



The History Of Crime And The Socio-Economic Background Of Criminals In Colonial Sundarbans: 1770-1911

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Abstract:

From a historical perspective, the concept of crime may vary depending on the individual and the region. With the beginning of colonial settlement in the Sundarbans, the definition and nature of crime in the region began to change. Since the Mughal period, the Sundarbans had suffered under the oppression of the Arakanese Maghs and Portuguese pirates, turning the region into a lawless zone known as “Mager Muluk.” When the East India Company initiated the settlement of the Sundarbans for the security of trade and urban life in Calcutta, instances of piracy and banditry gradually began to decline. However, crimes such as theft, robbery, piracy, and other forms of violence were never permanently resolved from the region in any era. The Sundarbans’ challenging geographical location is a significant factor behind this.

This article analyzes the origins, nature, spread, and the role of the government in controlling crime in the colonial Sundarbans (1770–1911). In 1770, Claude Russell, the Collector General of 24 Parganas, and Mr. Tilman Henkel, the judge and magistrate of Jessore, began the process of settlement in the Sundarbans. During this time, they cleared the forests of the Sundarbans and began establishing a peasant-based society. In 1911, the annulment of the Partition of Bengal restored Bengal to its former state. At the same time, the British government shifted the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi, opening a new chapter in the history of nationalism in Bengal and India.

Keywords: Sundarbans, Crime, Dacoits, Robbery, Murder, Piracy, Regulations, Punishment.

Introduction:

The definition of crime changes over time. Its nature depends on time, place, and individual character. In the study of social history, the concept of crime and criminal tendencies remains one of the most debated topics. Crime arises from deviant human behavior and which is punishable by law. The roots of crime often lie in religious bigotry, superstitions, caste-based hierarchies, and societal structures. At the same time, flaws in economic policies, indebtedness, poverty, hunger, and destitution can provoke criminal psychology. Sometimes, even the armed resistance of common people against oppressive rulers is categorized as crime. From a historical perspective, the concept of crime may differ depending on the individual and the region. With the start of colonial settlement in the Sundarbans, the definition and nature of crime began to change.

From the Mughal period, the region had been plagued by the oppression of Arakanese Maghs and Portuguese pirates. After the fall of Jessore’s king Pratapaditya in 1608, the Magh-Firangi atrocities led to

depopulation of the area. In 1666, Shaista Khan, the Subahdar of Bengal, successfully suppressed the Maghs and the Portuguese.¹ When the East India Company initiated the process of settling the Sundarbans to protect trade, commerce, and urban life in Calcutta, incidents of piracy and lawlessness gradually decreased. However, theft, robbery, piracy, and other crimes were never completely eradicated in the Sundarbans in any era. The region's complex and remote geography played a significant role in this persistent criminal activity. This paper explores the origin, nature, and extent of crime in the colonial Sundarbans (1770–1911), along with the role of the government in crime prevention.

An Overview of Previous Research Conducted in this Topic

Ranjan Chakraborty, Basudeb Chattopadhyay, Nemai Majumdar, Arun Mukherjee, Madhurima Sen, and others are notable researchers in this field. Ranjan Chakraborty, in his book *Terror, Crime and Punishment: Order and Disorder in Early Colonial Bengal, 1800-1860*, highlights rural crime and the voices of marginalized people associated with it. He shows how the decline of traditional judicial systems, such as village panchayats, guilds, and village police, created social crises, resulting in widespread poverty, local disorder, and organized banditry. He also explains how the ruling authorities used courts, guilds, police, and legal systems as instruments to serve their own interests.²

Basudeb Chattopadhyay, in his book *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal, 1770-1860*, discusses the origin, development, and reforms of police system in Bengal. This research provides a detailed account of the activities of rural police under colonial rule in Bengal. In 1793, the government formed a new police force under its control. Its significance was not limited to suppressing crime and violence; rather, it symbolized the intrusion and continuous presence of colonial authority within Bengal. The book also provides a detailed description of the status and activities of the Darogas (police officers).³

Nemai Majumdar, in his book *Justice and Police in Bengal, 1765-1793: A Study of Nizamat in Decline*, presents the history of criminal administration in Bengal from the ascension of Najim-ud-Daula to the death of Mubarak-ud-Daula. This work helps us understand how the Mughal judicial and police systems collapsed. The work is based on a deep study of administrative records between 1765 and 1793 and sheds new light on the development of British sovereignty in Bengal. Majumdar provides a detailed explanation of how the decline of Sultanate power contributed to the rise in crime across Bengal.⁴

Arun Mukherjee, in his research *Crime and Public Disorder in Colonial Bengal, 1861-1912*, presents statistical data proving the extent of crime in Bengal during the British colonial period. Bengal, being an important part of British rule for a long period, became a field for administrative experiments. Therefore, the issue of crime and public order in Bengal is highly relevant in this research. The work is divided into two parts: the first discusses the overall trends in various types of crimes, their regional characteristics, and the socio-economic profiles of criminals. The second part analyzes three significant issues related to public order, such as communal riots, unrest among industrial workers, and terrorist violence.⁵

Madhurima Sen, in her work *Prisons in Colonial Bengal, 1838-1919*, describes prisons as a symbol of harsh exploitation. She had worked extensively on growth of the prison as a system of legal oppression. She particularly examines how female prisoners were also victims of repressive systems.⁶

Sirajul Islam's research, *Magnitude of Crime in Early Colonial Nadia District in Bengal, 1793-1856*, makes a significant contribution by studying the increase and origin of crime in Nadia district.⁷

Arundhati Sen, in her research *Probing Crime and Criminality in Burdwan, 1793-1861*, discusses the development and nature of crime in Burdwan district between 1793 and 1861. She focuses on the period from the introduction of Cornwallis Code in 1793 to the implementation of the Police Act in 1861. By observing changes in the administrative structure of the East India Company in Bengal, she highlights the evolution of crime in Burdwan district during this period.⁸

Tushar Kanti Barman, in his article titled *Situating Crime and Administration of Law and Order in Colonial Bengal: A Study of Jalpaiguri, 1869-1947*, provides a detailed discussion on the origins, spread, and nature of crime in Jalpaiguri district. The article examines the role of police and judicial systems, law and order, and crime during this period in the context of colonial Bengal. During the formative years of colonial administration, various types of crimes and criminal activities were widespread in the district, such as dacoity, murder, theft, burglary, and riots. To combat these crimes, the administration adopted different strategies, the police and judiciary played a significant role in maintaining law and order. This forms the central theme of the article.⁹

Significantly, besides the above-mentioned research, there is a lack of studies on the origin and spread of crime in the Sundarbans region within local history. This article aims to fill that gap, providing a spatial analysis of the sources, nature, and development of crime in this region.

Central Argument

On June 23, 1757, following the betrayal of Mir Jafar and others at the Battle of Plassey, Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah was defeated, and Robert Clive, the head of the British East India Company, emerged as the de facto controller of Bengal's politics. As per a prior agreement, Mir Jafar became the Nawab of Bengal.¹⁰ In return for Clive's assistance in fulfilling his ambition of becoming Nawab, Mir Jafar rewarded him with a large sum of money along with the zamindari (landholding rights) of 24 Parganas.

On December 20, 1757, Lord Clive was granted ownership of these 24 Parganas, which covered a total area of 882 square miles.¹¹ In 1759, the then Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II, officially granted the East India Company hereditary rights to enjoy and manage the zamindari of the 24 Parganas. Mir Jafar also declared this estate tax-free. When Clive returned to England in 1765, the East India Company assumed permanent ownership of the 24 Parganas.¹² However, it is important to note that although Kolkata was included within the 24 Parganas at the time, no part of the Sundarbans was included within this territory.

