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Crime and Complicity in 19th century: The Underworld of mail robberies in the regions of Bihar, Chota Nagpur and West Bengal



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Abstract

This research paper explores the issue of mail robberies in 19th century colonial Bengal. During this period the Grand Trunk Road served as a link between Calcutta and distant regions. Yet, amidst bustling commerce, audacious robbers preyed upon vulnerable transportation routes, notably targeting Calcutta Banghy Mail. This paper examines the organized criminal activities targeting valuable parcels carried through the route, the internal collaboration between criminals and certain segments of society and the corruption within the police forces. Apart from that, it analyzes that the preventive measures taken by the British Government to combat these crimes which sheds light on the challenges faced and the strategies employed to protect public property and restore faith in justice.

Keywords: *Connivance, Corruption, Criminals, Mail, Robbery*

1. Introduction

The term 'robbery' can be defined as an act which involves the unlawfully taking or attempting to take property from another person through force or the threat of force. Robbery is a criminal offense. It is considered a serious violation of both civil and criminal law. In robbery the perpetrator has the intention of permanently depriving the victim of their property. This distinguishes robbery from other crimes like theft, where the intention may not involve permanent deprivation. Robbery can be classified into various types based on specific characteristics such as armed robbery where weapon is used to threaten the victims during the commission of crime, aggravated robbery which involves causing physical injury to the victim or may include multiple perpetrators, home invasion in which robbery occurs within a person's residence and bank robbery which involves the theft of money from a bank or financial institution. This research paper will focus on 'mail robbery' a distinct form of robbery which was prevalent in the 19th century in the regions of Bihar, Chota Nagpur and in parts of West Bengal.ⁱ This paper will also show who were the criminals, how they carried out their depredations, who were involved in this crime, how the police officers dealt with the criminals, what was their process of investigation and what steps the British government took to curb these criminal activities.

In the 19th century colonial Bengal, the Grand Trunk Road connected the heart of Calcutta to distant regions. It played an important role in the growth of trade, commerce and transportation. However, amidst the flurry of trade caravans and bustling activity, a shadow lurked- a shadow cast by audacious robbers who took the opportunity presented by lack of security and vulnerability of transportation routes. These daring criminals selected the Calcutta Banghyⁱⁱ Mail as one of their main targets of their depredations. Their activities instilled a sense of fear within the hearts of merchants, travelers and common people alike.

The incidents of mail robbery which occurred during this period were not isolated occurrences. They threw challenge that the British authorities faced in resisting criminal activities. The inability of the authorities to stem the tide of robberies suggest a deeper malaise within the police system which was

characterized by inefficiency, corruption and public trust. The guards attached to the Bullock trains or foot police whose task was to guard the road and protect the public property often neglected their duty and, in some cases, made an alliance with the perpetrators. The incidents of mail robbery also revealed a complex web of internal collaboration and corruption, where certain individuals within the system exploited their positions for personal gains. From guards aiding the robbers to pleaders receiving payments for the defense of accused criminals, the roots of corruption reached deep into the fabric of society.

In this situation there were still flickers of hope as the British government took steps and suggested some preventive measures to improve the condition. There were also instances where efficient police officers undertook investigations in mail robbery and got considerable success.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result of this, in some cases offenders got convicted and received punishments. All these efforts imply the recognition of the need to safeguard the public property and restore faith in the justice. However, for the limitation of source materials this research paper could not show whether the British government was ultimately successful in resisting the mail robberies and if not, how the British had dealt with the offenders.

