A 'Peace' of Paper and a Necessary Clown: Colonial Policing, Bengali Intelligentsia and the Birth of Limited Political Space in Bengal

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Abstract: *'Pacification' of a colonized territory is usually seen through the perspective of coercion and police as the tool of that process but this article argues that even the issue of security, a matter of coercive social control can be a space of conciliatory state-society relationship. The 18th and 19th century Bengali natives similarly developed a space of state-society conversation centering on the issue of security. This article argues that the Bengali educated elites addressed the issue of security through petition, newspaper articles and satirical literature but as the space of political expression was limited by colonial nature, the target of these political attacks were native policemen who were socially and culturally backward compared to the educated natives. As these native policemen were racially and socially stereotyped as inefficient in both official and native narratives, they remained as voiceless mimics.*

Keywords: Colonized, Relationship, Newspaper, Stereotyped

The state-making process goes hand in hand with two broad objectives: security and continuation of productivity. With the gradual development of state control, security not only remains a reality but often became rhetoric of political modernity; a bargaining point for state and society where the state's ability to provide security manifests the consent of the governed. Here state-control is synonymous with 'social control' because since the 18th century the gradual growth in State's unanimous control over the whole discourse of peace and security became self-evident. The conventional view proclaims the primacy of 'repression' as the tool for social control; focusing on hardware knowledge transfer from military to police, which means that the police adopted militaristic repressive efficiency to subjugate, control and maintain the subject population's docility. By hardware knowledge, it means technical, tactical and organizational knowledge invented in the military and adopted by the policing authorities. But new paradigm challenged this 'repression'-centric analysis of social control or 'the big-guns narrative' with a more nuanced view where coercive and consensual apparatuses were selectively allocated. This process is termed 'pacification'.[1] This process of asserting social control called pacification is mostly previewed from a sociological perspective for analyzing modern policing in a liberal democratic political space but this article argues that the same model could be used to analyze a colonial political space; it can provide a better understanding of colonial social control. As we have started with the term 'consent of the governed', a typically unfamiliar form of political conversation because how it was formalized in the colonial state system was by nature alien and unprecedented. Sometimes that unprecedented growth of state-society communication uses spaces of authority like police, judiciary, etc as the proto-democratic battleground. In the case of colonial Bengal, police not only was a tool of repression but somehow it's 'repression' acted as an issue-based catalyst to evoke societal debate regarding politics. But as for being within a colonial status that proto-democratic political space was limited on its own. As the British expansion had decided the destiny of Bengal and no significant section of the population were 'willing or able to challenge the British authority', 19th century Bengali or we can say Calcutta elite had 'less important areas of powers'.[2] Petitioning and later on

criticizing policies of the higher authority were one of those few areas of power in the political space, native elites competed for. Apart from this newly acquired space, Bengali society already had tools of social criticism which got magnified with the coming of print culture. But again this remained limited in terms of the educated population who could afford it. Despite these limitations, pre-colonial elements intermixed in the new political space. Native police forces became one of the main targets of criticism in this and indirectly encouraged the expression of dissent.

The colonial policing system as a tool of social control acted not only in a repressive way but also it had opened new avenues for state-society bargains concerning security. As Calcutta was the keystone of the 'British Bridgehead' a security-centric conversation first brewed in here. In the nascent phase security of the city was under the 'black zamindars' like Nandaram, Govindram Mittra among whom the latter was of a despotic short. The watch and ward unit with *pions* turned pikes were at large. Despite that, the growth of banditry compelled the Governor-General in Council to drastically increase the numbers of pikes at first and then to reform the whole system on 7th December 1792.[3] Between 1698's birth of the colonial Calcutta and 1792-93's new system of social security, the Company had developed a nuanced communication with the subject population regarding security. First of all the men like Govindaram Mittra served the Company in their day to day revenue duties and projected as well as used the power in the very way the native population had expected. These men would be the predecessors of the upcoming little tyrants called 'Darogas'. On the other hand modalities and elements of political modernity are infused inadvertently within the native society due to the political acculturation. For this, the new elite class who gradually adapted to this hybrid parlance concerning security adopted the state-society communication through petitions. Both these developments continued throughout the 18th century. In the 19th century, the whole process developed into something remarkable, where the subject started to express its dissent through the new form of communication with the state. These dissents were mostly projected against the lower ends of colonial infrastructure, like the police.