After the Company became zamindar of Kolkata and the 24 Parganas, they developed an interest in the resources of the Sundarbans, such as salt, timber, honey, fish, lime, shells, paddy, and others. Following several experiments regarding the land revenue system of Bengal, the Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 under the initiative of Lord Cornwallis. However, due to boundary complications and the uncertainty of agricultural production, it was not possible to implement this system in the cultivable lands of the Sundarbans. Nevertheless, during this time, the Sundarbans became part of the 24 Parganas.¹³ Finally, on August 21, 1828, Regulation III was passed. Through this law, the boundaries of the Sundarbans were clearly defined, and the Sundarbans were declared as government property.¹⁴

The Sundarbans is a vast forest region located in the southern part of the Ganges delta, extending all the way to the Bay of Bengal. It stretches from the estuary of the Hooghly River in the west of the 24 Parganas to the Meghna River in the east of the Bakerganj district. According to the 1873 survey, the area of the Sundarbans was 7,532 square miles. It is roughly situated between 88°51' to 91°03' east longitude and 21°03' to 22°30' north latitude. The districts of 24 Parganas, Jessore, and Bakerganj were included within the Sundarbans.¹⁵ Under British rule, this forested region was divided into three administrative divisions: 24 Parganas Division, Khulna Division, and Bakerganj Division.¹⁶

The dominance of the English East India Company in India expanded with Kolkata at its center. Therefore, as Kolkata grew in importance as a commercial hub, it became necessary to secure and make the surrounding areas more accessible. For the safety of the Company's commercial transport routes, the decision was made to initiate settlement in the Sundarbans. This initiative was taken by Claude Russell (1770–1773), the Collector General of the 24 Parganas, and Mr. Tilman Henckell (1781–1789), Judge and Magistrate of Jessore. In addition to security concerns, they were also attracted to the natural resources of the Sundarbans. When Claude Russell began establishing settlements in the wasteland estates (patitabadi taluks) of the Sundarbans, the surrounding areas were densely forested. Wild and dangerous animals such as tigers,

rhinoceroses, and pythons roamed freely in the area. Furthermore, the presence of river pirates and bandits, along with their acts of looting, made the waterways connecting Kolkata extremely dangerous.¹⁷

During British rule, Mr. F. D. Ascoli, Secretary of the Board of Revenue, wrote that the primary objective of the British government's policy regarding the Sundarbans was to improve public health in Kolkata and the surrounding areas by reclaiming forest land for agriculture, to protect wildlife, and to eliminate secret hideouts of smugglers and river pirates.¹⁸

The Commissioner of the Sundarbans, F. E. Pargiter, also agreed with this view. Additionally, he noted that in 1783, Mr. Tilman Henckell, Judge and Magistrate of Jessore, had proposed to the then Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings, certain measures aimed at converting the forest land into cultivable land and driving out the dacoits who had taken refuge in the Sundarbans jungle.¹⁹

In 1781, after Henkel's arrival in the Sundarbans, a letter written by him describes a notorious bandit named Hira Sardar. He frequently subjected farmers to severe oppression. As a result, the Nawab of Murshidabad would often issue orders for his arrest, but the landlords would declare him dead to protect him. After much effort and clever maneuvering, the English officials finally managed to arrest him. However, this bandit had an extraordinary level of popularity. Upon hearing the news of his imprisonment, 300 people from Khulna gathered and surrounded the prison, demanding his release. To ensure his safety, Henkel deployed 50 sepoy.²⁰

At that time, the river pirates were particularly powerful in terms of wealth and strength. To control the poor and middle-class commoners, they maintained a bright and heroic image. They were staunch in their religious practices and were respected as devotees of temples. In regions like Jessore, Khulna, and 24 Parganas, bandits were often revered because of this image. Most of them were practitioners of Kali worship.²¹

The thriving of bandits and pirates in the Sundarbans, adjacent to 24 Parganas and Jessore, was largely due to the ambiguity in the administration and judicial system. Before the full establishment of British rule, the local police officers (Darogas) acted as the chief judges in their respective areas under the Nawab of Murshidabad. These officers were always ready to release bandits in exchange for bribes. Several instances can be cited in this regard. In 1783, a band of 3,000 bandits attacked a boat carrying government treasures worth forty thousand rupees, which was traveling from Bhushna to Kolkata. They killed the guards and looted a portion of the treasure. Due to the lack of determination from the administration, not a single looter was arrested. While 50 people were arrested from Tamruk (Medinipur), they turned out to be the wrong individuals.²²

One of the ancestors of the Nodal family was Kalishankar Roy or Dutta. On the night of June 8, 1784, Kalishankar, along with his brother Nandu Dutta and an armed group, attacked a rice-carrying boat, looted it, and injured the boatman. In response to the looting, Henkel sent a group of sepoy under Qutbullah to the Giridwara area to arrest the bandits. Kalishankar, however, was prepared for battle with 1,500 men. He divided his forces into four groups and fought for three hours. Kalishankar emerged victorious in this battle. He killed two magistrates and injured fifteen others. Qutbullah himself was also wounded. Upon receiving the news of this defeat, Henkel sent another force, which managed to capture Nandu Dutta and others, but Kalishankar escaped. He took refuge with the zamindar of Natore. When Henkel ordered the zamindar to hand him over, the zamindar helped Kalishankar escape to Kolkata. There, he was hidden by the zamindar's agents. After much effort and delay, Kalishankar was finally arrested and brought to Murali (Jessore) under the custody of forty sepoy. However, under the Daroga's judgment, he was soon released. Such incidents of dacoits being released only served to enhance their reputation and influence. Their followers would spread the word among timid villagers that the dacoit leader possessed magical powers, able to escape from prison by even turning into a fish or a fly. The belief in their mystical abilities, spells and expertise in sorcery spread through society. Often, it was the police officers who accepted bribes who would propagate such tales.²³

At that time, it had become a practice for the zamindars (landlords) to harbor and support dacoits, which led to a significant increase in dacoity incidents in 1785 and 1786. In 1786-87, the collector of the Muhammadshahi area and a resident of Sonbariya (a textile mill owner) both wrote letters to the magistrate, frequently complaining about the rising number of robberies and numerous organized dacoity gangs. In response, Henckel sent a force to apprehend the criminals and instructed the zamindars to provide information about all the thefts and dacoities in their areas. Additionally, Henckel sent a condemned dacoit to be publicly executed by hanging, intending to instill fear among the dacoits and deter further crimes.²⁴

The incident of robbery in 1788 is a significant example of the audacity of pirates and robbers of that time. In October of that year, a gang of robbers attacked a boat, which carried a Nayeb (a local official) and eight sepoys. The robbers killed three of them by drowning. Although the robbers managed to escape, a team of sepoys was sent to capture them. After two or three of the robbers were injured, twenty-two of them were captured.²⁵

There was a direct and indirect connection between landowners (zamindars) and unlawful activities such as looting, dacoits, piracy, and slave trade. In Ratnalekha Ray's *Change in Bengal Agrarian Society*, there is a description of a notorious dacoit named Ainuddin Shikdar around the year 1790. He had a large dominion over several areas in the Sundarbans, including Bajragumadpur, Sahjadapur, and Selimabad. He forcefully collected shares (hissha) from other hawladars and talukdars. In addition, he had control over land and revenue collection in Dhaka.²⁶

In the case of other parts of the Sundarbans, such as 24 Parganas, similar issues arose. People were repeatedly attacked by pirates and slave traders along river routes. Portuguese and Mug pirates had created an atmosphere of terror along the river routes for a long time. On November 30, 1676, Streynsham Master mentioned in his diary that the Tanna Fort was built to prevent attacks by the Arakanese pirates. These pirates would kidnap people from riverside villages and sell them as slaves in the Pipli slave market, making it impossible for people to live in these areas without fear. As a result, no one dared to live in areas further downstream from there.²⁷

The Sundarbans region used to be infested with pirates. A chain was stretched across the Hooghly River between Kolkata and Shibpur to prevent them from launching attacks via the river route. According to the *East India Chronicle* of 1786, in February of 1717, the Maghs (Arakanese pirates) forcibly captured 1,800 men, women, and children from South Bengal. Some of them were sold as slaves to the king of Arakan, while others were sold for 20 to 70 rupees each, mainly for agricultural labor. Slavery was also prevalent in Kolkata. A report by Sir William Jones, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in 1785, reveals that almost every household in this densely populated city owned at least one slave child. These children were acquired at very low prices. They were either stolen from their parents or obtained during famines in exchange for a handful of rice. Large boats filled with enslaved children could be seen on the rivers of the Sundarbans. They were transported to Kolkata via river routes for sale.²⁸

Henckel took steps to protect the waterways from the nuisance of dacoits and arranged for the abolition of the toll stations set up by the zamindars. These toll stations used to illegally collect taxes from merchants and subjected traders to various forms of oppression and exploitation.

