



The White Criminals of a Native Metropolis: A Historical Quest of the European Criminality in Colonial Calcutta

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ABSTRACT

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when colonial power firmly established itself in Calcutta, several European disbanded soldiers and vagrant sailors committed robberies and thefts. At this period, Calcutta was the capital of British India and a thriving metropolis in terms of commerce and finances. In the past, a large number of people from various European nations would go to this city in hopes of being rich. Many of them joined Calcutta's criminal underworld because they were unable to make a good living. European robbers, jobless vagrants, and thieves were on one side of this crime scene in Calcutta, while native Bengali criminals were on the other. In Calcutta, which is separated into Black Town and White Town, these criminal gangs congregate in several locations. Bengali native bandits would occasionally accompany European bandits who were committing robberies in various parts of Calcutta. Theft and embezzlement were among the crimes in which many Europeans participated. It was frequently difficult for the colonial government to put an end to these crimes. Therefore, the social history of colonial Calcutta in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries was greatly influenced by the actions of

Introduction – Calcutta (now Kolkata¹), an expansive colonial metropolis, has drawn fortune-seeking migrants from all over the world as well as from various regions of the Indian subcontinent, since its founding. Many immigrants from Europe, America, Arab states, Africa, and the adjacent countries of China and Burma (now Myanmar) made Calcutta the focal point of their fortune-seeking during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Calcutta's economic and financial development was aided by a large number of fortune-seekers; some of these migrants enhanced the city's intellectual life, while others gained notoriety for their illegal actions. Thus, the city of Calcutta became a cosmopolitan city in every way from the start of the eighteenth century. Because European criminals were notorious for committing a wide range of crimes, Calcutta became a cosmopolitan metropolis. A string of crimes carried out by different international criminals seeking refuge in Calcutta marked the beginning of this criminal cosmopolitan culture. Theft and robberies were a common occurrence in Calcutta as the city's population and economic success grew. Multilingual, international, multifaceted criminals from around the world participated in these crimes, just as individuals from many regions of the nation did. Bengalis, Biharis, Punjabis, English, Portuguese, and other Europeans have participated in these robberies of colonial Calcutta from the seventeenth century. They continued to support one another in all of these atrocities. From bars in Lalbazar to the brothels of Khidirpur Dock, the extent of these transnational criminal operations included opium circles, brothels, Chinatown, Bengali and Hindustani slums of the city's Black Town, and *Saheb Para* or White Town across Chitpur. European sailors and soldiers were fed strong liquor *arrack* at the pubs of the Lalbazar neighbourhood, while Khidirpur's inexpensive brothels provided them with female bodies from all over the world. These women, who travelled to Calcutta to make their fortunes, were from all over the world, but they were usually only able to do so as barmaids or dock prostitutes. So, the colonial metropolis of Calcutta had become a hotbed of crime and vice.

Nature of the White Criminals in Colonial Calcutta – In his autobiographical memoir, Girish Chandra Basu, the newly appointed sub-inspector (*daroga*) of Nabadwip Police Station, wrote that the

¹Calcutta was officially renamed Kolkata on January 1, 2001, to match its Bengali pronunciation.



European or English criminals were not illiterate like the native or Bengali anti-socials. That's why the English criminals were more cunning and daring than their Bengali counterparts. According to Girish Chandra Basu, there was a misconception among the Bengali Intelligentsia that there were no crimes, robberies and thefts in contemporary England. Most of the time, some meritorious English-educated Bengali Students from elite and upper-middle class families went to England for their higher studies. There, they were surrounded by European professors and scholars. So, from the surrounding atmosphere, they had a misconception that every Englishman was sophisticated, erudite and virtuous like the English professors and scholars. But they had no idea that in every society, the existence of criminals and criminality was very usual. Even contemporary England was also full of cunning thieves, daring robbers and notorious criminals. As a result, some criminal elements of contemporary British society took refuge in India to avoid their possible detention and to start up a new blemish-free second life in the native colony. But even after reaching India, most of the time, their old natures never faded away.