Collective petition as a form of political expression had been being developed since the birth of colonial Calcutta. In the 1790's urban notaries like Jaganmohan Mukharjee, Netaichand Sarma, Ramgopal Bose, etc petitioned the Governor-General regarding the growing robberies in Calcutta. In their petition, they complained that despite 'different modes of policy' being adopted, nothing encouraging happened to the day to day security of the town. They not only complained in the petition that the law and order were declining but also reminded the government about the *Choukydary Tax*, which was collected based on security.[4] They further stated that the earlier position of *Hoodadars*, a position of local notaries entrusted with the job of selection and appointment of peacekeeping personals in the police force, should be reinstated because before the replacement of these local notaries by the sole authority of police superintendent, 'when power was committed in the hands of *Hoodadars*, there was no mischief attended'.[5] This incident shows that the city-dwelling natives were in a constant conversation with the colonial powers and often expressed their dissents regarding policies. Now, this was not a stray incident but soon became a norm of political parlance. Since the Maratha raids, natives started to perceive the Company establishment at Calcutta as an epitome of security. Even before that during the Rebellion of Sobha Singh, Ramkrishna, the Raja of Nuddea had sent eight thousand rupees by the hand of some agent to the Calcutta establishment 'thinking it more secure in his hand'.[6] Fort William which was started as a Company's security establishment soon turned out to be a zone of nascent subject-state relation. Even the

Company was pursuing such kind of relationship. In 1699 the Court of Directors instructed the Calcutta that 'the protected should pay an acknowledgment to their defenders' because security is the true foundation 'on which all pretenses for raising customs subsidies and other taxes are originally built'.[7] If this kind of policy-based conversation started to form a space of subject-state relationship then it is obvious that the subject would prefer the reality of security compared to the abstraction of freedom. From this point, we enter into a broader debate concerning sovereignty, colonialism, and the 'consent of the governed'. The consent of the governed within a colonial rule never collectively aspires for any abstraction called freedom or self-government; rather their demands from the ruler mostly take a very material shape. In that sense at least theoretically a colonial rule by consent is not necessarily 'undemocratic' in nature.[8] Despite the fear of anachronistic assumptions, it persuades us to compare it with modern instances. In 1958, all the African countries under the French protectorate accepted the continuation of French guardianship in case of foreign affairs.[9] So the colonized can democratically choose to remain colonized in some sense. In the case of early colonial Bengal, the native elites were certain that the colonial rule was preferable to the earlier pre-colonial state system and this sense would persist throughout the 19th century. The new western-educated *Bhadraloks* of the 19th century, whose societal hegemony 'was yet not challenged' would dominate in this limited state-society conversation.[10]

From here we can draw a further inference that even within a colonial system a colonized body can operate through a mode of political parlance where the ruled can get some opportunity to express his consent or dissent. In that sense, if we see petitions as the prototype of democratic expression of 'consent of the governed' then it could be said that the idea of material wellbeing and the existence of a non-violent medium of conveying subject's consent or dissent concerning such material interests convinced the ruled about the ruler's intention of listening. For example, 1793's Police Tax was met with protest and *hartals*, an indigenous form of non-violent show of dissent in the Bengal Presidency. After a series of *hartals*, the Company accepted it as a failure and withdrew the tax on 31st August 1797. Similar to this case we can see in Banaras people protested against the Banaras House Tax (1810-11) in the same manner.[11] Another such incident could be found at Bareilly in 1816, where the inhabitants tried *hartals* by shutting down shops and assembling before the office of Magistrate for petitioning.[12] Though scholars like Basudeb Chattopadhyay opined that the ineffectiveness of usual methods of coercion like the confinement of defaulters and incarceration of property against protesters' solidarity was the main cause of tax withdrawal, it seems that even the colonial state usually took 'non-violent' social protests not so much as a threat to its sovereign position but as a way of conversation with the subject. Whenever the Company found social protest tending to transform into a violent resistance with a potential of threatening the state, their treatment to such matters were less lenient than others. For instance, when the protest in Bareilly against the Police Tax possessed further threat by the Rohilla Revolt, the authority did not withdraw the taxation.[13] So the space of political expression was limited but when perceived from retrospective comparison, native elites found it satisfactory. Just like the idea of colonial security, the limited space of political expression was in many ways unprecedented.

From the middle of the 19th century, we are seeing a continuous growth of criticism regarding police brutality, an issue that concerns itself with both the idea of colonial security and expression of dissent. The growing awareness regarding the state's duty and importance of citizen's consent and dissent sprouted such criticisms, although these citizens were unequivocally arriving from the