Henckell came forward to protect the Mahindars (salt manufacturers). They were victims of oppression by the Malangis or middlemen. These Mahindars used to enter into contracts with the Raymangal Salt Agency to supply salt in exchange for advance payments. As a result, they effectively fell into a state of bondage. The Malangis not only extracted labor from them but also charged exorbitant interest, for every 4 rupees advanced, they would demand 20 rupees in return. Henckell's compassion and character had such a profound impact on the local people that during his lifetime, he was revered almost like a deity. The town of Henckellganj (present-day Hingalganj) was named in his honor. During the time of reclamation in this region, workers were often attacked by tigers. At that time, a popular belief had spread that uttering Henckell's name would drive away the fear of tigers. According to the 1788 Gazette, it is a true fact that Henckell's work in the Sundarbans was so exemplary, or that he was so compassionate toward the

indigenous people, that the poor Molangis (salt producers) created an image of him and worshipped it as an expression of their gratitude.²⁹

When the British took control of Bengal, like other regions of the Sundarbans, their attention also turned to Bakerganj. This was because the region was located on the trade route from Kolkata to Dhaka. Additionally, a large quantity of rice and salt was produced here.³⁰ Even before the establishment of the East India Company's dominance, piracy was rampant in Bakerganj. The pirates frequently looted the company's goods and passenger boats. People had to remain constantly vigilant due to the threat they posed.³¹

Bakerganj was formed as a separate district due to its notoriety for river piracy. Jesuit missionaries mentioned numerous incidents of river robbery around the year 1600. During this time, piracy had become so widespread that Europeans grew concerned about protecting their status and interests.³²

On June 4th, 1715, according to records from the Indian Office, a sloop (small ship) returning to Kolkata from Dhaka was attacked by pirates near Sirampur. The pirates looted everything from the sailors and killed five of them. They also cut off the ship's rigging, sails, and cables. Due to the pirate-infested and dangerous route from Kolkata to Dhaka, especially through the Bakerganj region, the British authorities decided to send a security team to Bakerganj. This team consisted of ten 'Boxari' soldiers (locally recruited armed personnel) under the leadership of a sergeant and a corporal, to escort British ships safely. In 1764, Mr. Rose was killed by pirates near Bakerganj.³³

When Mr. Middleton was appointed as the magistrate of Bakerganj, the administrative office was shifted from Bakerganj to Barisal. During this time, as river piracy increased in Bakerganj, he sent Aliyar Khan to Sahabajpur as a detective to capture thieves and dacoits. Aliyar Khan arrested nearly three hundred individuals and ensured they received appropriate punishment.³⁴

The purpose of establishing a separate judiciary in Bakerganj was to suppress such acts of piracy, lawlessness and banditry. Organized gangs of dacoits were involved not only in abductions but also in causing numerous riots and disturbances, which often resulted in the loss of many lives. Powerful zamindars often formed alliances with these bandit groups to gain support in their personal conflicts. This kind of unrest continued until the late 19th century. For this reason, the primary responsibility of the magistrates was crime suppression.

In this region, the dacoits were divided into large groups, each operating under a leader, and carried out robberies under their command. Among these prominent leaders were Mohammad Hayat and Ainuddin Sardar. They were not limited to looting; they also kidnapped children (both boys and girls) and sold them in the slave markets of Chittagong and Sandwip via river routes. In 1790, the government confiscated their property and exiled them.³⁵

The spread of crime was so rapid that by 1801, more than 300 individuals had been arrested for robbery and murder. That year, 750 prisoners were held in South Sahabajpur on serious charges. According to the magistrate's report in 1806, 152 individuals were accused of murder and 1,747 of robbery. Although the Circuit Court President in 1808 reported a decline in serious dacoity incidents, 23 murders and 6 robberies with murder occurred, alongside 95 robberies without murder. In 1809, a major initiative was launched to combat dacoity, and a Police Superintendent was appointed for the Kolkata, Murshidabad, and Dhaka divisions. Using intelligence and undercover operations, he actively carried out raids. By 1815, the number of robberies had decreased to one with murder and nine without murder. During the same period, there were three riots with murder and 105 without murder. However, in 1811, five people were killed by dacoit leaders. Reports from the magistrate in 1815 revealed that the police not only confiscated the looted property of the dacoits but also opposed zamindars' rent collections. Furthermore, it was revealed that many dacoity incidents were kept secret by the police. At that time, there were no village guards in place.³⁶

On the other hand, to combat river piracy, a strong river patrol force was formed in 1818, consisting of 14 boats and 182 personnel. In 1819, there were reports of 15 murders, one dacoity involving murder, six robberies without murder, and 176 incidents of housebreaking. Due to the effective efforts of the then magistrate, Mr. Thomas Bruce, the number of serious crimes significantly decreased. He was praised as the restorer of order in the district. However, it was clear that many serious crimes were kept hidden, and only those incidents officially reported to the courts were reflected in the statistics. In 1850, there were 15 murders, five dacoities involving murder, and one incident of assault. In the writings of Beveridge, the historian of Bakerganj, several dacoits such as Gagan Miah were described, figures who had effectively reached the level of rebellion against the government. As per the 1858 report, 32 incidents of dacoity were recorded, and 25 in 1859. In 1861, police reforms led to the formation of a new police force directly under the control of local officers. This resulted in a significant reduction in crimes and riots. However, crime rose again in 1871, with 28 cases of dacoity. In 1872, there were 26 murders and 189 riots, which caused 12 deaths. By 1887, the situation improved again, with murder cases dropping to 13, dacoities to 2, and riots to 54.³⁷

In 1882, the enactment of the Criminal Procedure Code and the Evidence Act made it more difficult to convict criminals in serious cases, resulting in criminals being comparatively more likely to receive lenient treatment. This area was a remote environment, surrounded by numerous rivers, ponds, and trees, making it easier for criminals to hide. Between 1872 and 1882, serious crimes had significantly and consistently decreased. In 1878, the Arms Act was passed. Before this, ordinary people could manufacture and use firearms (gun) with the magistrate's permission. This led to an increase in secret killings and murders during that time. However, these murderers were generally from lower castes. As a result, the government confiscated all firearms in the district in 1896. But from 1886 onwards, gun-related killings began to rise again. In 1892, the number of murders by firearms was 41, in 1893 it was 57, in 1894 it was 82, and in 1895 it reached 94. Between 1908 and 1914, an average of 40 murders occurred annually. During this time, riots were a very common occurrence.³⁸

In 1829, Lord William Bentinck passed laws to abolish the practice of *sati* (widow immolation) and the practice of throwing children into the Ganges River. At that time, there were approximately 160 instances of *sati* in Bakerganj.³⁹

These organized gangs of dacoits often had connections with local zamindars, taluqdars, and their appointed watchmen (chowkidars). A share in the loot or mutual enmity frequently served to promote the interests of these influential elites. To put it clearly, zamindars would shelter or support dacoits to serve their own interests. The main hideouts of these dacoits were in the forested and waterlogged areas of the Sundarbans. The frequent incidents of dacoity were caused by multiple factors: the non-cooperation of village leaders, the dishonesty of chowkidars, the widespread fear of dacoits, the cowardice of the general public, and the limited presence of police forces.

Table-1

G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, in his book *The Criminal Statistics Bengal*, presented statistical data on crimes that occurred in the regions of Bakarganj, Jessore, and 24 Parganas during the periods 1823–1826⁴⁰ and 1833–1836. The picture he portrayed is described below:

		Extent		Crime			Conc erned	Convi ctions	Offence & Others			
		Square miles	Population	Cases		Total			Cases	Conc erned	Convi ctions	Ratio of Offenders to Population
				Against Person	Against Property							
1823	Bakarganj	2780	686,640	10	227	237	444	317	403	1403	744	372
	Jessore	5180	1,183,590	11	173	184	691	119	885	2266	528	400
	24 Parganas	4715	9,59,955	15	133	148	551	173	788	1992	1847	378
1824	Bakarganj	2780	686,640	15	67	82	246	226	433	1510	852	391
	Jessore	5180	1,183,590	19	65	84	1628	219	742	1600	618	335
	24 Parganas	4715	9,59,955	15	131	146	799	196	2210	5869	1790	144
1825	Bakarganj	2780	686,640	30	152	182	738	630	740	2613	1514	205
	Jessore	5180	1,183,590	28	185	213	1489	268	811	2328	851	310
	24 Parganas	4715	9,59,955	21	282	303	1768	680	919	3987	969	167
1826	Bakarganj	2780	686,640	16	205	221	603	483	1332	4598	870	132
	Jessore	5180	1,183,590	92	154	246	949	173	880	1997	772	402
	24 Parganas	4715	9,59,955	16	299	315	809	553	2084	3931	1779	203

Source: G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, *The Criminal Statistics Bengal*, 1847.

