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**“I Am Your Compatriot”: Investigating the Role of the Native Police Officer in Colonial
India in *Darogar Daptar***

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Abstract

The beginnings of policing in the colonies coincided with and was characteristic of the white colonizer’s anxieties born out of racial and cultural differences and anticipated alienation in the colonized territory – anxieties which were reflected duly in the inability to negotiate the ever-evolving nature of crime when it came to the colonial subjects, thereby requiring equally capable and characteristically ‘masterly’ manoeuvres on the part of the former. The necessary measure in this regard is embodied duly in the recruitment of native police officers in the colonial police force – officers who, hailing from amongst the colonized subjects themselves, became integral instruments of policing on behalf of the ruling colonial ideology. The narratives of the native police officers of the period record, among other things, the role of the native subject in this newly emerging vigilance system as reflected in his perceptions of and participations in it on behalf of the colonizer—one which Priyanath Mukhopadhyay’s *Darogar Daptar (The Detective’s Files)* stands out as a crucial textual example of. This article shall, therefore, examine *Darogar Daptar* in the context of the curious case of the native police officer and his role in the colonial project.

Keywords: colonialism, crime, policing, native police officer, subject

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In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Charlie Marlow, the narrator and veteran of the voyage to the Belgian Congo where he comes across the horrors embodied and let loose by Mr. Kurtz who is hailed as the poster-boy of the white 'civilizing' mission in Africa back in his own country, remarks, "[H]ow can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion?" (Conrad 56) The anxiety as articulated by Marlow stands out as immensely significant in that it highlights the necessity of 'policing' as a measure to thwart the white man's risks of disorientation in the heart of the colonies, as a preserver of rational 'righteousness' (as perceived, of course, by the unconscious or the all too conscious supporter of colonialism alike) by the use of the "holy terror of scandal and gallows" (56). The need to do away with such a fear on the part of the colonizer who seeks to sterilize and stabilize his own claim while fulfilling his colonial project is reflected duly in the establishment of the colonial police force as an assisting state apparatus – one which has involved, across colonies and centuries, the recruitment and assimilation of native colonized subjects in order to actively expand and strengthen itself. While the police procedural narratives of the colonial era contain and give a voice to the issues which give rise to as well arise from such an act, namely the anxiety of the white colonizer in the colonies, the inability to perceive and negotiate the changing nature of crime in a newly organized social structure, the racial tension within the police force, the horrors of the colonial project as perceived by the native colonized subject inducted into the police force and finally the harbouring of anti-colonial sentiment which manifests itself in the form of a number of struggles both within the police force and without, they also reflect the necessitation of the native colonized subject in the colonial police force in the first place followed by the ways in which the same aim is achieved, leading him to work to restore and reinforce order through the 'holy terror' that the colonizer has deemed fit. Priyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Darogar Daptar (The Detective's Files)* may be considered in this regard as a text offering significant opportunities to study the latter, narrativizing as it does the crucial aspects of policing in the colonies as perceived by a native colonized subject who also

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directly participates in it. This paper shall, therefore, attempt an analysis of the instances found in select *Darogar Daptar* narratives which highlight the role expected from the native colonized police officer in the colonial machinery as well as the ways in which he is inducted into the same, emerging as a suggestively Western symbol of vigilance in the colonies, an indispensable tool for enforcement of social control and discipline through the assertion of powers on the colonizer's behalf.

