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Peace Officers' Maintaining Social Order In a Minority-Dominated Area of Kolkata, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT:

The Kolkata Police Force has a long history of maintaining law and order amid various masses and classes considering its colonial antecedents as the then Calcutta Police. The police as a public body represents the government's civil authority, which is essential for a developing nation such as ours. The declining employment and rising crime rates create a ratio of imbalance within our society which also affects the image of Kolkata as a city of joy being a crime-prone city in turn. The crime records exhibit the fact that *Narkeldanga* as a minority-dominated area is a safe haven for all delinquents, even criminal migrants. Most of the crimes committed in such minority-dominated regions are arrested through the efforts of men in white. The men in white often consider themselves as peace officers as they guard the study area via acting as a human agency which protects the life, liberty, and property rights of the society as a whole. In this context, the present paper sheds light on the life of police personnel and their anxiety-ridden lived experiences associated with policing and patrolling in the *Narkeldanga* region. The policing web, elevated emotional intelligence of the personnel and use of ICT in detecting crime are also discussed in this paper through an anthropological prism as the rich purview provides us with a holistic perspective of the status quo of cop culture in the minority-dominated area of Kolkata, West Bengal.

KEYWORDS: Policing, Minority, Bureaucracy, Anxiety, Cop Culture, Information Communication & Technology (ICT)

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INTRODUCTION

The Greek term “Polis” plainly means a “City” and the Latin term “Politeia” means “State” which is considered to be the bedrock of the development of modern policing cultures across the world¹⁸. In the Indian context, through the vicissitudes of time, the concept of policing was present in Vedic times which was later better defined by Vishnu Gupta, also known as Chanakya, in his seminal work “*Arthashastra*”¹¹. However, the genesis of police in erstwhile Calcutta emanated from the act of Job Charnock in the 1690s¹⁶. In 1856, the then-colonial administrators of the British Raj drowned in their high-handedness trailing their white man’s burden disregarding our Indian knowledge systems and reinforcing their own London-based codified laws and policing system to tame or pacify the dissident masses and classes, the Calcutta Police came into existence imitating Royal Irish Constabulary¹². This was just before the mutiny of 1857 which shook the then-British empire to its core¹⁵. In 1939, the number of persons attached to the force rose to 9000 personnel in 25 stations and 10 specialist branches under the colonial administration¹². The police force continued to render service without much change even after our independence from the then-British Raj in 1947. Even the uniform of the Kolkata Police Force remained similar to that of the colonial Calcutta Police Force. At present, the force adopted all modern technologies to enable their personnel to work efficiently. However, the police-public ratio is around 97.66 which is very low as per the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) which showcases the amount of vacancy present in the services¹³. This significant lack of manpower in the policing web creates a negative impact on the cop culture of the Kolkata Police Force in terms of the prevalence of anxiety, and lifestyle diseases which in turn impacts their mental and social well-being as a whole. In a similar pulse, the data from the NCRB report showcases that Kolkata is one of the safest cities to reside in terms of cognisable offences⁹. This is in contrast to the findings of rising crime rates in terms of drugging, pick pocketing, murder, theft and so on¹⁴. The annual review report of Kolkata Police which was last released in 2022 showcases the use of modern-day technologies to sanction crimes but still much needs to be done regarding motivating the personnel in the lower section to tend their task as per the laws and regulations codified by the government of the day. The higher officials usually form a part of the policing bureaucracy and the lower sections are usually the personnel who discharge their duties and responsibilities on streets, desks, patrolling and so on⁴. The always-on-duty phrase for Indian police personnel creates a pro-rata sense of an overburdened workforce that tends to showcase cynical behaviour to the same persons that they were recruited to protect¹⁷. The vicious loop of lack of manpower in the Kolkata Police Force and the 14-hour shift a day made them the most stressed-out forces in our nation⁶. A study on crime reports by Bhattacharya¹ put forward the fact that most of

the slum-based areas are crime hotspots this includes the *Narkeldanga* region, the delinquents who are also mostly non-literate considering the crime records used by the said researcher. An ethnographic study on the same region (Ward No. 28, 29, and 36) was conducted by the author from 2021-2024 periodically to collect data on the issues associated with policing minorities in their own social settings. The study frame mostly includes the lived experiences of the police personnel while policing, patrolling and discharging their duties in *NarkeldangaThana* (police station). The changes that might come due to the adoption of *BharatiyaNyay Sanhita*(BNS), *Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita* (BNSS) and *Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam*(BSA) from July 01, 2024, in place of the Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code and Indian Evidence Act¹⁹ that one group of individuals in my study frame were using in policing since their induction as personnel which had added stress in their already overburdened workload. The stress in their work space is also evident in their experiences which showcases their need to be expressively masculine with elevated emotional intelligence to tackle delinquent populace coterminous to the police station. A study through an anthropological prism has enabled me to look into the policing web which is a pre-requisite to enable social order considering the recent polarising times. This anthropological perspective has enabled an array of holistic sides which exhibited their life as a police officer, their relationship with their own families, their relation with other police personnel (inter-personnel and intra-personnel), and especially their relation with the minority communities whom they are policing.

METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Ward No. 28, 29 and 36 involving the police personnel and minority communities in the region from 2021-24. A shocking fact emerged is the stress and anxiety faced by the police personnel while they are discharging their duties. These lived experiences in this paper are presented in the form of case studies to relate to the level of pressure that each police personnel at various levels have to encounter in the Kolkata Police force. The central maxim of this particular research paper revolves around the aspects of “Cognitive Aspect of Policing While Observing Urban Security and Protection”, and “On-duty and Off-duty Behaviours of Police Personnel”. The study area was prefixed based on the objectives of studying a minority-dominated police station wherein *Narkeldanga* police station emerged as to be the most suitable one.

The study looked into the bureaucracy present in the personnel from Bourdieu’s perspective rather than the Weberian perspective²⁰. The experiential ethnography was used to understand the ambience of the *Narkeldanga* police station where data i.e., observations and conversations are now being showcased in the form of case studies. Grounded theory was also employed in the study frame³. The *Narkeldangaregion* (Ward No. 28, 29, and 36) is the universe, where individuals were

selected through a purposive sampling method considering their voluntariness and availability in the study frame, considering them to be police personnel. The snowball method was also used in the field to recruit further personnel into the frame of the study. The experiential ethnography allowed me as a researcher to delve into the policing culture and the policing web which enables the station to dispense law and order that in turn maintains the social order of the day. My periodic presence in the region allowed me as a researcher to become invisible which had somewhat allowed me to dissect the contours of the emic perspectives of police personnel. All crime records, reports from the Kolkata Police website, and BPR&D Reports were also studied by me in due course of the study to understand what the people in the study frame are going through. From all the field respondents, informed consent was taken during the field to record their interviews, and experiences while sharing it. And for this research paper and my final PhD thesis, all the names are kept anonymous to safeguard their identity for citing random initials are used for this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are several police stations under the jurisdiction of the Kolkata Police Force, however, each station is different from the other due to the diversity of the populaces' coterminous to them. The top officer of a thana/ station Mr. SP shed light on the structure wherein he noted that *"the police station whose main aim is to follow orders according to the whims or requests of higher officials. The lower order comprises several officers from green police, constables, special forces, and home guards. The mid layer of a thana is comprised of assistant sub-inspectors, sub-inspectors, an assistant inspector (Choto-babu), additional inspector (Mejo-babu) who works accordingly to requests of Officer in Charge and the local Assistant Commissioner of Police"*. Later in due course of conversation Mr. JC added *"that assistant sub-inspector of Kolkata Police force is like the fulcrum on which the entire station rests because most of the crucial tasks are performed by them"*. In a separate context, Mr. BD stated that *"I am a modern-day Kshatriyas who is entrusted with public protection, but I am crippled due to government policies the agency which has brought down the Kolkata Police Force from its former glory that is Calcutta Police Force"*. The present force essential has ties vertically which allows them to operate in government interest and orders from time to time. Apart from them, green police comprise a volunteer from the community who are chosen by *thanas*(police stations) to work for them regarding certain miscellaneous tasks of their higher officials. They are similar to constables and home guards but they aren't government-appointed rather they are chosen by the station according to their needs. The strength ratio of the green police also varies according to the needs and requirements of the station and the salary is also fixed and provided by the station as such. The case studies presented below are taken from lived

experiences of various levels which showcases their off-duty and on-duty behaviours along with their cognitive aspects of policing in the studied minority-dominated area.