Bakarganj: Bakarganj had a specific place occupied in terms of crime rate. Here, one criminal existed for every 425 residents. Over time, this situation gradually worsened. In 1823, the ratio was one criminal for every 372 people. By 1826, the ratio worsened by 37.5%, with one criminal for every 132 people. The number of criminal cases against individuals significantly increased from 1823 to 1826. In 1823, there were only 10 cases, but by 1826, this increased by 60%, reaching 16 cases. In 1825, this number grew to 30 cases, indicating a 200% increase compared to the first year. On the other hand, crimes against property decreased from 227 cases in 1823 to 205 cases in 1826, a reduction of approximately 9.75%. The decline from 1823 to 1824 was 70.5%, with 67 cases. As a result, the average annual number of property-related crimes for four years was 163. The number of individuals involved in both categories of crime rose from 444 in 1823 to 603 in 1826, a 35.75% increase. The conviction rate for these individuals was an annual average of 81.5%, which is 50% higher than the general average in Bengal. In 1823, the conviction rate was 73.5%, in 1826 it was 80%, and in the intervening years, it was 91.75% and 85.25% respectively. On average, 2.80 criminals were involved in each case, but 2.28 of them were convicted, meaning nearly one-fifth of the offenders escaped punishment. In the case of other crimes, the conviction rate was 53% in 1823 but dropped to 19% in 1826. This indicates that the authorities focused more on curbing serious crimes.⁴¹

Jessore: In Jessore, there was one criminal for every 357 people. The difference between the first and the last year was minimal, 400 and 402 persons per criminal, respectively. Crimes against individuals showed an alarming increase, from 11 cases in 1823 to 92 cases in 1826, indicating a 735% rise. On the other hand, crimes against property decreased from 173 to 154 cases (an 11% decrease). However, in the second year (1824), this number had dropped sharply to 65. In 1823, a total of 691 individuals were involved in crimes against persons and property. The following year, this number rose by 135% to 1,628. But by 1826, it had decreased again to 949 individuals. In terms of general criminal statistics, there were 885 cases in 1823 involving 2,266 individuals. By 1826, the number of cases slightly decreased to 880, with the number of

individuals involved falling to 1,997. The conviction rate in 1823 was only 23.25%, but by 1826, it had increased to 38.75%.⁴²

24 Parganas: In 24 Parganas, there was one criminal for every 195 residents. This situation gradually worsened. In the first year (1823), the ratio was one criminal per 378 people, but by the final year (1826), this worsened by 46%, reaching one in every 203 people. Crimes against individuals remained almost stable during this period, from 15 cases in 1823 to 16 in 1826, a difference of only 6.5%. The only noticeable rise occurred in 1825, when the number of cases increased by 40% from 15 to 21. However, in the following year, it declined again, and the annual average settled at 16 cases. On the other hand, while the average annual number of crimes against property was 211, there was a 119% increase from the first to the last year, from 133 cases in 1823 to 299 in 1826. The number of individuals involved in these two types of crime rose from 551 in 1823 to 809 in 1826, marking a 46% increase. Notably, the number peaked at 1,768 individuals in 1825. On average, 981 individuals were involved annually, out of which 401 were convicted, yielding a conviction rate of 40.75%. For other types of crimes, around 1,500 cases were recorded annually. The number of cases rose dramatically—from 788 in 1823 to 2,084 in 1826, indicating a 164% increase. The number of accused rose by 97%, from 1,992 to 3,931. However, among an annual average of 3,945 accused, the conviction rate was only 40.5%. This relatively low conviction rate was due to the authorities’ primary focus on controlling serious crimes.⁴³

Table-2

Similarly, the scenario for the years 1833–1836⁴⁴ is described below:

		Extent		Crimes, Offences & Others		
		Square miles	Population	Parties Concerned	Convicted	Proportion of Offenders to Population, being one in
1833	Bakarganj	4750	737,765	1659	1014	445
	Jessore	5940	893,038	4728	1824	189
	24 Parganas	2296	722,814	3536	1131	204
1834	Bakarganj	4750	737,765	1466	788	503
	Jessore	5940	893,038	3448	1270	259
	24 Parganas	2296	722,814	3276	1781	221
1835	Bakarganj	4750	737,765	2464	1203	299
	Jessore	5940	893,038	3283	1415	272
	24 Parganas	2296	722,814	3193	1879	226
1836	Bakarganj	4750	737,765	3495	2584	211
	Jessore	5940	893,038	2616	1440	341
	24 Parganas	2296	722,814	2403	2081	301

Source: G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, The Criminal Statistics Bengal, 1847.

Bakarganj: The rate of crime had improved by 44% compared to the previous period. Previously, one crime was recorded for every 226 people, which has now reduced to one crime for every 326 people. The comparative statistics for crime in 1836 are given below:

Table-3

Heinous Crimes	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	181	101
Concerned	508	542
Conviction	414	383
Offences	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	727	685
Concerned	2531	2053
Conviction	995	1411

Source: G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, The Criminal Statistics Bengal, 1847.

The most significant feature of this report is that the number of serious crime cases has significantly decreased (44%), but the number of criminals has increased (7%). More criminals have been convicted compared to before (an approximate 7% difference). In 1836, there were an average of 5.36 individuals involved in each case, and 1.79 was convicted. On the other hand, between 1823-1826, the ratio was 2.80 and 2.28 respectively, indicating that the effectiveness of the administration had drastically reduced. Regarding minor crimes, the situation had improved: the number of cases decreased by 6%, the number of criminals decreased by 19%, and the conviction rate increased by 41%. In 1836, 70% of criminals were convicted, whereas previously it was 39%.⁴⁵

Jessore: In this district, the ratio of criminals increased from one in every 357 residents to one in every 254. However, the main reason for this rise was an abnormal surge in crime during 1833, when the ratio had reached as high as one in every 189 people. The comparative crime statistics for the year 1836 are presented below:

Table-4

Heinous Crimes	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	182	109
Concerned	1189	498
Conviction	198	340
Offences	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	829	668
Concerned	2123	2118
Conviction	692	1176

Source: G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, The Criminal Statistics Bengal, 1847.

Like other districts, Jessore also saw significant improvement in crime control. There was a notable decline in both the number of cases and individuals involved. However, the conviction rate increased unusually, indicating that strict surveillance and firm administrative measures were successful in curbing major crimes. According to this report, serious crime cases fell by 40%, and the number of involved individuals dropped by 58%. At the same time, the number of convictions increased by 75%. The previously high number of individuals involved per case suggested frequent incidents of violent clashes instigated by lathials (armed enforcers). But the simultaneous decline in the number of people involved and the increase in conviction rate now proves that stricter measures helped reduce such unrest.⁴⁶

24 Parganas: The crime rate was relatively high here, with 1 in every 233 residents being a criminal. However, there was noticeable improvement in 1836, when the ratio stood at 1 in every 198 residents. The comparative crime statistics for the year 1836 are as follows:

Table-5

Heinous Crimes	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	228	239
Concerned	982	303
Conviction	401	210
Offences	Annual Average 1823 to 1826	1836
Cases	1500	502
Concerned	3945	2100
Conviction	1596	1881

Source: G.T.E.S. Barlow Speede, The Criminal Statistics Bengal, 1847.