Set in British India, the *Darogar Daptar* narratives were serialized in a periodical of the same name between 1893 and 1912 by Priyanath Mukhopadhyay, a Bengali officer who worked in the Calcutta Detective Police from 1878 to 1911. Speaking of these narratives in his autobiography *Tetrish Botsorer Police Kahini ba Priyanath Jibani (The Story of Thirty-Three Years of Policing, or the Life of Priyanath)*, Mukhopadhyay remarks, “Dirghokaal Detective Police-e karjyo koriya je sokol muqaddamar kinara korite somortho ba somoy somoy okritokarjyo hoyiachhi, taha ami onek somoy *Darogar Daptar*-e prakash koriya thaki” (“I often publish in *Darogar Daptar* those cases from my long career at the Detective Police which I have managed to solve and, from time to time, have failed to”;9) – cases whose results testify, more often than not, to his immense success in the colonial police force. Mukhopadhyay's joining the Calcutta Detective Police coincides with the unprecedented development of crime in and around Calcutta as a major historical phenomenon, in terms of nature as well as number – crime which, as Sumanta Banerjee remarks, was “indirectly produced by the colonial policies” and required “a tailor-made police force” to successfully combat and contain it (“City of Dreadful Night”2045). The radical change in the socio-economic conditions under the newly formed colonial administration, the creation of an unorganized poor as a result of the loss of traditional livelihood for many and the exodus from other parts of India to Calcutta, the then capital of British India, in the wake of its rapid urbanization laid the ground for the emergence of crimes both novel and numerous, to which the criminal activities of various foreigners, European as well as non-Europeans, keen on exploring Calcutta as a centre of possibilities, was an addition only more triggering for the then British masters of the country. The popular perception of Calcutta as a centre for

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criminal activities can be clearly discerned in a Bengali proverbial couplet common in the eighteenth century: “Jal, juochuri, mithye katha/ Ei tin niye Kolikata” (“Forgery, swindling and falsehood. These three make up Calcutta”, trans. by and qtd. in Banerjee, ““City of Dreadful Night”” 2045). Coupled with this was the problem of the suburbs and rural provinces which, although considerably away from the city, posed no less a threat to the colonial enterprise as situated in it. The seriousness of such a situation served greatly to trigger further the already present anxieties and fears of the white masters – anxieties which involved, among others, those regarding the “created loneliness of the colonizers in the colony” as a result of “cultural stratification and exclusivism”, “an unending search for masculinity and status before the colonized”, and the need to enforce and reinforce the identity of the master before the colonized subjects by a display of “conspicuous machismo” (Nandy 40) and needed proper dispelling through a more sound and influential vigilance system.

It is this situation which called for the native colonized subject to be called into play, to be inducted into the vigilance system in order to revise and reassert, in the colonial context, the role of the “dominant Western symbol of social control: the policeman” (Winston and Mellerski 2). The volume and variety of criminal activities in and around colonial Calcutta proved too much to be tackled efficiently by the British officers alone; the right call was, therefore, to recruit the *darogahs*, the native police officers who, hailing from Bengali middle-class backgrounds themselves and therefore in a relatively closer touch with the criminal geography and the various layers of the socio-economic conditions of Bengal, “were in a better position to understand the makings of a Bengali criminal, and had an easier access to the underworld from where they operated, than their British counterparts” (Banerjee, ““City of Dreadful Night”” 2050). The indispensability of the native officer can be well understood in terms of their chance at understanding things better from the point of view of the customs they have been habituated to, as well as their ability to toggle between the city and the provinces and between subaltern cultural identities in order to successfully apprehend criminals, unlike the European police officers who would evidently stand out as the white