Organized Crime by European Robbers of Colonial Calcutta – Reports from Fort William state that starting in the early eighteenth century, Calcutta was filled with both European and local criminals; sometimes, European and native bandits would collaborate to carry out robberies. The criminal organisations operating in Calcutta from the end of the eighteenth century comprised both European fortune-seekers and older native robbers and thieves. When the *zamindars* (landowners) lost their *zamindari* (landholding) to different experimental land revenue settlements during the English East India Company's time, the *paiks* and *barkandajs* (armed footmen and musketeers) who worked for them were fired and moved to Calcutta in pursuit of employment. Additionally, during the era of the East India Company, numerous famines caused a large number of people from Bengal's rural areas to migrate to Calcutta in search of work. Furthermore, many troops and royal guards of the Mughal Empire and its successor kingdoms were fired as a result of the gradual ongoing decline of the Mughal Empire and later successor native states of India. They all relocated to Calcutta's Black Town in pursuit of employment. They were hired as home *durwans* (gatekeepers) by many rich Bengalis, while some were hired as *chowkidars* (watchmen) in business administration. However, many of them joined Calcutta's criminal underworld after failing to find employment. These individuals were highly sought after in the criminal world as well because the majority of them had received proper training in firearms and hand-to-hand combat. White Town's European fortune-seekers, particularly ex-military Europeans, frequently became involved in Calcutta's criminal underworld. The international crime syndicate of colonial Calcutta was



formed by these European criminals and native criminals. The criminal world in Calcutta was formed by this intersection in a multiracial manner. The cooperation between these criminals from Calcutta's Black Town and White Town was sparked by European sailors and soldiers. The many restaurants and liquor shops situated on Flag Street in the Lalbazar neighbourhood of Calcutta used to be the meeting place for these European soldiers and sailors. They drank, ate, and interacted with people from many social classes and occupations, including thugs, brothel pimps, gamblers, race track bookies, local and foreign hooligans, and illicit narcotic (alcohol, opium) vendors. Police discovered and detained many Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian illicit *arrack* dealers in 1780 while attempting to break up a fight between inebriated sailors and soldiers on Flag Street. These imprisoned criminals were then taken to Fort William.

Since the late eighteenth century, this gang of dacoits—a mix of indigenous and foreign criminals—has attacked and looted the wealthy residents of Calcutta's homes, banks, warehouses, and other establishments. They used to target the English officers' homes and residences of the wealthy Bengali and English traders for plundering. In this regard, three robberies in the late eighteenth century Calcutta were significant. The first was the October 21, 1789, heist at the home of Chaitanya Dutta, a wealthy and well-known Kalutola resident in Black Town. A gang of Portuguese and Bengali robbers killed Chaitanya Dutta during this heist and took roughly 6,000 rupees. The second notorious robbery occurred on New Year's Day 1795 at Lieutenant Marshers' home in the Bhowanipore neighbourhood, which is close to White Town. A group of between 100 and 150 Europeans and indigenous people carried out the heist. On January 29, 1795, a wealthy Bengali businessman named Chaitan Sheel's home was the scene of the third robbery. In North Calcutta's Chinabazar, close to Kashipur, Chaitan Sheel operated a store. This third robbery was special since the robbery crew was made up exclusively of white Europeans, and a Bengali gave the robbers all the secrets of Chaitan Sheel's home. Justice John Hyde had charge of the robbery case when it was heard by the Supreme Court of Calcutta. We can gain a sense of the multinational criminal scene in Calcutta during that period from the hearing of this case. Many things might be learnt from these proceedings, including the perpetrators' socioeconomic backgrounds, robbery techniques, early distribution of plundered property, and schemes to instill fear in the minds of wealthy people through the horrors of crime. One of this gang's convicted European members consented to testify in court. From distant Hanover, this royal witness travelled to India. He testified that Marcos, Rousseau, Antonio Buafas, and Mathew Cazanvic were among his party's other associates. Their group consisted of over 200 individuals from various nations and ethnicities, including Portuguese, Italian, and