2.The Nexus of Criminal Collaboration: A Study of Mail Robberies in Colonial India

From the available archival records, it is known that the mail robberies mainly took place in Bihar, Chota Nagpur region and in the regions of West Bengal like Midnapore and Nadia. These regions were significant because of their connectivity and accessibility along the Grand Trunk Road. The F.T. Road played a major role in trade and commerce and the robbers targeted these regions. The criminal gangs mainly comprised of up-country men.^{iv} Apart from that some Bengali people^v were also involved in the criminal activities. Generally, they plundered the valuable items like money cheques, packages containing guns, gold bricks etc. One interesting feature of their looting is that after opening the mail boxes the items which they found less valuable like pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, books, disposed them altogether.^{vi}

The frequent incidents of highway robberies targeting mail vans carrying valuable parcels suggests the presence of organized group of criminals. In this context, two big gangs of Johari Sirdar and Madhub Sing can be mentioned which indicates the was existence of organized criminal networks in the society.^{vii} Collaboration between these gangs in criminal activities suggests the existence of coordination and co-operation among the criminals.^{viii} Sometimes these gangs were leagued together to carry out the criminal activities of plundering mail vans.^{ix} This suggests that a strong sense of unity prevailed among them. However, instances can be found where one member of a gang when apprehended by the police confessed his crime and helped the police to catch the leaders and other members of his gang. One case can be mentioned where it is seen that one Mootie when he got arrested by the police confessed his crime and in order to evade punishment he turned "Queen's Evidence" and gave up the names of his accomplices.^x Prang Singh, one of the leaders of the gang were apprehended with the help of his confession. He had also several brothers serving as "Coachmen" in the Inland Transit Company and other Horse Daks, and it is surmised that the plundered property was rapidly conveyed through them.^{xi} One Madhub Chowbey had committed the plunder near Gopeegunge with his former associates. Prang Singh committed the plunder with the help of his relatives.^{xii} Thus it can be asserted that harmony prevailed among the dacoits of the neighbouring villages.

One significant aspect of the instances of mail robberies was that the police found no traces of stolen packages can be found even after the long time of the commitment of crime. This is a glaring indication that the robbers got support from the neighboring villagers.^{xiii} This support facilitated the swift transportation of the stolen goods to a remote location or their concealment until an opportunity arose to inspect and rifle through the contents of the looted items. Therefore, it can be argued that there was a potential collusion between certain segments of society and criminal elements which hindered the efforts to curb thefts and protect cargo.

3.Unveiling Collusion: Guards, Villagers, and Legal Officials in Mail Robberies.

There are some notable works on the police system in 19th century colonial Bengal. Among these the works of Basudev Chattopadhyay and Ranjan Chakrabarti can be mentioned. Basudev Chattopadhyay has argued that corruption was prevalent within the police system in Bengal during this period (Chattopadhyay, 2001). Ranjan Chakrabarti has shown that how police officers took side with the rich people like influential zamindars and screened them from the hands of justice if they were involved in criminal activities like harbouring dacoits, making collusion with them and even directly or indirectly participating in the operations of dacoity. (Chakrabarti, 1997). They have shown that the police officers made collusion with the ring leaders of the criminal gangs and took bribes from them. In turn, they protected them, concealed their crimes and often put the blame of the crime on the shoulders of the innocent people. Even there were instances that they harbored dacoits and took part in dacoity.^{xiv} David Arnold's examines how the colonial state sought to control crime while reinforcing British authority (Arnold, 1986).^{xv} Similarly, Anand A. Yang emphasizes that many criminal networks functioned within a broader social and economic framework and they maintained connections with local elites and corrupt officials (Yang, 1985).^{xvi} In the second half of 19th century, even after the reorganization of the police and promulgation of Code of Criminal Procedure, the situation remained more or less the same. This assertion can be proved by the instances of the dealing of the police with the criminals connected with mail robbery. The incidents of mail robberies show the other aspects of police system of this period like corruption, neglect of duty, forming collusion with the criminals. But not all police officers were the same. Some instances of success like apprehending offenders and sending the ringleaders to trial resulting in their imprisonment or transportation were also there.^{xvii} The following section will show the police arrangements in some regions, how the police investigated the cases of mail robbery and how they performed their duty.