Although the number of serious crime cases increased, the number of individuals involved dropped significantly. Overall, it was found that each case involved, on average, 1.31 persons and 0.89 convictions, compared to 4.32 and 1.77 in the earlier period. This indicates that more cases were properly investigated, and the district judiciary’s strict oversight helped keep habitual offenders under control. Furthermore, there was a 68% increase in the number of criminals successfully punished. The outcome in general crimes was also positive, cases declined by 66%, and the number of offenders dropped by 46%. On the other hand, the conviction rate increased by nearly 18%. These figures clearly indicate that the cases brought to court were thoroughly investigated and resolved, with appropriate punishment delivered.⁴⁷

Table-6

The picture of crimes Statistics from the years 1901-1911 found in the Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, Bakarganj District⁴⁸, is presented below:

Offence	Person Convicted or Bound Over in										
	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Total	4696	4727	6068	3989	3440	4263	3665	3632	3584	2821	2847
Offence Against Public Tranquility	432	334	453	193	209	195	185	287	197	220	218
Murder	26	31	27	36	34	42	17	10	24	12	19
Homicide	4	11	6	8	19	19	14	24	40	41	31
Rape	5	5	6	7	4	4	-	1	3	4	7
Grievous Hut	7	-	3	5	5	4	-	1	1	-	-
Hut, Criminal Forces & Assault	197	161	168	232	218	128	117	126	132	129	129
Deceity	4	4	-	-	-	-	12	10	-	20	19
Robbery	3	4	-	2	1	5	8	4	13	6	1
Cattle theft	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other thefts	175	180	188	217	213	323	256	280	187	268	229
Against the Indian penal code	885	760	938	853	1018	977	917	394	855	896	1031
Bad Livelihood	152	245	440	99	125	143	106	124	300	213	235
Keeping the peace	2326	2507	3408	1793	1059	1758	1602	1150	1230	451	567
Salt Law	27	44	12	24	20	4	-	-	-	-	-
Excise Law	19	28	21	25	21	23	27	22	52	26	44
Forest Law	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-

Stamp Law	16	25	14	2	7	1	-	4	1	7	1
Municipal Law	88	68	58	41	71	39	93	73	89	88	74
Other Offences	380	320	326	452	415	607	311	582	460	440	260

Source: Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, Bakarganj District, Statistics-1900-1901 to 1910-1911, 1914.

Table-7

The picture of crimes Statistics from the years 1901-1911 found in the Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, Jessore District,⁴⁹ is presented below:

Offence	Person Convicted or Bound Over in										
	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Total	3685	3171	2872	2866	2753	1914	1822	1868	2030	2287	2623
Offence Against Public Tranquility	331	336	382	237	166	183	153	154	129	99	410
Murder	6	3	-	8	-	2	9	8	7	2	1
Homicide	4	10	4	8	2	4	3	25	11	15	9
Rape	9	2	1	3	-	1	-	-	-	3	-
Grievous Hut	1	5	-	1	2	1	3	1	1	5	-
Hut, Criminal Forces & Assault	227	365	259	224	254	223	221	152	139	196	138
Decoity	19	29	12	6	11	5	9	5	9	5	37
Robbery	-	-	7	7	9	-	-	6	5	2	3
Other thefts	264	314	270	235	156	191	259	289	116	216	266
Against the Indian penal code	1862	1117	1035	1000	1064	871	682	669	773	836	721
Bad Livelihood	62	118	82	115	98	48	104	58	61	54	152
Keeping the peace	265	288	310	408	378	62	44	145	388	352	517
Excise Law	28	23	13	19	26	25	12	15	17	12	9
Stamp Law	18	12	5	15	17	4	-	2	-	-	-
Municipal Law	148	102	126	108	182	103	23	40	46	30	59
Other Offences	441	437	366	422	388	191	301	299	328	269	301

Source: Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, Jessore District, Statistics-1900-1901 to 1910-1911, 1914.

Table-8

The picture of crimes Statistics from the years 1901-1911 found in the Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, 24 Parganas District,⁵⁰ is presented below:

Offence	Person Convicted or Bound Over in										
	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Total	13212	13895	16793	14943	16453	18816	21032	21730	20744	20370	26454
Offence Against Public Tranquility	273	202	211	214	215	314	152	228	265	353	489
Murder	3	1	5	4	7	2	1	3	7	3	3
Homicide	5	14	4	3	4	4	6	3	4	2	14
Rape	2	5	4	6	-	-	-	1	-	2	3
Grievous Hut	1	-	2	1	3	3	5	6	2	16	2
Hut, Criminal Forces & Assault	616	521	619	373	455	609	584	381	398	456	498
Decoity	44	44	33	55	38	6	11	54	49	17	17
Robbery	21	-	5	4	10	11	5	12	10	15	12
Cattle theft	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other thefts	832	707	627	694	680	682	854	1086	864	864	756
Against the Indian penal code	1883	2037	2443	1756	2071	2173	2579	3575	2711	2518	4010
Bad Livelihood	237	241	244	133	116	227	126	167	238	173	298
Keeping the peace	87	88	135	84	83	133	133	97	25	102	58
Salt Law	333	196	287	257	75	144	33	73	25	2	-
Excise Law	378	268	311	352	284	302	357	290	377	404	477
Forest Law	25	25	23	32	41	13	56	22	5	6	29
Stamp Law	152	34	90	14	34	25	12	-	-	-	-
Municipal Law	773	727	1077	946	1068	979	1028	947	785	895	1081
Other Offences	7547	8765	10673	9995	11269	13189	15120	14785	14979	14542	18797

Source: Bengal District Gazetteer, Vol-B, 24 Parganas District, Statistics-1900-1901 to 1910-1911, 1913.

The judicial system for criminals

The Daroga was the only government official in this region. He worked in association with the civil administration to ensure justice. His responsibility was to arrest and adjudicate thieves, dacoits, and murderers on behalf of the zamindars. He could receive complaints directly from the complainants, but his authority was very limited. In all cases except minor ones, he had to present the case details to the government (Nawab Nazim) and receive instructions from the government for each case. In fact, he had no supervisory authority over the zamindars.⁵¹

Magistrates did not have the authority to adjudicate criminal cases. They would receive cases from those under the police department and, if deemed appropriate, refer them to the Daroga for trial. He, too, was entirely a subordinate officer under the Nazim. In 1785, the government granted Darogas the authority to hear small cases such as verbal abuse, fighting, insults, and theft, and to impose punishments like a four-day prison sentence or 15 lashes with a stick, which remained in effect until the introduction of Cornwallis's reforms.⁵²

At that time, the hearings of cases were extremely delayed. According to records from 1790, an account of an incident reveals that the accused would take up to a month to travel from the Magistrate to the Daroga, and once there, they would remain in custody for several months, or even years. Those accused who had been under trial for four or six years at the Magistrate's court, or were awaiting a verdict from the Nazim, would be released by him. Similarly, murderers or dacoits were granted bail. However, in cases where the criminals had not made confessions, they would remain under trial for up to ten years before eventually being granted bail.

However, this huge delay was not due to the heavy workload, because on average, only one case was submitted per day to both the Daroga and the Magistrate. The reason for the delay was that instead of making a decision on the spot, each case was presented to the Nayeb Nazim for a judgment order, and the accused had to wait until the judgment order was received from him.

The Darogas often showed mercy when it came to administering punishment. A Magistrate complained that even for serious crimes such as robbery and murder, minor punishments were being given. In a report from April 1791, it was noted that in some cases of murder and robbery, punishments such as 39 lashes or prison sentences of four months to one year were imposed. Therefore, the Magistrate recommended the appointment of a government representative in the Daroga's court to ensure proper judicial procedures.

The punishments given included the death penalty, imprisonment (for life or until death), flogging, and amputations. Often, the duration of the punishment was not specified, or it was imposed until the prisoner either compensated for the crime or guaranteed good behavior. When the British government took over the management of the prison in 1792, it was found that there were three hundred (300) prisoners in the Jessore jail. Among them, 105 were held indefinitely, including several murderers and mostly robbers.

Another strange practice was that when a person was arrested, their property would be confiscated immediately. If found guilty during the trial, the property would be permanently seized, but if not guilty, the remaining property would be returned after deducting the police officials' expenses. The confiscation of the criminal's property meant that they had to both compensate for the crime and serve time in jail (both imprisonment and fines). This was undoubtedly unjust.