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‘master’; Priyanath, for example, poses as an inconspicuous madman in a lunatic asylum to investigate the role of the cleaner in the burglary at the zoo in “Chatur Chor” (“The Cunning Thief”), as a Vaishnava to get hold of the ruthless dacoit Krishnachandra Chowdhury, who has been hiding in Calcutta under the guise of a Vaishnava himself in “Dakat Sardar” (“The Dacoit Boss”), or as a meek vaccination inspector in order to lure the forger Moti Dutta into custody in “Captain Moti”; moreover, in the murder case in “Katamundo” (“The Severed Head”), he apprehends the guilty party on the basis of his knowledge of the Hindu rural custom of discarding earthen pots in case of death in the family, saying, “Ami bideshbasi Ingraj nohi, ami apnar swadeshbasi Brahman, sutorang jaha taha boliya sohoje amake bhulaite pariben na”(“I am no Englishman from a foreign land, I am your compatriot, a Brahmin; you cannot fool me by saying anything you want”; Mukhopadhyay1:141) – something at once unthinkable if it were the British officers on the same job. The issue of cultural stratification getting in the way of policing was, therefore, a lesser problem as the native officers’ ability to tackle them efficiently brought relative relief. The works of these police officers impressed the colonized subjects considerably; their very success was a symbol of subaltern excellence which, suggestively enough, served the colonizer’s intentions to keep a display of masculinity and power close at hand – one which relieved in part his own anxiety and fomented carefully the growing subaltern sentiment among the native cultures. The success of Priyanath in this regard can be discerned clearly in his pursuit of Healey and Warner, the infamous English bandit duo, over almost eight hundred hours and across almost one hundred and eighty miles, in doing which he braves excruciating hunger and sleeplessness and ultimately displays a remarkable heroism while apprehending Healey, as recorded in “Ingrej Dakat-II” (“The English Dacoits”, Part II):

Pray paanch minute kaal amader ubhayer ek prokar mollojuddho hoilo; kokhono se aamar upore, kokhono aami taar upore. Tahar cheshta, – aamar hosto konoroope chharaiya loy; aar aamar iccha je, uhake bishesh kaydar sohit dhoriya rakhi – jeno aamar hosto kono prokaare shithil na hoy. Sei समय ki jaani, kiroope aamar nashikay, bhoyanok aaghat lagilo. Jhor jhor koriya nasika diya roktodhara bohirgote

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hoiya, amar kameez-er sommukhbhaag ronjito hoilo, Healey-r kalo coat-er kono kono sthaane bhijiya gelo; tothapi aami tahake porityag korilam na, pranpone tahake amar ayottadheen koribar cheshtai korite lagilam.

We wrestled for about five minutes; at times he managed to straddle me, at times I him. He wished to wrest his arm free at all cost; I, on the other hand, wished to hold on to him – to not let my grip loosen even for a moment. Suddenly I received a crushing blow on my nose. Blood stained my shirt-front red while Healey’s black coat was smeared in patches; however, I did not leave him, but tried instead to subdue him in spite of everything. (Mukhopadhyay 1:338)

Priyanath’s display of unbelievable courage and determination in the face of such a violent encounter resolves doubly the display of masculinity and machismo before the colonial subjects as discussed earlier; it satisfies the colonizer and the colonized alike in their own positions of power and sentiment respectively. Priyanath’s apprehension of the European criminals serves, at the same time, a much more suggestive intention on the part of the white colonizers to suppress and terrorize the white European criminals who dared transgress the intended social and moral discipline of the colonies, who dared become the other to the colonial mission, by the display of the subaltern weapon in the arsenal of the colonial masters – being apprehended at the hands of whom would result in a humiliation that would serve them right. To return to a more general idea, it is the ‘other’ which the native colonized officer successfully polices in his own way on behalf of the colonizer, preserving its intended ‘values’ and resolving transgressions and threats: in “Daktarbabu” (“The Doctor”), for example, Priyanath apprehends the unnamed impostor posing as a practitioner of Western medicine; in “Captain Moti”, he resolves the threat to the legal and economic enterprise of the colonial administration by bringing into custody the notorious Moti Dutta, a forger of banknotes and legal documents; in “Shesh Leela” (“The Final Act”), he stops once and for all the activities of Troilakyatarini, a prostitute whose crimes of swindling, robbery and multiple murders were a notorious addition to the moral threat to the colonial society as posed by the increase in prostitution. Such acts of dealing uniquely and efficiently with transgression and

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effecting the colonially intended restoration and preservation thus proved the native colonized subject as an indispensable addition to the police force, serving suggestively the colonizer's interest in the context of a "confrontation and contest between [the] two opposing forces – the coloniser and the colonised – on the disputed site of "crime"" (Banerjee, *The Wicked City* 25).