The Officiating Commissioner of Patna had stated that it was very discreditable to the Police arrangements of the district that a robbery of this kind should have taken place within a few miles of a great city.^{xviii} A particular case can be mentioned here in this respect. S. Sullen, the Superintendent of Government Wagon Train observed that when the Vans were being plundered between the two police posts, a cry was raised by the coachmen and Bargees, but no one came to their rescue. After the packages were carried off the Coachmen gave immediate intimation to the Police Jemadar of the Shahabad at Nowbutpore in Bihar who instead of hurrying at once to the spot, and tracing the robbers by following their footprints, commenced to take depositions, and did not stir until an European traveler enroute towards Calcutta came down from Benares and hearing of the plunder asked for some policemen to accompany him.^{xix} No attempt was made to recover the property by the Jemadar that night. The robbers got enough time to open the parcels, scrutinize their contents, took those were worth their taking and scattered the rest and damaged and destroyed as many parcels as lay in their power.^{xx}

The Commissioner of Patna further mentioned that immediate steps were not taken to proceed after the robbers otherwise, some of the stolen items like the gunny bags might have been recovered.^{xxi} In this respect he referred to the case of Burhee in which the policemen as an excuse said they did not follow the robbers by penetrating into the jungles, as they were afraid of wild beasts. In this instance, there are no jungles about the spot, and with the aid of the shoes, and rope, the Police ought to have little difficulty in apprehending the culprits.^{xxii} The guards attached to the Bullock Trains also neglected their duty. It is evident in a case where a robbery took place in Burhee and Govindpore primarily due to the neglect of the duty by the guards.^{xxiii} It was mentioned that robbery was not carried out by the professional robbers but occurred due to neglect by the guards.^{xxiv} The was also negligence on the part of the jemadars in their duty. For example, the Jemadar of a place called Topechancee was criticized for delaying his response to the reported theft. The Deputy Magistrate held him accountable for not proceeding immediately to the spot where the theft occurred.^{xxv}

The frequent occurrences of robberies on the Grand Trunk Road implies that those happened with the connivance of the police. The lack of timely response and proper actions by the police during the

incidents such as taking depositions instead of pursuing robbers, raises suspicions about their involvement or negligence in preventing and addressing these crimes.^{xxvi} The statement in which he mentioned that the foot police, or Burkundazes, on the Grand Trunk Road were the most slothful implies that the foot police force lacked in efficiency and effectiveness.^{xxvii} This inefficiency contributed to the repeated incidents of robbery on the road. The assertion that the police are to blame for the repeated robberies on the Grand Trunk Road further reinforces the argument that law enforcement agencies, either through connivance or negligence, failed in the duty to prevent such crimes. This also implies a potential corruption within the police force which raised concerns about the overall state of law enforcement in the society.

C.K. Dove has stated that “The neglect of the duty by the police probably prevented the recovery of the packages or the apprehension of the robbers”.^{xxviii} This statement indicates the neglect of duty by the police either in apprehending offenders or to recover the stolen property had a profound negative impact on the minds of the public in entrusting their property to the postal department for conveyance. The failure to recover stolen property and apprehend the robbers contributes to a perception that the justice system was not adequately protecting the interests of the public. The delay in the response of the police to the criminal activities eroded public trust in the ability of authorities to maintain law and order. In this context, S. Sullen, the Superintendent of Government Wagon Train in his letter to the Deputy Magistrate to Sasaram has stated that “...in conclusion I regret to add that, by the constant occurrence of highway robberies and loss of valuable property, the confidence of the public, to entrust their property to Police Department for conveyance, has been greatly shaken.”^{xxix}

A case occurred near Powapore, it was suggested that the robbery might have been committed by the Bullock train guards and carters themselves. This suggests the connivance of guards and carters in mail robbery.^{xxx} Some were even sentenced to imprisonment. This indicates a lack of effective security measures to protect public property during transportation.