Case 1 – Use of Information, Communication & Technology (ICT) in Policing in General

Mr. SP is the key respondent of my study frame. He is the first individual with whom I had met as I introduced myself as a researcher and my Ph.D. research work in 2021. He is a veteran police personnel who has been associated with the *Narkeldangaregion* for more than 15 years. After lots of deliberations, he accepted my work at the station. In later days, during an interview, he opened up and began the narration of his life by stating that *“an officer of a police station is always alert and steady of his/ her duty and the law according to my point of view which might be different from rest. I am a 1994 batch officer and was brought up in a village and always wanted to become a professor as I was interested in history subject. At present, I am a part of the peace officers’ group, not gundas [criminals] wearing white uniforms. In Narkeldanga there is an increase in organised crime in cases of snatching, shoplifting, pick-pocketing, and mobile lifting even higher crimes such as burglary, murder, kidnapping and others etc. At a similar pace, the process of capturing a criminal has also shifted from old policing techniques to a newer form of policing which involves social communication with each other. The development of interaction of policing agents with the community as a whole transpires a newer level or strata of information triangulation and enhances the working capability of personnel as a whole. An appointed officer of a thana may remain in his post for 2 to 3 years but the location changes neighbourhood changes. But it is that officer who remains static in his point of view on dealing with crimes and so on. I have been in this service for 22 years acting according to my will and sometimes under the influence of my superiors as this is what I am supposed to do to protect society as a whole. I have never thought of ever becoming a police officer I have always dreamt of becoming a professor and teaching students. But destiny has brought me here thus here I am a Poridorshok [Inspector]”*.

The crime pattern has changed a lot since the early 2000s¹ and in a similar pulse, Mr. SP noted that *“I have said earlier, it has changed to a newer form of threat which is mainly due to unemployment amongst the lower strata of people in this police station [referring to Ward No. 28, 29 and 36]. To feed themselves they feed off other people who can afford to sustain themselves. Priorities have changed seamlessly from earlier decades to now. Mass, media, communication, and globalisation have changed the process of sighting crime and bringing it to justice. The old way of sourcing or Khoborilal/informer is now extinct those days are now bygone eras. The informer and the informant are now different in perspectives and allow and also ask different ways of treating them. Now communication and connection with people in the neighbourhood is the only way of*

receiving any form of information regarding any matters or else there are specialized departments who are mainly specialising in supplying information or data on issues about serious matters like SB (Special Branch), DD (Detective Department), IB (Intelligence Bureau) and so on. We naturally work with these departments with issues of arresting wanted criminals and so on. But in case of regional exigencies, we have to rely on contacts including the locals who have seen what has happened and we work accordingly to situations as we perceive in case of investigation of a particular crime. Thus, anyone can be my source of information anyone who provides the correct knowledge and positive information regarding issues which fall under enforcing law and so on. In 22 years of my service, I have seen several cases at hand relating to proper sources of linking of related information". This particular case study focuses on the cognitive build-up of the said police personnel who now belong to a higher rank starting initially from a rank of sub-inspector. The said personnel also noted the difference between the previous era and the present era of policing and how the ICT (informational, communication and technology) is bringing positive steps in the prevention of crime on a real-time basis. The use of Artificial Intelligence can be also added to the policing framework which would allow predictive policing⁵. The nexus of all the departments also aids in better tracking, managing and recording all forms of criminal activities taking place across Kolkata which is essential for maintaining law and order, especially in regions like Narkeldanga where the crime rate is higher in comparison to other police stations¹.

Case 2: Extrinsic Intelligensia Support as Backbone of Police Personnel

Another respondent Mr. JC is at the rank of sub-inspector. The said person would be soon promoted to additional inspector as per his opinion. He was one of the senior sub-inspectors who held quite a lot of experience in policing minorities. He once narrated a significant case in 2021. He began by saying "there are several cases which I have dealt with in my starting days which have been conducted only due to the presence of proper knowledge regarding those matters. In the year 2000, when I was newly posted in a thana earlier I was posted in the detective department Lalbazar [headquarters of Kolkata Police], it was my first thana posting. Thus, a new manner of policing was taught to be employed which was different from earlier. In the thana every day several cases came and were resolved day to day according to probing citing of proper crimes through investigation. Batala thana also had a local redlight area which was Kolkata's biggest one named Sonagacchi. Thus, several cases came in those times regarding money-related problems and many other issues which had to be dealt with accordingly with time. One of the most interesting cases dealt with me was arresting of three dacoits who had just looted a train recently and were staying in the Narkeldanga area. Earlier I heard news of a gang robbery on a running train nearing Sealdah in