The Darogas were in charge of the prisons. The contemporary Muslim government had little regard for the treatment of prisoners. The rules regarding prison discipline were so relax that prisoners could freely interact with outsiders. Many were even completely unrestricted and were allowed to go outside for shopping. As a result, imprisonment had very little significance as a punishment. On the other hand, the death penalty was also not a source of great fear for people, as they relied on fate.⁵³

This mismanagement reflects the weakness of the administration. The criminals were emboldened by this. Robbery was usually committed by groups. These groups would often consist of ten to fifty people, and sometimes even up to 100 members. Such dacoit gangs were not only present in this region but were spread throughout Bengal. By around 1810, there were nearly four thousand prisoners in six different locations in this region, most of whom were dacoits.⁵⁴

From the above discussion, it is apparent that due to delays in the judicial process, uncertain punishments, and the laxity in prison discipline, criminal activities had steadily increased during this period (1770-1911).

Government Policy on Crime Control

In 1781, Mr. Henkel proposed the restructuring of the police force upon arriving in Jessore. The oppressive Faujdar officials had already been removed. At that time, there were four police stations—Bhushna, Mirzangar, Noabad (now Khulna), and Dharmapur. These stations had several outposts (chaukis) under their jurisdiction. Each outpost had spies or informers. Instead of the Barkandaz, native soldiers were appointed in these police stations. The zamindars bore the expenses of these soldiers. However, in 1792-93, with the introduction of the Cornwallis Code, the government declared that all zamindars, chaudhuris, and talukdars were responsible for preventing incidents of robbery, theft, or murder in their regions and for bringing all criminals to justice. Zamindars were also instructed to compensate those who were victims of robbery. If any zamindar was involved in or assisted in acts of murder, robbery, or disturbing the peace, they were to be punished accordingly, with death being the penalty in many cases.⁵⁵

To ensure the safety of the river routes in the Sundarbans from pirates, patrol boats were arranged. The river route to Kolkata from the eastern regions still exists today. The boats would travel from Kachua, passing

through Fakirhat, Khulna, Kabadak, and Chandkhali, and then on to Kaliganj. These river routes were strongholds for the pirates. It wasn't just pirates who traveled these paths, but also many ordinary people, fishermen, and others. However, whenever the opportunity arose, they would engage in piracy. There was a lack of security along these river routes due to the fact that they passed through forests and desolate jungles. On both sides of the river were uninhabited areas. The government became aware of the atrocities committed by these pirates and instructed the magistrate to take measures to prevent them. Based on Henkel's recommendation, in 1788, six patrol-operated guard boats were introduced. These boats would patrol the rivers and escort ships for protection.⁵⁶

In 1782, Mr. Henkel suggested sending notorious criminals to sea because many ship captains were looking for local sailors at that time. There was a societal tradition that crossing the sea led to the loss of one's identity. Therefore, he wanted to add a new dimension to it as an effective punishment. On the other hand, for general prisoners, he recommended employing them in ongoing public service work in the Budge Budge area.

In fact, since Henkel's earlier suggestions had not yielded any fruitful results, he proposed another plan known as the "*Sundarbans Scheme*." In this proposal, he suggested partially funding landlords (zamindars and taluqdars) and prisoners to settle in the Sundarbans. He proposed granting small plots of land, excluding the most notorious criminals, to establish a *Convict Colony*. The Board of Revenue, which was then responsible for matters of crime and justice, approved Henkel's plan. He applied for the transfer of long-term prisoners from various districts to this location to begin developing the proposed colony. However, no effective steps were taken to manage the prisoners, and as a result, the plan remained on paper and was never implemented in reality. Later, he made yet another proposal suggesting that long-term prisoners be deported and short-term prisoners be employed in government road construction projects. Although the Governor-General approved this proposal as well, it is unclear whether it was ever actually implemented.⁵⁷

After Cornwallis arrived in India, he focused on reforming the criminal justice system. He sought reports from magistrates on the legitimacy of punishments, the effectiveness of punishment in preventing crime, the treatment of criminals, delays in the judicial process, the efficiency of the police system, and other related issues. The reforms introduced by Cornwallis in the judicial system included the abolition of the authority of the *daroga* (a police officer) and assigning magistrates the responsibility for managing minor criminal cases. A *Court of Circuit* was established in order to ensure the speedy trial of serious crimes. The *Nizamat Court* was established in place of the *Nazim's* court as the chief criminal court. Police stations were set up in every district.

Under the newly reformed system, it became necessary to quickly resolve the backlog of old pending cases. Orders were issued to promptly decide on cases where the *Naib Nazim* had not yet delivered a verdict. Judgments that had already been given by the *Naib Nazim* but not yet executed were also enforced. However, punishments such as mutilation were not implemented, as they were not approved by the British government. There was a need to reconsider the sentences of many long-term prisoners. Some inmates had no fixed term for their sentences, while others had been imprisoned for a long time simply because they couldn't find a bail guarantor, especially foreigners or outsiders who were unable to secure bail. Additionally, some individuals remained in prison because they had failed to pay compensation for their crimes. These types of cases were reviewed by the magistrates or the *Nizamat Court*, and their sentences were revised accordingly. By the end of the year 1792, the re-evaluation of all such old cases was completed.

The practice of confiscating the property of arrested individuals was abolished. However, the custom of hanging those sentenced to death by rope or chains was still in practice at the time. Flogging was a very common form of punishment during that period. In 1795, the *Nizamat Court* supplied whips to various magistrates. When old whips became unusable, orders were given to procure new ones. Cornwallis also had a brick-built jail constructed in Jessore.⁵⁸

In the second volume of Farminger's report on the new phase of settlement in the Sundarbans, there is a detailed account of the disturbances caused by dacoits and river pirates. In 1802, the magistrates of the criminal court of the 24 Parganas—C. F. Martyn, W. C. Blacqiere, A. Macklew, and E. Thornton, sent a report to George Dowdeswell, the then Secretary of State for India, offering several recommendations for controlling crime.

The existing police system in the region was not sufficiently effective in suppressing crime or apprehending criminals. Additionally, the number of police personnel was inadequate. The magistrates suggested that increasing the police force would help improve the situation, as it would enable the *darogas* (police officers) to maintain better surveillance over the local Inhabitants. They also observed that the *barkandazes* (constables) under the darogas were not only too few in number but also lacked the necessary skills and efficiency. Therefore, they recommended that *chowkidars* (village watchmen) be appointed under the supervision of the darogas in place of the barkandazes.

According to the aforementioned magistrates, the main causes behind the rise of dacoity and other organized crimes in the region were as follows:

1. **Withdrawal of policing responsibilities from zamindars** – With the complete removal of police-related duties from the zamindars, they no longer took part in crime prevention or suppression, which weakened local control over criminal activities.
2. **Limited powers of magistrates** – Due to the restricted authority of magistrates, they could only try serious offences. As a result, many criminals went unpunished for lesser crimes, which encouraged further criminal behavior.
3. **Delays in the judicial process** – The long duration required to complete criminal trials led to delayed punishments for offenders. This caused a loss of interest and cooperation from both complainants and witnesses.
4. **Lack of correctional facilities**– There were no correctional facilities or proper institutions to rehabilitate or reform vagrants and individuals of criminal tendencies, allowing such people to continue their unlawful ways without intervention.
5. **Lack of strict regulations on stolen property** – There were insufficient rules to control the buying and selling of stolen goods. As a result, the trade in stolen property was easy and common, indirectly encouraging theft and robbery.
6. **Inadequate punishment** – Criminals were often given punishments that were lenient compared to the severity of their crimes. The absence of exemplary punishments failed to deter others.
7. **Difficulty in securing prosecutors and witnesses** – It was often very difficult to get prosecutors and witnesses to appear and cooperate, which caused delays in trials and sometimes allowed criminals to escape justice altogether.
8. **Dacoity as a hereditary and culturally accepted profession** – The rate of dacoity in the 24 Parganas and neighboring districts had been steadily increasing since 1793. Dacoity had become almost a traditional profession in the region. Many individuals were involved in it through family lineage—so-called "hereditary dacoits." Their ancestors had engaged in the profession, and subsequent generations followed suit. From a religious or cultural perspective, some even considered dacoity to be acceptable, believing it to be the "will of God."⁵⁹

To reform the police system and effectively suppress crime, the magistrates of the time made several notable recommendations:

1. **Holding zamindars accountable for crimes in their areas** – They suggested that zamindars should be held partially responsible for crimes committed in their areas, as many zamindars encouraged dacoits and benefited from their loot. Often, *chowkidars* and *paiks* were involved in crimes under the instructions of the zamindars. If zamindars were made responsible for controlling the actions of their employees, theft and robbery would likely decrease.
2. **Bond from zamindars** – They also proposed that zamindars be required to submit a formal bond stating that they would be fined if they were found to be sheltering known criminals. This measure aimed to deter zamindars from protecting or aiding offenders.
3. **Expanded judicial powers for magistrates** – Magistrates should be given the authority to try all kinds of criminal cases, not just serious ones. In addition, they should be empowered to impose punishments in all cases except those involving the death penalty, in order to speed up the judicial process.
4. **Addressing slow and expensive justice** – At the time, the justice system was so slow and costly that many victims refrained from lodging complaints or pursuing justice. The magistrates believed that if the process were faster and more accessible, people would be more willing to seek justice, which would ultimately benefit society as a whole.
5. **Delays leading to escaped justice** – Due to delays in the judicial process, many dangerous criminals managed to escape while awaiting trial, or avoided punishment due to witness illness, death, or fear. As a result, they returned to society unpunished, which encouraged further crimes.
6. **Encouraging participation in the justice system** – To resolve these issues, magistrates, prosecutors, and witnesses needed to be motivated and supported to actively participate in the justice process. This was seen as vital to ensuring fair and timely trials.
7. **Increasing the power of criminal courts** – They recommended that the **powers and responsibilities of criminal courts be expanded**, which would allow for quicker and more effective trials, and would help build public trust in the justice system.
8. **Stronger control over police officers** – Finally, to make the police system more effective, it was suggested that subordinate police officers like *darogas* be kept strictly under the direct control of magistrates. This would ensure accountability and prevent negligence in their duties.

These proposals reflect an early understanding of the link between administrative accountability, judicial efficiency, and the control of crime in colonial Bengal.

According to Regulation 22 of the year 1793, a reward of 10 rupees was fixed for capturing a dacoit, which was considered insufficient. Such a small reward was not enough to justify the risk to one's life or to cover the expenses involved in apprehending a dacoit. As a result, dacoits often managed to escape easily. It was therefore recommended that magistrates be given the authority to offer rewards of up to 100 rupees for information leading to the capture of notorious dacoits or thieves, and that additional rewards could be granted based on the severity of the criminal's offence and the risk involved in capturing them. To prevent the buying and selling of stolen property, the magistrates emphasized the need to introduce new laws. Since stolen goods could be sold easily, people were more inclined to engage in theft and dacoity, making it very difficult to apprehend the actual criminals. They also stressed the need for strict punishments for common crimes, especially theft, dacoity, and perjury (giving false testimony). In short, they believed that an effective and strict judicial system was essential for controlling crime.

The British government abolished the punishment of mutilation and instead introduced imprisonment, transportation (to penal colonies), or forced labor as alternative forms of punishment. However, these new forms of punishment did not instill fear among the local population, nor were they often perceived as serious punishments. Therefore, it was proposed that the government should establish a system of punishment that is swift, long-term, and certain, in order to ensure its effectiveness in deterring crime.⁶⁰

Socio-Economic Context:

The Sultan of Delhi, Jalaluddin Khalji, had once exiled captured Thug bandits to southern Bengal, offering them release in exchange for conversion to Islam. In a way, this was a form of rehabilitation of criminals, who were resettled in the lower regions of Bengal.⁶¹ From the time of the Mughal rule, the Sundarbans region suffered heavily under the oppression of the Arakanese Magh pirates and Portuguese mercenaries (harmads or bombets). After the fall of Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore in 1608 CE, the brutality of the Maghs and the Portuguese led to large-scale depopulation of the region. In 1666 CE, Shaista Khan, the Mughal governor (Subahdar) of Bengal, successfully suppressed these Magh-Portuguese pirates. Since then, the name "Shaista" became popular in this region.⁶² When the East India Company began efforts to settle and cultivate the Sundarbans for the protection of trade and urban life in Calcutta, the activities of Magh pirates and other riverine bandits gradually declined. However, crimes such as theft, dacoity, river piracy, and other offences were never permanently resolved in the Sundarbans in any era. One of the major reasons for this persistent lawlessness has been the unique geographical setting of the Sundarbans region.

Under British rule, as a result of various land settlement laws, two types of land tenure systems were introduced in the Sundarbans region, the Lotdari Settlement and the Ryotwari Settlement. Between 1830 and 1919, the Lotdari system was the dominant form of land management along the 24 Parganas frontier. However, from just before 1919, the Ryotwari system became the standard land tenure across the entire Sundarbans.⁶³

These two systems led to the emergence of local intermediaries, ordinary peasants, and a large class of landless agricultural labourers. This landless farming class occupied the lowest level in the socio-economic structure of the Sundarbans. However, they were also the primary productive force in the region. As more land was reclaimed from salinity and became increasingly cultivable and productive, the number of landless labourers also increased. In this context, the landless peasants and small farmers of the Sundarbans came to represent one of the most exploited sections of Bengal's rural population. This socio-economic condition led many among the landless class in the Sundarbans to resort to criminal activities as a means of survival.⁶⁴

During British rule, as forest land in the Sundarbans was gradually brought under cultivation, many small farmers oppressed by the zamindars of the mainland began to seek refuge there. With the increased import of British industrial goods, the local artisans engaged in small-scale cottage industries began to face widespread unemployment. When the East India Company established monopoly control over the salt trade, the taluqdars (landholders) who had previously supported local salt production in Bengal found themselves in crisis. From around 1890, the market was flooded with foreign salt, making things worse. As a result, the workers engaged in salt pans in the Sundarbans, such as the Malangi, Paki, Chuliya, Jandar, Kodaliya, and others, became jobless. Some of them turned to agriculture, but many, driven by the need to survive, became involved in various criminal activities.⁶⁵

Bedes or Bediya Community of Jessore:

The Bedes of Jessore are likely a surviving group of former free bandits. According to the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, they were formed from the scattered Muslim soldiers and Hindu looting tribes of Bengal.⁶⁶ The Pindaris, who emerged as the subsequent terror of the Marathas in central India, Bombay, and Madras, were similar groups. These groups in Bengal were soon eradicated under the strict rule of Warren Hastings. However, undoubtedly, some groups continued to maintain their habit of looting, albeit on a smaller scale. From these groups, the Bediya community originated. The word "Bede" means "hunter" in Bengali. Sir Herbert Risley, in his work and other authorities, have used this term for various Muslim and Hindu communities in Bengal, such as the Sandar and the Gaine. However, to the police, the Bedes of Jessore are known as a small community. Although they were once a nomadic group, they are no longer nomadic in contemporary times. They have settled in specific areas such as Gaisata, Sarsha, Bonganga, and Jhikirgacha police station areas in Jessore district, as well as a few villages in Basirhat, 24 Parganas. The Bedes did not have a specific traditional profession. According to Mr. Quari, in one family, one member might be a carpenter, while another might be a barber. However, in general, the men worked as day

laborers, while women and children wove date palm mats. Despite their extreme poverty, the community did not beg. They resorted to various crimes to meet their needs. Their primary criminal activities were theft and burglary, often involving intricate methods of entering houses. They were particularly skilled in breaking through mud walls and stealing crops. Stolen goods were quickly sold off, and they rarely kept anything at home. Mr. Quari mentions that around each Bede settlement, there were some individuals who made a significant income by buying stolen goods. In some cases, they even took the stolen items to Kolkata to sell them. Their criminal records were found in Nadia, Khulna, Hooghly, 24 Parganas, and Kolkata. In 1907, a gang of Bedes was identified in the northern part of Kolkata, which was connected with local and Kolkata-based criminals.⁶⁷ To protect themselves from the police in their district, they would often flee to Kolkata. From this discussion, we get a clear understanding of the social-economic condition and criminal tendencies of the Bede community.⁶⁸

The Byadh (Hunter) Community of Lower Bengal:

The Byadhs are a nomadic, lower-caste Hindu community. They mainly lived in the districts of Jessore, Nadia, and 24 Parganas. There is no clear information about their origins. Risley's *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* does not mention them, nor are they separately listed in the census reports. They claimed that their traditional occupation was bird hunting and that their ancestors used to supply birds to the Nawab of Murshidabad. Men, women, and children all moved from place to place together. They made a living by weaving and selling bamboo baskets and by hunting birds using *satnola* (a traditional bird-hunting tool). Usually, they would stay in one place for several months, build friendly relations with the local villagers, gain their trust and then deceive them. Both men and women were equally skilled in fraud. One of their typical tricks was to present themselves as owners of a large amount of gold coins, which they claimed to have found while demolishing an old building. They would show a clay pot shaped like a *lakhdi* (traditional money pot), filled with fake gold coins, and offer to pawn it in exchange for some money. After receiving the money, they would quickly disappear. It was believed that Byadh women often borrowed jewelry from rural women by promising to return them along with a pot full of wealth or Lakshmi's treasure (*Lokkhi'r bhār*). The fraudsters would bury a clay jar filled with soil, topped with a few coins, in a secluded spot and present it as genuine treasure. Sometimes, they would also deceive people with scams promising to double their money. Physically, they resembled ordinary lower-caste Bengalis and their speech resembled that of the people from Jessore.⁶⁹

The Bagdi, Pod, and Kaora Communities of Bengal:

These three communities, Bagdi, Pod, and Kaora, were known to independently collaborate with both Hindus and Muslims to engage in criminal activities. Their main offenses were smuggling and dacoity (armed robbery). Their methods of crime did not show any distinctive or unique traits.

The Bagdi Community of Bengal:

Sir Herbert Risley described the Bagdis as an agricultural, fishing, and service-oriented caste in central and western Bengal. They were divided into 11 sub-castes. Around 1891, the Tenulia and Kasaikulia Bagdis worked as masons and prepared lime for building houses. The Duliya Bagdis were traditionally employed to carry palanquins. In general, the Bagdis made their living through fishing, making gunny bags, weaving thread, and farming. Many of them were also employed as village watchmen (chowkidars). Under zamindars (landlords), they often served in roles such as patok, sardar, or tothida (local administrative or security roles). Police records show that Bagdis in Medinipur, Bankura, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Hooghly, and Murshidabad were notorious for being dacoits and bandits. They were skilled stick fighters (lathiyals) and adept at scaling walls, which made them effective in both attack and escape. Zamindars often employed them for violent and coercive tasks. Many Bagdis were convicted in cases of theft and robbery, or punished for leading what was termed a "bad livelihood." At the time, the most active Bagdi criminal networks were found in the Diamond Harbour subdivision of 24 Parganas, Arambagh in Hooghly, and the Sadar subdivision of Bardhaman.

The Pod Community of Bengal:

Sir Herbert Risley described the Pods as a fishing, agricultural, landowning, and trading caste of Lower Bengal. They had a significant population in the 24 Parganas district. The community was divided into four sub-groups: Bagande and Bangla (mainly found in 24 Parganas and Jessore), Khotta or Mana (in Murshidabad and Malda), and Uraiya (in Midnapore and Balasore). Religiously, the Pods were Hindus and had their own priests. They were considered a degraded branch of the Rarhi Brahmins, and some among them claimed to be fallen Kshatriyas, even wearing the sacred thread (symbolic of higher caste status). However, most of the community was illiterate, and the men were known for excessive alcohol consumption and promiscuity. They were typically irregular farmers, and few were engaged in any steady occupation or business. According to the 1911 Census, the total number of male Pods was 274,181, with 169,104 residing in 24 Parganas alone. The Pods of Diamond Harbour subdivision in 24 Parganas were particularly notorious for criminal activities. They often collaborated with the Bagdi and Kaora communities, and sometimes even with Muslims, to carry out crimes. At that time, there were at least ten well-known dacoit gangs active in the Diamond Harbour area, consisting mainly of members from the Pod, Bagdi, and Kaora communities. In Mathurapur police station area, there were two such dacoit gangs, and in Kulpi police station, four active gangs were reported.

The Kaora Community of Bengal:

The Kaoras are a sub-caste of the Hadi community. Traditionally, they were engaged in pig-rearing and in producing jaggery (molasses) from date palm sap. Many Kaoras also worked as cooks in European and Eurasian households during the colonial period. According to the 1911 Census, the Kaoras had a male population of 56,072, with 31,904 residing in the 24 Parganas district alone. Much like the Pods, the Kaoras of the Diamond Harbour subdivision in 24 Parganas were particularly noted for their criminal tendencies. They frequently collaborated with Pods and Bagdis, and occasionally with Muslim groups, to carry out criminal activities. In the Diamond Harbour region, both men and women of the Kaora community were notoriously involved in crime and known for their quarrelsome and disruptive behavior. Socially, they held a very low status and typically lived on the outskirts of villages, often in filthy and unhygienic conditions.⁷⁰

Mochi Community of Bengal:

The Mochis were primarily settled in the districts of Jessore, Khulna, Bakerganj, Pabna, Rajshahi, and also in 24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Bardhaman, and Hooghly. They were Hindus and worshipped Hindu deities. Their favorite foods included beef, pork, and chicken. Their traditional occupations included: Skinning animals, Producing leather goods, Castrating animals, Shoemaking, Various forms of leather craftsmanship. They also worked as professional drummers and musicians (particularly with the *dhol* drum). Despite their artisanal roles, the Mochis were also notorious for criminal activities, including: Theft, Burglary (especially breaking into homes at night), Poisoning cattle, which would later die and provide them with hides for leatherwork. They often engaged in roadside and home robberies, using a secret regional code language for communication during criminal operations.

Notorious Methods:

- Stealing iron ploughshares from neighbors' courtyards to break open doors and safes
- Cutting rope from shop shutters to facilitate theft
- Hiding bamboo sticks used as weapons under a shawl, tucked beneath the armpit
- Using swords and ritual sacrifice knives (*balidan chhuri*) in some robberies

During robberies, they would brutally torture household members to extract information about the location of keys or valuables. Their cruelty included tying up victims, branding them with burning torches, or setting their beards on fire by pouring kerosene. In a notorious robbery in 1908, a victim was wrapped in a petroleum-soaked blanket and burned alive. They would poison livestock with arsenic wrapped in banana leaves, as dead animal hides were a source of income for the local Muchis. They typically traveled 20–30

miles on foot to carry out their robberies and avoided using the railway during such criminal activities. According to the 1911 census, the total number of Muchi males in Bengal was 239,888, with 20,115 in Nadia and 24,389 in Jessore.⁷¹

These communities, while historically engaged in various livelihoods essential to rural economies, were increasingly criminalized and marginalized under colonial rule. Many of the "criminal" labels were products of systematic surveillance, socioeconomic exclusion, and caste-based stigma, rather than reflections of innate criminality. Their stories highlight the intersection of poverty, caste, and colonial policing, and how entire communities were stereotyped based on the actions of a few or due to their vulnerable economic status.

Conclusion:

This study has undertaken a details examination of the nature, causes, and socio-administrative context of crime in colonial Bengal, with a particular emphasis on the districts of Bakarganj, Jessore and 24 parganas from 1770 to 1911. Drawing upon archival sources such as district report, revenue records, administrative correspondences, and judicial proceedings, the research reveals that the rise of crime during this period was intricately linked to the transformations introducing by British colonialism.

The decline of indigenous governance structures, disruption in the agrarian economy due to land revenue policies like Permanent settlement, Ryotwari Settlement and the emergence of a monetized market economy gave rise to new forms of social dislocation and vulnerability. In this volatile environment, crime such as dacoity, theft, smuggling and violent assaults not only become more frequent but also evolved in complexity and organization.

Criminality in this context was not merely an act of lawlessness but also response to socio-economic distress, marginalization, and in some cases, active resistance to colonial control. The colonial administration's attempts at policing and legal reform were often inadequate, inconsistent or excessively coercive between crime, control and resistance.

By situating crime within the broader framework of colonial transformation and local agency, this article challenges conventional narratives that view criminality as solely a matter of moral failure or deviance. Instead, it argues that crime in early colonial Bengal was both a product and symptom of systemic inequality, administrative breakdown and contested authority.

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