In another case, the carts were not attacked but the boxes were stolen by villagers or Garrewans with the connivance of guards suggests the fact that those whose task is to protect the public property, were helping the thieves in their tasks instead of preventing them. The Guards were blamed for falling asleep which indicates lapse in their duty which allowed the theft to take place.^{xxxi} This raises questions about their integrity and their involvement in the crime. The involvement of guards, villagers, and other individuals in thefts suggests a degree of internal collaboration and corruption within the system. The connivance of guards and potential involvement of local communities indicate a breakdown of trust and integrity. The involvement of coachmen and guards in the robberies suggests potential corruption or exploitation within the system. This reflects an image of societal inequality, where certain individuals may exploit their positions for personal gain at the expense of others. In this context a case can be mentioned in which there was involvement of a pleader, Bhoobun Banerjee, in receiving payments for the defence of the accused, coupled with his admission under oath, points to corruption within the legal system. The ability of Johari Sirdar to pay money to a Vakeel for the release of prisoners suggests a level of influence and corruption within the justice system.^{xxxii} The special case of Haradhun Puramanick highlights the audacity and mighty influence of Johari and his gang, as well as the lamentable neglect of duty and defective inquiry which was conducted by the police. The police completed their inquiry without questioning a key individual, Shaik Naloo, who had fled from his house due to fear of Johari, indicating a failure of law enforcement.^{xxxiii}

4. Enhancing Security Measures: Recommendations to Combat Mail Robbery

The recommendation to enter into arrangements with zamindars to provide armed patrols suggests a need for collaboration with the local authorities to enhance security. The necessity of employing good and skillful detectives was emphasized.^{xxxiv} This indicates a recognition of the importance of investigative expertise to

address the complex issue of theft along the Grand Trunk Road. Suggestions were given to employ armed guards in each van to shoot down attackers to deter future crimes.

Several steps were suggested to combat the frequent occurrence of mail robbery. This includes offering rewards and promotions to individuals who provide information which would ultimately lead to the arrest of robbers or who would assist in the recovery of stolen property.^{xxxv} Measures such as implementing mounted patrols along the roads prone to robberies and providing armed escorts for Banghy dispatches^{xxxvi} demonstrate a reactive approach aimed at enhancing security and deterrence. However, these strategies also imply acknowledgment of the vulnerability of the current transportation system to criminal activities. The directive to the postal authorities to send armed bearers with Banghy dispatches and holding them accountable for their actions^{xxxvii} signifies an emphasis on accountability and proactive measures to prevent collusion with robbers. Mr. Reily suggested the employment of two policemen at rupees 40 per month each. One at the General Post office in the Banghy Department and the other in the Travelling Post Office, to learn the routine of these two departments.^{xxxviii} He proposed to train these men initially in the Post Office works and to send weekly reports of all they see and observe. In time these men would make useful detectives connected with the Post Office.^{xxxix}

5. Conclusion

This research paper illuminates a complex interplay between criminals, structure of society and law enforcement. The prevalence of organized criminal networks highlights the existence of deeply rooted collaboration and coordination among perpetrators. These criminals operated with impunity, exploited vulnerable transportation systems and received support from various segments of society, including Bullock Train Guards, villagers and even legal professionals. Eric Hobsbawm in his book 'Bandits' has introduced a concept of social bandits. (Hobsbawm, 1981). According to him they are outlaws who, despite engaging in illegal activities, are often supported by the local population because they are seen as resisting an oppressive system.^{xl} In this research paper an instance of the collaboration between villagers and criminals in hiding stolen goods occurred but there is no concrete evidence to show that the robbers had societal acceptance. On the contrary, unlike classic social bandits like Robin Hood, the mail robbers in this study do not appear to redistribute wealth or fight for justice. They seem more to be driven by profit rather than serving the poor and oppressed. Apart from that the presence of corruption among police and legal officials does not necessarily mean the criminals are acceptable. It might reflect loopholes in the system of law enforcement.

This research also sheds light on various issues within the police force, characterized by inefficiency, corruption, and neglect of duty. Despite instances of success in apprehending offenders, the overall response of law enforcement to mail robberies was marred by incompetence. The failure to prevent these crimes eroded public trust in the justice system. However, there were glimmers of hope as the British government recognized the gravity of the situation and proposed preventive measures. Collaborating with local authorities, employing skilled detectives, and implementing armed escorts were among the strategies proposed to enhance security and deter future crimes. These initiatives indicated a proactive approach of the government aimed at restoring public confidence and safeguarding public property.