other European people. They also planned to raid and loot the Bank of Hindostan (the First Bank of Calcutta, which operated from 1770 to 1832) in the near future. Rammohan Lal was the Bengali babu who provided them with a variety of information during the robbery of Chaitan Sheel's home. At the celebration, Rammohan Lal would speak Portuguese to everyone. Lal claims that Rousseau's hiding place was used to plot the heist of Chaitan Sheel's home, which was based on information obtained from ten to twelve other European robbers. The entire group of robbers divided into smaller groups after arriving at Sheel's house. The first group watched the main entrance; the second group broke windows and doors and then entered the house, tying the servants' hands and feet and gagging their mouths; and the third group, led by Rammohan Lal, went inside Chaitan Sheel's house and looted the warehouse. The householders and servants were threatened with flaming torches (*Mashals*), and an iron crowbar was used to break the lock of Chaitan Sheel's house's warehouse. Expensive clothing, gold and silver jewellery were stolen from the house's interiors. All of the European robbers of the gang gathered at Rousseau's hiding place following the successful heist and pillage. Each member kept eight pieces of the plundered clothing for himself, while Rammohan Lal pocketed all of the gold and silver jewels. By selling those jewels to the local goldsmith, Rammohan Lal raised the funds for the celebration, which he then delivered the following morning to Marcos' hiding. For this work, Marcos gave Rammohan Lal Rs. 26.

In essence, the robbery of Chaitan Sheel's home provides insight into the rank and working habits of the multi-national gangs that were active in Calcutta at that time. The first is that when the treasure was distributed, the disparity in quantity between the European white robbers and their Bengali counterparts was evident. Reaching the higher levels of colonial society in Calcutta at the time required the assistance of Bengali dacoits. However, the Bengali attendants were always the European robbers' second-class partners (status of subordinate) in this hierarchy of assistance. We discover that Rammohan Lal, the key player in the break-in at Chaitan Sheel's home, did not get any of the stolen clothing. Rammohan Lal, who received only 26 rupees as a share, even made arrangements to sell the stolen gold and silver ornaments at considerable risk. However, in one instance, these Bengali and Indian attendants had an edge that the European criminals could not match. In the court case involving the robbery of Chaitan Sheel's home, it was revealed that the gang involved in the crime had over 200 members. However, not all of them were white or European. Many of these Bengali attendants were either elderly members who had been excluded from the village banditry or impoverished, needy individuals who had relocated to the city from the village. They had a fantastic opportunity to flee to their isolated ancestral villages after



the Calcutta robbery to blend in with the locals. This was a chance they seized. For this reason, in the robbery case of Chaitan Sheel's home, the police were only able to apprehend Rammohan Lal and no other Bengali or local dacoit. However, this possibility was denied to the European robbers. As a result, though they divided the loot more among themselves, it was extremely difficult for them to hide in the rural interior of Colonial India.

In light of these crimes, it is important to keep in mind Calcutta's social and economic situation during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Two classes of the city started to accumulate the mountains of property, which was reflected in their opulent lifestyles, whilst a significant portion of Calcutta's indigenous population remained marginalised due to poverty. The East India Company's merchants, officers, and agents made up the wealthy first class, and their residential palaces adorned Calcutta's White Town. The Bengali Babu Compradors, who were part of the East India Company, made up the second class, and their opulent houses were constructed in the Black Town. However, at that time, their British consumers loved their extravagant banquets and entertainment with dancing girls (*baiji-nautch*). Calcutta was a popular destination for fortune seekers from all over the world because of its luxury and comforts. However, many of these fortune-seekers adopted the simple but risky path of robbing bystanders of the rich people's wealth after arriving in Calcutta and failing to change their fortunes. Several British soldiers from Fort William and unsuccessful fortune-seekers of different nationalities, including French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, American, and others, abandoned their regular jobs to join the criminal underworld in Calcutta. Let's look at the case of the European Member for Hanover, who was a Crown witness in the robbery of Chaitan Sheel's home, to demonstrate this argument. He first travelled from Hannover to Madras, India, in pursuit of wealth, and he spent five years working for an Englishman. After that, he arrived in Calcutta and spent a few days working in a British trading office. However, the office job with a fixed salary no longer appealed to him, and he eventually decided to make a living in Calcutta's underworld in hopes of a better future. At that period, Calcutta was home to a large number of these European fortune seekers who started to commit crimes to increase their income. According to the words of the contemporary Calcutta Police Commissioner, there were so many marginal European vagrants in Calcutta that the government was unable to give them decent jobs.