which three men looted people of the compartment showing a local pistol and knife. During my duty hours, a local tip came from an anonymous woman from Sonagachhi that three men had arrived in this area and had occupied a room under the Lady Shanti (a prostitute) and they were quite suspicious and were discussing their recent prowess of looting people. They spoke to Lady Shanti who gave them an address which was of a shady lodge in Narkeldanga area. So, following this tip, I became aware of the situation and took two constables and four specials with me to look into the particular matter myself. I didn't take the main route instead took the backside of the lodge to enter and my forces were in civil uniforms to avoid suspicion. I also had to carry arms as they were armed themselves as the source/informer had tipped us earlier. I moved cautiously towards the room and entered. As we entered, we found those three burglars were drunk from top to bottom and were in no condition for their defence as they weren't even able to properly stand up. With the help of my forces, I was able to capture these burglars and we took them to the station with that lady who was entertaining them. From their bag, we found out few gold ornaments, wallets and a few other articles. Those were named thus people were called accordingly and their goods were handed over to them. Later while enquiring my suspicion came out to be true, they were the person to loot a train nearing Sealdah. They were charged with IPC 395, 379, 326, and 341 respectively due to looting people hurting them, and other thefts, grievous hurt using weapons and wrongful restraint. They were arrested, trialled and sent to jail according to links of evidence brought together by me in due course of further investigation". The entire incident was narrated in a stressed voice as the said personnel lamented that "such raids are like life and death situation. If anything, bad happens, I may not be able to return to my family at the end of the day". The said personnel are suffering from hypertension, cholesterol and diabetes as per the data collected by me through a questionnaire. The sub-inspectors are essentially doing all the grunt work in the force but only some of them are promoted to higher ranks through departmental promotion due to the graded division present in the policing structure which is still persistent in the present Kolkata Police Force.

Moreover, in this case, the policing web² can be viewed which was at play that allowed the actor to nab the deviant using extrinsic intelligentsia support. The nexus herein is considered to be extrinsic because the information came from a separate place and from the same locale which enabled the personnel to act swiftly. Mr. JC also added that, "it was one of the most influencing cases wherein my thoughts clicked at the right moments thus, acting briefly and accordingly we were able to capture them red-handed. Thanks to the lady who tipped us accordingly to their presence and suspicion as it had led to the capture of these wanted robbers. Source/ informer played one of the most vital roles in the movement of information from suspicion to citing of crime. Later we connected

the links and arrested them according to the law". This further reinforces the policing web at play involving several actors and institutions involved in aiding policing services. There is also an added shade of off-duty and on-duty perspective which allowed the said personnel to nab the criminal in disguise of a common man which also required elevated emotional intelligence.

Case 3: Cognitive Aspect of Policing in a Peculiar Case

Mr. BD has been working as an assistant sub-inspector for the last seven years at the Narkeldanga police station without taking any transfer to other police stations. He states that *"I am now a part of Narkeldanga thana"*. During my fieldwork in 2023, he shared a bizarre case of Narkeldanga which piqued his interest. He started to share his lived experience by saying *"bizarre or peculiar cases are rare occurrences as dead bodies, and chopped parts are quite commonly cited in investigation of a murder case. These do not tend to be creepy or bizarre as such irregular cases. I have been policing for several years and it has brought a few changes in my way of thinking and common sense. It helped me perceive a crime as who can be a victim or who is misusing power can be easily allocated while experiencing those cases from a 1st hand perspective. This way of envisaging what will I do. If I was there solving several questions at hand and hearing out their sides clears the rest. But, sometimes due to a lack of pieces of evidence, many criminals roam about freely committing crimes and also get away with it. Such was the case in 2011. I was posted here only. But the case was linked to New Market thana which is one of the busiest in Kolkata due to the presence of SS Hog Market. The SS Hog Market which is one of the oldest colonial markets in Kolkata is still functioning. From local street vendors, hawkers, and international branded shops there are several outlets with an admixture of several populations of several strata of occupation and income level. There crime might occur at any instance so police are quite alert due to the presence of several heritage buildings nearby and a large mass of population at hand. Adjacent to the new market is Park Street and Maidan which is also the busiest due to the presence of several discos and bars. Maidan is famous for its local playground which stretches vast area and is the greener section of the city. For a few days, early in the morning, a drunkard is found lying on the grassy fields of Maidan which raises the suspicion of local policemen. As they were severely drunk thus, they didn't remember what had happened on the earlier night. They are found lying on the streets when they wake up, they go away in shame. This incident was spotted for the past few weeks and these drunkards didn't dare to speak to police personnel regarding their loss of chains, wallets, watches, mobiles and so on. On waking up they search for their goods but they are unable to find them. Local people have often reported to the police officials on these cases. One day early morning suddenly a dead body was found lying near the same spot where people were earlier found. Finding this dead body police came*

to investigate this matter at hand, now a case can be formulated under this particular basis of finding a dead body from that particular place. From that dead body, nothing was recovered but their family members who belonged to Narkeldanga region stated in his possession that he possessed a high-end Nokia mobile, a Timex watch and a load of cash in his pocket while leaving home. They suspected that it was a murder or some opposition aggression. Our station in collaboration with New Market thana took the matter seriously at hand on these early morning cases of drunken people found there. Later, the PM (post-mortem) report came which stated that the person died due to a heart attack not due to any form of hurt-blow or injuries or haemorrhages". The initial case was solved but another case related to it was solved due to the cognitive aspect of policing which was showcased by the said personnel and his seniors.

