathial was a person employed by the colonial administration or local police or by zamindars and even by leader of the dacoit gangs. Their main task was to wield a lathi and carrying out the orders of their masters.

⁷ Miajan Darogar Ekrarnama, Calcutta: Amal Gupta, 1957, pp.40–46.

⁸ In the context of police investigations, the term "Ekrar" generally refers to a confession or admission made by a suspect. This is a formal acknowledgment of guilt or involvement in a crime, often recorded in writing or as an oral statement during police interrogations.

⁹ Bose, Girish Chandra, Sekaler Darogar Kahini, Calcutta: Anup Kumar Mahinder, 1888, pp.109–112.

¹⁰ Ibid

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¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Judicial Department, Judicial Branch, November 1864, Proceedings no.66, West Bengal State Archives. (hereafter WBSA)

¹³ Section 330 was included in Indian Penal Code to penalize acts where an individual, often a police officer, caused hurt through violent means. This section was applicable for the situations where the injury inflicted on the persons went beyond what might be considered acceptable disciplinary or investigative action.

¹⁴ Historically, Meherpur was part of Nadia district during British rule, but after the partition of India in 1947, it became part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Today, it is a district in Khulna Division, Bangladesh, situated close to the Indian border near Krishnanagar and Karimpur in Nadia district.

¹⁵ The title "Karigar" is derived from the Persian and Bengali languages and is commonly used in South Asia. It primarily means "artisan," "craftsman," or "skilled worker."

¹⁶ Judicial Department, Judicial Branch, February 1865, Proceedings no.75, WBSA.

¹⁷ In colonial India, a Barkandaz was a type of armed guard, policeman, or watchman, often employed by the British administration, local zamindars, or private traders. The term originates from Persian where *Barqandāz* means "one who throws lightning"—symbolizing a warrior or armed enforcer.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Koolik river or Kulik River, which is a tributary of the Mahananda River in North Bengal.

²¹ Judicial Department, Judicial Branch, October 1866, Proceedings no.61, WBSA

²² Section 302 defined murder as an act carried out with the intention of causing death or with the knowledge that the act was likely to result in death. This provision was modelled on British legal principles and was a central part of the IPC, which was enacted in 1860 to create a uniform criminal law system in British India.

²³ Judicial Department, Judicial Branch, October 1866, Proceedings no.61, WBSA

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.