Overall, this paper offers valuable insights into the complexities of crime, governance, and dynamic of society by analyzing the events of mail robbery. It highlights the enduring struggle between law and lawlessness, the vulnerabilities of transportation systems, and the imperative for responsive governance. As we reflect on this historical context, it prompts us to consider the lessons learned and the relevance of these insights in addressing contemporary challenges in crime prevention and justice administration.

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Endnotes:

ⁱ In 19th century the mail robberies mainly took place in the regions like Powapore, Govindpore, Burhee, Manbhoom in Chota Nagpore, in Shahabad, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, Patna in Bihar, and in Nadia and Midnapore in West Bengal.

ⁱⁱ The word 'Banghy' means a shoulder yoke for carrying loads. In 19th century bullocks were used to carry mail vans.

ⁱⁱⁱ One such instance was the success of Nabakrishna Ghose, who was employed as an assistant inspector to help the two other inspectors who were investigating a case of daring robbery which occurred at 'Talepookor' in Midnapore. With his assistance, the whole gang of robbers were apprehended and sent for trial, Judicial, Judicial, October 1868, A Proceedings no. 86-88, West Bengal State Archives. (hereafter WBSA)

^{iv} The names of robbers like Madhub Chowbey, Pran Singh, Johari Sirdar suggest this.

^v The names of the robbers like Haradhun Pramanick, Soroop suggest this.

^{vi} Judicial, Judicial, September 1862, A Proceedings no. 137, WBSA

^{vii} Judicial, Judicial, October 1868, A Proceedings no. 86, WBSA

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Ibid

^x Letter of S. Sullen, Superintendent, Mail and Government Waggon Train, Bengal Division, to H.M. Court, ESQ., Inspector-General of Police, North-Western Provinces, Allahabad, enclosed in the letter of Dr. G. Paton, Director-General of the Post Offices of India, Judicial, Judicial, February 1863, A Proceedings no. 212, WBSA

^{xi} Ibid

^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} Judicial, Judicial, February 1862, Proceedings no. 200

^{xiv} For a detailed discussion on this topic see Ranjan Chakrabarti, *Authority and Violence in Colonial Bengal: 1800-1860*, (Kolkata: Bookland Private Limited, 2001) and Basudev Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal, 1770-1860*, (Kolkata, K.P. Bagchi and Company, 2001)

^{xv} For more information on this topic see David Arnold, *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras, 1859–1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986)

^{xvi} John R. McLane, “Bengali Bandits, Police and Landlords after the Permanent Settlement” in *Crime and Criminality in British India*, ed. Anand A. Yang (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985)

^{xvii} The names of the detective officer J. H. Reily and Assistant Inspector Nabokrishno Ghose can be mentioned.

^{xviii} Judicial, Judicial, February 1862, A Proceedings no.72, WBSA.

^{xix} Judicial, Judicial, February 1862, A Proceedings no. 201, WBSA

^{xx} Ibid

^{xxi} Ibid

^{xxii} Ibid

^{xxiii} Judicial, Judicial, September 1862, Proceedings no.137, WBSA.

^{xxiv} Ibid

^{xxv} Ibid

^{xxvi} Judicial, Judicial, February 1862, A Proceedings no. 200, WBSA

^{xxvii} Ibid

^{xxviii} Judicial, Judicial, February 1862, A Proceedings no. 201, WBSA

^{xxix} Ibid

^{xxx} Ibid

^{xxxi} Judicial, Judicial, September 1862, No. 138, WBSA

^{xxxii} Judicial, Judicial, October 1868, No. 86, WBSA

^{xxxiii} Ibid

^{xxxiv} Judicial, Judicial, September 1862, No. 138, WBSA

^{xxxv} General, General, 28th November 1859, No. 15, WBSA

^{xxxvi} Ibid

^{xxxvii} Ibid

^{xxxviii} Judicial, Judicial, August 1866, No.86, WBSA

^{xxxix} Ibid

^{xl} Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).