Vagrancy of Miscreant White Soldiers and Sailors in Colonial Calcutta – However, aside from these professional robberies, locals frequently got into problematic arguments with British soldiers and sailors who were insane from *arrack* drunkenness, which occasionally resulted in murder. Numerous criminals from Europe also arrived in Calcutta and committed burglary-style theft (known as *Sindhel* in



the regional Bengali dialects). We learn that the four notorious burglars (*Sindhel Chors*) - Hans Fort, Peter Harnalton, Simon Jansen, and Van Ek - were involved in numerous thefts, harbouring other criminals, giving away the stolen things to others, etc. All four had to work as sailors on the ship to pay for the trip after being detained by the police and sent back to their home nations. However, these thefts were occasionally punishable by harsh penalties as well. To make everyone frightened of the punishment before committing the theft, five European thieves—among them a Bengali thief—were once publicly hanged for petty theft in the marketplace close to the home they had stolen from. In this instance, the stolen commodities had a total market worth of Rs. 26.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the behaviour of European soldiers and sailors in Calcutta caused significant annoyance to the city's administration and common residents. Outside the brothel sections of the Khidirpur docks and the drinking dens of the Lalbazar district, European troops and sailors used to congregate. Several British troops from Fort William were detained by the Calcutta police on April 16, 1795, for allegedly committing robbery while wandering the streets of the Maidan neighbourhood of the Esplanade. The violence of European soldiers and sailors was well-known in Calcutta and the surrounding territories even in the middle of the 1800s, nearly half a century after this episode. According to the 1862 annual police report, a member of the Queen's Army's 75th Regiment attacked a Foreign Office Department officer while intoxicated and shattered a box of official dispatches with him. Following this occurrence, the soldier was taken into custody and 18-month rigorous prison sentence. In addition, the administration began to worry about sailors from different European countries visiting Calcutta. Occasionally, they broke out of the ship and became part of Calcutta's vagrant and beggar population. The Deputy Commissioner of Police of Calcutta reported in 1864 that approximately 100 renegade sailors slept on the open streets of the Maidan at night and roamed around on their bellies in the Maidan and surrounding neighbourhoods of Calcutta. Not even wearing a full dress of shame, 14 sailors who had been hiding in fields by the side of the road all night were taken into custody during a police raid on Eden Gardens at midnight. As a result, they occasionally robbed and begged others. An infamous European sailor once got intoxicated and climbed upstairs to Mr. Bailey's house in Esplanade. When the Calcutta Police's *havildars*, or police sergeants, tried to apprehend him, he bit and clawed at them like a crazy dog.

In the first six decades of the nineteenth century, there was a dire need for ice among the Europeans of Calcutta's white town. In the hot and humid weather of Calcutta, ice was very crucial to the Europeans for the domestic and social consumption of alcohol and other drinks. Before the advent of the artificial