educated *Bhadralok* class only. Vernacular newspapers are full of such evidence. In most cases, those who had written these editorial letters kept their anonymity to save them from any kind of potential threatening from the vindictive police officials. Although newspapers like the *Som Prakash* started to mention these matters in the 1820s, the frequency of such socio-political criticism regarding lower strata of the colonial administration increased later. In 1865 the *Som Prakash* published an editorial letter by some Kailash Chandra Roy of Deruda, which described the growing police brutality and extortion in the Hijli area. As the government started to monopolize salt and opium, police forces of these areas started to use the pretext of smuggling to raid and extort masses. Kailash Roy's letter not only narrates these malpractices but also urged the government to take necessary steps, echoing the earlier languages of the petition.[14] In 1843, another editorial letter mentioned that how Darogas used to extort money from the victims of crime or ill-fate.[15] In another instance, the *Bharatvritya* newspaper describes an incident where the Head Constable of the police of Howrah named Kailash Chandra Mondal accused Iswarchandra Napit and his family of the murder of Mohini Dasi, daughter of Iswarchandra Napit. As a result, those victims were on the verge of being punished based on false shreds of evidence until murdered Mohini Dasi dramatically appeared before the District Superintendent.[16] Apart from such dramatic cases of false evidence or witness, generally, various newspapers often mentioned the general administrative malpractices. If we return to the early petitioning activities as expressions of consent and dissent in a limited political space, we could be able to see continuity in the mode of parlances. The languages of mass petitions somehow molded into editorial letters to such newspapers. Another remarkable thing is that the earlier petitioning activities were only confined within the city-space like Calcutta, but just like the spread of British expansion bridge-heading Calcutta, the consciousness regarding a limited political space started to spread like an oil-spot from urban to *mufassil*. By the middle of the 19th century, it was the *mufassil* newspapers who kept on fiery criticism of native police.

Beyond the native narrative, the British officials first churned up the idea of an inefficient native policeman. From the middle of the 19th century with the coming of new police reform, various Bengali natives started to pour into the colonial policy establishment. In the lower section of the police system due to the absence of educated Bengalis, those posts were filled with non-Bengali, Muslim, or lower caste Bengali recruits. There were a few who were educated but due to their caste consciousness often criticized their profession.

Community Composition of Police *Darogahs*

District	Total No. of *Darogahs*	Titled Muslims	Untitled Muslims	Hindus
Birbhum	8	5	1	2
Burdwan	38	6	22	10
Rajshahi	23	3	6	14
Sylhet	13	-	2	11
24 Parganas	10	2	2	6
Mymensingh	12	1	6	5
Dacca	30	28	2	-
Murshidabad	28	17	3	6
Midnapore	21	3	7	11

Alipore	17	1	2	14
Total	200	66	53	79

(Source: Basudeb Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal 1770-1860*, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Calcutta, 2000, p. 56)

For instance in the whole presidency according to 1869's Annual Report, among the overall police force, 13239 were non-Bengali North Indians who were the majority.[17] Now non-Bengali majority along with lower caste and Muslim dominance in police posts made Bengali elites annoyed about these men. The basic narrative regarding such caste and community composition was that the work of the police was foul and without any security, due to which most of the upper caste educated Bengalis were not encouraged with these jobs. But on the other hand, the newspapers which were mostly composed of upper caste, educated people, kept on criticizing the malpractices. With more criticism, the caste angle started to get more and more evoked in those writings. Some newspaper started to say that as the police forces were mostly composed of uneducated Muslims if any gentleman somehow entered into the service soon turned into legal goons like the majority.[18] Even Girishchandra Bosu, a police inspector in his autobiographic writing stated that the condition of police in Bengal was so malign that nobody from a gentle lineage should join this job.

Regional Composition of Bengal Police:

Regional Identity	Numbers under Police Service
Hindustani	13239
Punjabis	473
Afghans	6
Khonds	3
Western Himalayan	232
Eastern Himalayan	552
Bengalis	12044
Marathas	10
Telingas	119
Ooriyahs	1219
Kookies and Assamese	1502
Gurkhas	271
Manipuri	119
Europeans and Eurasians	26
Tamils	10
Kols	170
Hill Tribes	627
Cacharies	137
Meekers	3
Kohitas	30

(Source: Annual Report on the Administration of the Bengal Presidency 1868-69, Bengal Secretariat Office, Calcutta, 1869, p.26)