Mr. BD said "the then Boro babu was quite puzzled that if that person didn't die of any injuries, then how did it happen? Earlier a person's phone number which was last contacted through the phone was sent to be traced at Lalbazar[headquarters of Kolkata Police] for special enquiry regarding the matter at hand. The number was traced and was found out that it was used by a taxi driver. He was brought in for interrogation, later it came out that the taxi driver with his accompanying mate every day stalked and picked up severe drunkards from bars and discos and they were brought to this silent spot. Everything is taken away from their possession and they are left in their spot as it is. Frighteningly he even confessed his mate's name and also stated that they have been doing this for a month or so. And, he hasn't hurt anyone in this process and the person might have died coincidentally and they have no hand in it". It was noted by me during fieldwork that police personnel associated with the Kolkata Police Force tend to connect the dots in most cases which leads to the resolution of a case. A detail with might feel oblivious can often lead to the detection of a criminal who might have partaken in the same or a different crime. The personnel are mostly sceptical with most individuals regarding their motive or their attachment to the case but surprisingly add a bit of weightage in solving cases. This might be an attribute of their elevated emotional intelligence which aids them to unpuzzle the crime. The police personnel experience the highest rate of stress and anxiety in comparison to other professions¹⁰. The situation is more adverse in the context of third-world countries, especially while policing the minorities in a minority-dominated area. Herein the presence of elevated emotional intelligence is just like a coping mechanism which allows them to manage and survive any adverse situation considering the rise of crime in recent times as stated by recent research in the context of Kolkata, West Bengal¹⁴.

CONCLUSIONS

The colonial policing of the then-Calcutta police has undergone several changes with the adaptation of modern technologies and ICT in crime detection and management. The NCRB data often mentions Kolkata to be one of the safest cities being the city of joy⁹ which is in contrast to the ground realities of research^{1,14}. In India, the low reporting of crime by the victim to the police might be at play considering the hesitation of various individuals⁸ which might be also similar in the case of West Bengal, especially Kolkata. However, the Kolkata Police Force has a significantly low number of public to police ratio¹³ considering the total population of around 1.5 crores in 2024⁷. The personnel associated with the Kolkata Police Force mainly consider themselves to be peace officers. In the Kolkata Police, *athana* as I have discussed earlier is comprised of troops of several categories which are deployed according to scenarios. The constables make up the working part of the functioning of a police station. This is followed by assistant sub-inspectors and sub-inspectors who do the paperwork which needs to be documented and notified to the higher authorities regarding allotment and transfer of force in any particular specialised works. Most of these employees follow orders, requests and whims of senior officers who assign their duties as per their rank and appointment in various departments. Their duties are also framed according to their capacity for what they can conceive in a given amount of time. However, most of the police personnel work around 14 hours a day which is also noted in a report⁶. This high degree of work is creating severe stress and anxiety among the personnel which is never redressed due to the lack of manpower across all departments in the Kolkata Police Force. The lived experiences shared by the personnel are riddled with stress and health-related issues which cause lifestyle diseases such as hypertension and diabetes in the long run as per my field respondents. The disparate responsibilities of VIP protection, protection of state assets and so on need to be divided appropriately to enable the smooth functioning of the police force. In this context, the main task is to uphold law and order which is being carried out by the force mostly following due process. In a similar pulse, the rest of the activities should be separated from them to relieve the stress and anxiety encountered by them daily. Yoga, meditation and other leisurely activities can be also added to the daily activities of the force to enable them to heal from such strenuous work and life balance. The added burden of following *BharatiyaNyay Sanhita*(BNS), *Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita* (BNSS) and *BharatiyaSakshyaAdhinyam*(BSA) needs to be checked at the ground level to understand the pressure which is created on the forces who are dispensing law and order at the grassroots level. The study created a prism-like effect which highlighted several facets of the Kolkata Police Force, and all the interviewed police personnel and

even the persons who were policed stated that more such studies should be conducted to understand the effect of codified laws on a real-time basis.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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