freezing system, the frozen water trade (trade of natural ice) was very popular in Calcutta. From America, large tonnes of natural ice came to Calcutta. To preserve the imported ice from America, huge capital was invested to set up the ice house. Because the whole trade regarding the natural ice was very profitable in Calcutta. So, during the middle of the nineteenth century, when one of the British owners of a Calcutta-based ice house was brutally killed in a night, the whole white town became horror-struck. The police of Calcutta first suspected some native attendants of the British-owned ice house. But it was deduced through some evidence that the British man was killed after a hot physical tussle between the killed and the killer. The police administration presumed that an effeminate Bengali native couldn't kill a stout, masculine British man after a hard physical fight. So, then, it was suspected that the murderer must be a white man (European or American). This murder incident disturbed Lord Dalhousie himself too, the then Governor General of India. That's why he officially warned the police department to solve this murder mystery as soon as possible. Otherwise, police officials would face a possible suspension. After that, the police took this matter very seriously. After some serious investigation in the hotels and rented houses from Lalbazar to Chandni-Chowk areas, two white people were suspected by the police. One was arrested immediately, but the other one was able to leave Calcutta on an American Ship. After some interrogation, the arrested European told the police that the name of this fugitive person was S. Berry, an American Sailor. On the night of that murder, he and his compatriot S. Berry went to this ice house to embezzle a large amount of money. By breaking the window, the two miscreants entered the ice house. But they did not find any money. This frustration had made S. Berry infuriated. The owner of that ice house slept there on that night. Berry rushed on him with a knife. After some hustle and bustle, the angry American youth sailor had killed the owner of that ice house with that knife. After the murder, the worn clothes of Berry become heavily blood-stained. After that, they avoided the crowded main road beside the Hooghly River to clean the blood-stained clothes of Berry. Because there was a possibility to be eye-witnessed. So, they choose some narrow dark alleyways like Mangoe Lane in the Lal-Dighi area to run away. On the west side of the Dharmatala area, there was a water channel at that time. This area was also very deserted on that night. Berry washed his blood-stained clothes there and threw the knife for evidence tampering. Then Berry returned to his ship anchored at Calcutta port. After this interrogation with Berry's compatriot, Calcutta police searched accurately at that water channel near Dharmatala. The knife and handkerchief of S. Berry were found by the police from that channel. So, it was confirmed that Berry was the murderer. But the problem was that Berry's ship had already left Calcutta. Even after that, Calcutta police did not give up. They received confirmed news that the ship with Berry still has not crossed Diamond Harbour, very near to the Bay of Bengal. The river police of



Diamond Harbour were urgently informed through the transmitting messages of the semaphore telegraph (optical telegraph) to stop that particular ship. The ship was stopped near Diamond Harbour, and S. Berry was arrested. He confessed his crime. Later, he also disclosed before the judicial magistrate that he fled from his homeland to avoid possible imprisonment for murder and theft. Berry was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court in Calcutta. Some European padres wrote a petition letter to the Governor General for commuting the death sentence of Berry to his life imprisonment (Because Berry was very young of his age and maybe also a white man who was always qualitatively superior to any native person). But the Governor General had not shown any sympathy regarding this matter, and the death sentence of S. Berry was enforced. Finally, he was executed by hanging in Calcutta.

The Flamboyant Journeys of Some Calcutta-Based European Thieves – But not all of Calcutta's European criminals were extremely careless and insane. Many of them used their creativity to accomplish tasks while maintaining a fairly calm demeanour. Instead of working together, they stole by using their intelligence. '*Sahib-Chor*' was the term used by the Bengalis in Calcutta to refer to these Europeans. They occasionally presented themselves in incredibly sophisticated ways in social situations, and many of them were ignorant of their illegal actions. However, they used their creativity to engage in theft and embezzlement. In this regard, the actions of two gentlemen-thieves, Warner and Healey, documented in Calcutta police records during 1888–1889, are significant. Let's start by discussing Warner. In Dalhousie area of the White Town, Calcutta, Warner was the manager of the Singer Sewing Machine Company store. Warner was well known in the European high society of Calcutta. Warner informed the Waterloo Street local police station that his store had been broken into early on October 18, 1886. The store was looted when he opened it on Monday morning. Many items of silver and gold jewellery, as well as a substantial sum of money, were taken from Warner's smashed drawers. His complaint prompted the police to launch an inquiry. The police suspected that someone from the Singer company was involved in the crime after questioning every employee in the store. Warner was suspected by the police. The master key to open the store was always in Warner's possession. Therefore, the key mould could not be duplicated on top of him by any other employee. Additionally, the police have doubts about Warner's lifestyle. Warner frequently visited the red-light district of Kalingbazar, which was teeming with European and Eurasian prostitutes, at night after dining at upscale European restaurants and numerous European clubs in Calcutta during the day. One such European prostitute had been close to Warner. Following the police inquiry, a gold bangle that was on the prostitute's hand matched one that listed the stolen goods from the Singer company. After questioning the aforementioned