But how is the subject constituted to be so? What leads him on to act so? What secures his complete assumption of his role as an officer in the repressive state apparatus, policing on the colonizer's behalf? The answer to these questions may be found unmistakably if one considers the interpellating role of ideology as examined and presented by Louis Althusser, "insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting concrete individuals as subjects'" (171). In constituting the native colonized police officer – as a colonized subject with a difference in terms of functionality – and securing his active participation in the colonial regime, the ideology of colonialism works by 'interpellating' or hailing him in the everyday practices which serve, in reality, the purpose of ideological recognition – the ones which "guarantee for [those so hailed] that [they] are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (Althusser 172-173). Instances of such hailings in the context of colonial police duty can be found in the everyday official affairs as recorded in *Darogar Daptar*, in instances ranging from trust and understanding between the European superior police officer and the native officer to praise and recognition for the latter's diligence and dutifulness in course of day-to-day police work: Priyanath's superior, Mr. Bell, entrusts him with the prestige of the police and asks him to do as he thinks and sees fit in "Abir Jaan"; the superior officer in "Katamundo" praises him on his immediate reporting for duty on receiving the telegram sent to him while on vacation; the English officer as well as the captured Healey praise his courage and determination in "Ingrej Dakat-II" ("The English Dacoits", Part II) – occurrences which also secure his recognition of the same as addressed to him - for "the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed" (Althusser 174) – thereby securing, in turn, his recognition of himself as a native colonial police officer committed to duty and detection on behalf of the white master.

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The response, however, comes not always as one of simple acceptance and compliance, involving often a self-generated (though, in fact, ideologically secured) response which only leads him to affirm doubly his own role and reinforce his own sense of duty in the context of the whole case, as in Priyanath's dismissal of the idea of betraying his superior in "Captain Moti" or his conversation with his superior officer in "Dakat Sardar" where he dispels sternly the notion of request for reward and asserts instead his duty as his primary objective. The securing of the native colonized police officer's participation – in the truer, more ideologically motivated sense of the term – is thus made possible through his own affirmation and reaffirmation of his own role in the system, striving to vindicate the part he has been entrusted to play. In the ideological framework, however, such a vindication is definitely two-way; with the officer as a subject and the white master as a 'Subject' to whom he is subjected, the encounter between both is one of mutual recognition, where one needs the other as much as the other needs one: while the indispensability of the native officer has already been discussed, it is the white superior who is in turn considered by him as necessary for him to function, as in Priyanath's expressing of a certain anxiety in 'Kuthial Saheb - II' ("The Indigo Planter", Part II) while talking about the transfer of the police officer investigating the death of Ramnath Biswas to a forlorn, desolate place "where there is no presence of any Englishman" (Mukhopadhyay 2:231), thereby reflecting the cohesion and co-existence of the roles of the white master and the native subject and their mutual affirmation in the colonial police force, brought about by the colonial ideology which secures so through "the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject" (Althusser 181) and paves the way for effective policing in the colonies through the ideologically confirmed participation of the native colonized subject.

To conclude, therefore, it may be said well without blasphemy that in spite of the anxieties born out of difference and dissidence in the colonies, colonial ideology secured more from the native police officer than met the eye, perhaps even its own. While instances of anti-colonial sentiment and struggle are as present in *Darogar Daptar* as in other narratives relating to the native's encounter with colonialism while working for it, and in

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documenting which, as Shreosi Biswas asserts, Priyanath mirrored “the postcolonial sentiments of fin-de-siècle Indians” and thus “contributed to the anti-colonial movement in his own unique way”, this paper explores instead the problematic flip side to it, studying what necessitated and facilitated such an absorption into the colonial system in the first place and how such a system continued to hold its own despite ideological loggerheads born out of its myriad encounters with what it othered. It is this absorption which *Darogar Daptar* embodies and validates more often than not – much in line with police procedural being “as much a part of the ideological state apparatus of control as the thin blue line of the police force” (Scaggs 86) – in its capturing of the practices and predicaments of the native colonized subject in a colonial police force.

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