This statistics was very much analogous to the dominant colonial ideology that the Bengalis were weaker than the non-Bengalis. Lt. Colonel H. Bruce echoed a similar idea with further generalization. He said that the efficiency of a policing authority very much depends on the Police force 'when it consists chiefly of foreigners'.[19] And by foreigners, he meant about the well-built North Indians. Although 'the arrogant domineering tendency of Sikhs or Hindoostanees… over a naturally weak and timid people, must lead to troubles', Bruce stuck to the ideal of north Indian dominance in Bengal police.[20] The native perception about the Bengali policemen was also stereotypical which despite having no possible direct relation to the 'weak Bengali' narrative of the British, successfully made imagery of inefficient police. At first witty newspaper editorials and later literary representations often personified police as atrocious humbug or of laughing stock. As previously shown, most of the police personals were coming from a lowly origin, Bengali educated elite, who had societal hegemony, felt free to mock these men. Most of the lowly police officials were uneducated so failed to counter those mockeries through narratives. Basudeb Chattopadhyay mentioned that in Bengali literature no figure 'been subjected to so much ridicule as the *darogah*'.[21] Now can we say satire could have engaged the political space to such an extent that it encouraged the formation of a nascent form of democratic expression? First of all humor or satire couldn't operate if it does not function in the shared space of cultural symbols, ideas and norms.[22] In that sense, the audience and the satirist were very much on the same boat while making fun of native policemen, who became the familiar clown of the regular satire. Now how far this expression of collective ridicule affects? If we return to the contemporary forms of 'democratainment' or 'politicatainment', political theorists and sociologists accept the positive effect of humor to change and to some extent improve the system.[23] Political satire today reached some optimum level if we keep in an account of modern mediums like talk show hosts like John Oliver, but in the 19th century, Bengal's literary arena was not strong enough to punch up the higher authorities. Just like the limited space of expressing consent or dissent, social satires used to target low hanging fruits like the native police. Mild satirical popular verses which continued even, later on, mentions one of the earliest native peacekeepers, Gobindaram Mittra, about whom we have mentioned earlier. The verse mentioned about who's who in 18th century Calcutta;

"Banamali Sarkarer Bari,
Gobindaram Miterer Chari,
Amirchander Dari,
Huzurimaler Kari"[24]

In between 1720 and 1756, Gobindaram and his stick-wielding *pikes* unleashed terror among people. His harsh methods of exacting money not only helped to 'fill the coffers of the East India Company' but also made him a wealthy notary of Calcutta; rich enough to erect a temple higher than the Ochterlony monument.[25] This verse indicates popular consciousness regarding Gobindaram's atrocious ways to serve his benefits was very much present. With the growth of the press, such colloquial forms of criticisms found more permanent and substantial methods of circulation of expression. In this case, Harinath Majumdar's *Grambarta Prakashika* shows interesting evidence of satire regarding the native police;

"Kiskinder Poshak Pora
Mukhe Shala Bol
Ghush Paile Naik Chalan,
Mete Sakal Gol /

Babu Sadai Chata /"[26]

In this little satirical verse, the composer compared the police with monkeys, one of many sardonic analogies found in colloquial forms and made its way to the printed medium. Among various newspapers, it was the *Grambarta Prakashika* that continued harsh and witty criticism of native policemen. This trend of collective ridicule was more or less persistent in all *muffassil* newspapers.[27] Later we will see it transfer into literature and performative spaces. During the period of Darpan literature, satirical representations increased. In 1872, Harigopal Mukhopadhyay wrote 'Daroga Moshai Prahasan' which perfectly put forward the inefficiency stereotype. Kedarnath Dutta's *Sachitra Gulzarnagar* (1870), Chandra Sekhar Banerjee's *Jatadharir Rojnamcha* (1883) continued the tendency till the end of the century.

But why this criticism of inefficiency and malpractices tend to stick to the native officials rather than tainting the Company *bahadur*? In the early nineteenth century, Dukhina Ranjan Mukharjee presented a paper on the situation of the Company's police establishment in the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge. Mukharjee stated that though it would be unjust to deny that the natives under East India Company's government were comparatively safer than their predecessors, at the same time it would be an untruth to say that 'the present system of police was one in which the natives could repose the least confidence'.[28] In response to that speech Captain Richardson, the Principal of Hindu College said that the security enjoyed by the natives was unprecedented and the abuses committed by *darogahs* 'was rather the fault of the people themselves than of government'.[29] Though Cap. Richardson was criticized in the *Bengal Huekaru,* the opinion of Richardson could be found persistent in all newspapers. Even the *Grambarta Prakashika*, known for its fiery sarcasm against native police, always accepted the fact that the British Government was not the problem and it was them who could reform these malpractices. So the narratives in the newspaper articles found the language of prayer towards the higher British authorities while the aim of their sardonic criticism was native police. Even in the literary representations, the colonial state was always praised; just like in 'Jail Darpan' drama one character mentioned that the inhuman atrocities performed by the native jail officials were by nature 'un-British'.[30] Even in Harigopal Mukhopadhyay's 'Daroga Moshai Prahasan' the culprit Kamalakanta Daroga was jailed at last and by that punishment, the author tried to show the fairness of the colonial government. This in general loyalty towards the colonial administration would continue till the end of the century, proving that the native educated elites remained satisfied with the limited space of political expression and as their hegemony remained unchallenged they continued to dictate the narrative of the ruled in the state-society conversation. In this whole proto-democratic stage, native police played the role of a necessary clown, a mime without a voice; taunting whom the native elites exercised their limited power of political expression.

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