prostitute, the authorities discovered that Warner had personally given her the gold bangle and that her mother in Bombay had received a package full of jewels. After contacting the Bombay Police, the Calcutta Police were able to retrieve the package and discover that all of the jewellery had been taken from the Singer Company's store. The Singer Company Head Office in Bombay was notified of the situation by the Calcutta Police. However, Warner vanished from Calcutta before bringing the case to the court. In Warner's name, the police then sent out warnings throughout India. A year or so later, Warner was discovered in Rangoon by a Calcutta police officer who had travelled to Burma to move a prisoner to Rangoon Jail. After being detained in Rangoon, Warner received a four-year term at the Calcutta Presidency Jail.

Let's now explore Healey. Healey was a gallant soldier in the British Army's Scottish Regiment stationed in Meerut. However, Healey abruptly returned to England after quitting the service and joined a gang of bandits. He eventually rose to become the bandit leader. However, he once more fled to India when the English police came after him. Healey first spent a few days in Calcutta after leaving Bombay. On British Indian Street, close to Dalhousie Square, Healey started renting the third floor of a hotel. Soon, there were further burglaries in other European homes on British Indian Street. These thefts continued despite the Dalhousie area of Calcutta having a sufficient police presence. Healey was then discovered and chased by the police one night while breaking into a house in the dark. However, Healey's speed and physical prowess were too great for the Calcutta police. An eyewitness police detective claimed that Healey would ascend a house's roof and leap from one roof to another while the cops chased after him down the street. In this sense, police lacked the bravery and expertise to pursue Healey once he jumped from roof to roof. Therefore, the Calcutta Police were unable to apprehend Healey during the free-running, parkour-style chase scenes. Fortunately, police quickly apprehended Healey in his hotel room while he had the stolen goods. He was found guilty at trial and given a three-year sentence in the Presidency Jail (August 1888).

Warner and Healey first met at this Presidency Jail, where they later escaped on March 5, 1889. They continued to flee from one village to another while adopting various disguises after breaking out of jail. Sub-Inspector Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, a Bengali detective, and two local *havildars* were able to apprehend Warner and Healey without the use of guns from the forest of the Shushunia Hills in Bankura after all the British police officials had given up. It was determined during the trial to deport Healey back to England. Healey was never heard from again. Warner, however, was once more imprisoned in



India. Warner, however, initially relocated to Calcutta and then to Bombay after being freed. Then, he decided to live a peaceful life in Bombay, far from the criminal underworld.

The downfall of the White Criminals in Colonial Calcutta – The combined annoyance of these native and European dacoits in Calcutta started to decrease around the close of the nineteenth century. From this point on, robbers and thieves from other European countries, including Portuguese, German, Italian, and others, began to vanish from Calcutta's criminal underworld. This was caused by several things. Over more than a century, from the start of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, Calcutta's topography underwent significant alteration. First, as the jungles surrounding Calcutta were cleared, European robbers and thieves lost their hiding places in the city's suburbs. Secondly, the link of robbers and thieves from Black Town and White Town was broken by the strict police monitoring maintained on liquor bases in Lalbazar and the surrounding regions. Thirdly, European disbanded soldiers, sailors, beggars, and homeless vagrants were all closely monitored in the city under the Vagrancy Act of 1869. Consequently, European robbers and thieves gradually vanished from colonial Calcutta's criminal statistics.

Conclusion – Finally, I want to get a so-called to-the-point storyline in this dissertation rather than focus on dry facts about crime and criminality in Colonial Calcutta in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. I want to depict the intricate and frequently disregarded facets of Calcutta's colonial past. I have attempted to vividly depict the intriguing interaction of crime, culture, and colonialism in the vibrant metropolis of Calcutta by concentrating on individual narratives and social dynamics. In the vibrant yet chaotic colonial metropolis of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century's Calcutta, it was not only about crimes, robberies, or thefts; it was also about the lives that are connected.

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