

Social Vagrancy and Drinking Problems of Sailors in Calcutta: How the British rule exacerbated social problems in society

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ABSTRACT

The East India Company faced several difficulties sustaining its rule and authority in India. However, among such problems, there was a peculiar issue surrounding the immigrant sailors or the fortune hunters, who mainly came from Britain, Australia, and France. The abolishing of the Emigration Law in 1833 paved the way for such emigration to those sailors who sailed to India, particularly to the ports of Calcutta. Many of them came here with the expectation of getting a job, doing some business, or with an aim for financial gain. However, such sailors created several difficulties for the Colonial rulers. Many times, such sailors failed to get any boarding facilities. Consequently, because of the unavailability of jobs and failure to do business or to secure other methods to earn money, such sailors tend to involve themselves in criminal activities and use unfair means for their financial gain. Those sailors or fortune hunters created numerous societal issues; they often indulged in drinking, criminal activities, looting, etc. Therefore, the colonial government implemented several methods and rules to restrict the growing misbalance in society. Although the nature of such amalgamation of emigrant sailors, the rising violence, unemployment issue, and administrative difficulties faced by the Colonial government impacted Calcutta heavily. This paper seeks to explore the situation and analyses the impact, actions taken by the colonial government to restrict such issues, and the subsequent breaking down of the notion of white people as a “Civilized Race.”

Keywords: *Fortune Hunters, Sailors, Vagrancy, Drunkenness, Unemployment*

INTRODUCTION

The gravity of the problem surrounding the Fortune Hunters, or the emigrant sailors from Britain, Australia, and France, was such that the Colonial government implied numerous methods and rules to restrict their movement and channel those men for effective social equilibrium. The issues regarding such emigrant sailors were that they were often found to be unemployed, and even the delay in getting employment prompted them to adopt criminal ways to make their living. The rising disruption in society caused by such white emigrant sailors greatly affected the notion of a “Civilized Race” and the colonial rulers' governance. However, sailors were an important colonial categorical tool of the Colonial government. Abhijit Dutta argued that Colonizers' four primary social strata in Calcutta were based on a person's status and income. The first group consisted of elite civilian workers of the East India Company, military commanders, and prominent merchants. The second group comprised junior citizens, lower-ranking military commanders, and smaller merchants who conducted less business than more prominent merchants. Regular traders and shopkeepers were included in the third section, which was further divided into two groups: wealthy traders and shopkeepers and lower-income traders and shopkeepers. Section Four also had vagrants and lower-class, destitute Europeans (Dutta 1992: 26-27).

Mariners were a crucial part of Colonial authority in British India, as promoted by Harald Fischer-Tine. The sailors resided in port districts where most punch houses and pubs were located. The colonial administrators were worried about binge drinking in these types of settings. These actions endangered the health of the colonial state since mariners were necessary for the movement of military forces and economic operations. Consequently, seamen bought booze or rum on board ships (Fisher-Tine 2012: 391). Therefore, the drinking issues of such mariners produced unavoidable circumstances, and the attention of the colonial government was necessary.

The British government gave Calcutta special attention since it was a major seaport, administrative centre, and European metropolis. The Rebellion of 1857 made British colonial society more vulnerable, which resulted in problems with the legitimacy and prestige of the empire. The influx of European sailors created a serious “sailor problem” that took years for

colonial officials to resolve. There was a tense connection between the European sailors and the white establishment because the colonial authority saw European seafarers as native Indians. Unlike other low-class groups, this problem was not readily handled by making them invisible (Fisher-Tine 2009: 121-22). Because the Colonial Government required a workforce for their projects, they were simultaneously a vital prospect and a threat to the Colonial Government.

Mission to Establishing White Colonisation in British India

By the nineteenth century, British supremacy was established across the globe. Historian David Arnold explores the reasons for British attempts to encourage white colonisation in different regions and its failure in British India. He expounded the political, economic, and ideological underpinnings of British strategy and why these colonial aspirations fell short of their full potential. The civilising mission and the conviction that Europeans, mainly the British, were superior to other races served as the main drivers. Economic considerations were also important; the British government encouraged white colonisation in colonies to utilise the land and resources there to broaden its financial base (Arnold 1982: 134).

The Europeans living in India without proper passes from the East India Company were deported till 1833. In October 1792, the Court of Directors of East India Company issued a directive ordering the deportation of deserters from over two dozen warships. In India, soldiers seeking formal release were also turned down for employment even though European aristocracy hired them as grooms, household helpers, and coachmen. In 1823, the Bengal administration was notified of its extreme disapproval of the increasing number of European residents in India and instructed that permission not be allowed for those who would otherwise be deported to Europe to remain in India. The policies, regulations, and methods applied by the colonial rulers were precisely to maintain their white supremacy. The Bengal government monitored the behavior of the whites to protect their supremacy, and those who violated were deported to asylum or home back to England (Arnold: 136). Only 1,253 people were permitted to travel to India between 1814 and 1831 after the Company in London thoroughly examined all applications. Among these were 192 missionaries whose permission to enter the country was granted by the Company's 1813 charter renewal. The remaining individuals included 250 partners or representatives of well-established commercial businesses, 78 attorneys, and 106 indigo growers. A select group of

skilled labourers, musicians, painters, tailors, domestic helpers, and others were permitted admission for private or family-related reasons. Despite lifting restrictions in 1833, by 1858, there were still perhaps no more than 22,000 European non-officials in India. The tropical climate of India, its mortality rate among the Europeans, population density, and larger areas to rule failed to establish a similar kind of colonisation like Australia or Canada (Arnold: 134-35).

Employment Reality in Colonial Bengal

The Sailors who voyaged to Calcutta for employment could not find suitable jobs immediately. Therefore, most sailors in Calcutta roamed the streets during their initial days in Colonial Calcutta. Around fifteen to twenty percent belonged to the 'floating population of the city.' The first census of Calcutta's European population in 1866 listed 11,000 permanent European inhabitants and over 2,000 sailors as transient white members of Calcutta. However, the growing economy of the Colonial government attracted several such fortune hunters. Consequently, overseas exports increased, leading to a rise in European and American vessels sailing to Calcutta. This impacted the city's 'white' community, with more white crews on shore. By the mid-19th century, the 'sailor element' remained significant, with 1,216 European and American ships entering the port of Calcutta in 1863-64, bringing in 27,500 European seamen (Fisher-Tine 2009: 121-123).

It was essential for the white colonisers to employ men for labour and other manual work. The company also sought it necessary to recruit European workers. However, they also wanted to secure their white supremacy of race at the same time. Therefore, the government was unwilling to recruit unnecessarily and did not consider the abundance of Europeans on Indian soil. Hence, the government applied strict measures to restrict the employment of incoming European sailors. Able-bodied men were recruited to do physical labour, and others were sent back to their respective countries.

The major drawbacks faced by the European labourers in British India were their lack of dynamic attitudes and competency compared to the Indians. From the Bentick times, the British administrators realized the difference between attitudes among the labourers and the greater adaptability of new techniques among the Indian labourers. As well as, the cost of hiring and

import of European labour was very costly, nearly \$ 30. So, the British mercantile community preferred Indian labours (Arnold:138-39). Subsequently, for the employment of Indians, the employed agencies had to pay a quarter of the white labour. After the commencement of the East Indian Railway, the railway authority in 1879 claimed that it saved \$ 30,000 by recruiting Indian loco pilots (Arnold: 149).

Vagrancy and Nuisance

It had already been pointed out that abolishing the Emigration Law of 1833 was a major cause behind such a significant influx of sailors coming to Calcutta to seek job opportunities, and their unemployment created vagrancy and nuisance at that time. It is critical to understand the nature of vagrancy and the nuisance of that time. White vagrancy became a significant issue in British India in the 1860s. European ‘loafers,’ mostly ex-soldiers, stranded sailors, and railway men, created a nuisance and tortured the natives after they were intoxicated. The European Vagrancy Act of 1869 was enacted to solve the vagrancy problem among the Europeans, and workhouses were established to involve them in work (De 2008: 109-14).

Sailors in Calcutta were known for their profligacy, rowdyism, and intemperance. Many ships moored in the Calcutta Port for months, providing sailors ample opportunities to spend time there. Many European sailors frequented Lal Bazar and Bow Bazar Street, which became known as Flag Street due to flags on boarding houses and grog shops (Dutta:16). The area was also a hub for drunken brawls, often involving police personnel. Mrs. Rouse, a Christian Missionary working among sailors, reported the murder of a native policeman by a drunken Scotch sailor who paid for his crime on the gallows in July 1880 (Stanford 1962: 17).As a consequence, police control was necessary to reduce such crime rates and the fights and brawls in the effect of the temptation of liquor. Most of the crimes were committed nearliquor shops, taverns, and nearby places (Fisher-Tine 20014: 100).

The port in Calcutta was overcrowded by sailors. The sailors’ home, which could only accommodate 200, was the only safe place for them to live without risking theft or drinking. In many cases, they resided in boarding houses near Flag Street in a very filthy atmosphere where the temptation for liquor was very high, and they got addicted. The uncontrolled lifestyle of the

sailors increased the mortality rates (Gazette 1866: 272). The Merchant Shipping Acts of 1854 and 1862 had given the provision for unwillingness to permit the seamen to leave the ship for the scarcity of demand of employment in any port by the shipping agencies. However, it was unlikely to follow. The climate and temptation to drink made them vulnerable. Boarding Masters only cared for sailors for profit, encouraging them to stimulate drink on their premises. When funds were exhausted from excessive drinking, they turned them into the streets (Gazette 1866: 266-69).

Consuming Pattern and Liquor Preference of the Sailors

Complaints about the sailors' drinking habits appeared extensively in the early 19th century, and those instances were very prevalent at that time, which led the government to take evasive actions. The government suggested reducing liquor shops, providing sober men access to quality coffee, soda water, ginger beer, and lemonade at reasonable rates, introducing a Lock Hospital system for women, and regulating all lodging houses for seamen, emphasizing moral and religious values (Chevers 1864: 51).

The economic disparity among the sailors influenced them to drink low-cost adulterated liquor. In India, the evil of alcohol had permeated all social groups and cultures, not only Europeans and Eurasians. The government had been viewed as the leading player in this matter and an active accomplice. The Trades Association had also brought attention to the type of liquors served to lower-class patrons in some Native American-owned and operated bars. The government had also determined that it must maintain control over authorised vendors in European areas. However, that need also applied to places frequented by sailors, lower-class Eurasians, and the aboriginal population that consumes alcohol. However, the problems regarding the production and import of liquor were of myriad nature and its complexities were also of different natures. It was observed that, in the past, Bengal used a considerable amount of rum, 177,755 gallons in 1864-65. It had subsequently decreased, nevertheless, with 13,847 gallons in 1882-1883. The latter year saw 48,784 gallons from Hong Kong and other parts of British India. This was less than the total consumed in either of the years 1877-1878 and 1864-1865 (Commission 1884: 87). The preference for liquor among the lower-class Europeans was changed from Calcutta Rum

to cheap brandies. The yearly rum consumption in the last five years between 1872-77 was an average of 72,920 gallons; it reduced to 62,018 gallons in 1877-78 and declined to 39,298 gallons in 1878-79. This heavy falling off is ascribed to a preference shown for country spirits in the districts of the 24-Pergunnahs and Dacca, to less demand in Midnapore and Hooghly, and in Calcutta, to the importation of cheap brandies and of Shajehanpore rum, which is sold at lower rates than those charged for Calcutta rum (Gazette 1879: 1234).

Health Degradation and Mortality on Excessive Liquor Consumption

As a consequence of heavy drinking, the health issues of such mariners were degrading quickly, and no such remedies were found to cure them of this addiction. There were also questions regarding the quality of liquor and foods sold to them. Hence, inquiries were made by employing sixteen health officers to monitor the issue (Sanitary Commission 1866: 63). To gain quick profit, many of the shopkeepers, vendors, taverns, and liquor shops sold highly drugged alcohol and mixed other substances with it for profit making. The rise of the dishonesty of the sellers was one of the major causes behind the deteriorating health conditions of the emigrant sailors. Dr. Hugh Macpherson of the Bengal Army in 1860 reported a marked improvement in the health of resident Europeans for the past 30 years due to a healthier moral tone. However, non-residents experienced a significant mortality rate, with nearly half of the deaths among European Protestants occurring among those without a fixed occupation or house in Calcutta. The majority of the victims were sailors visiting the port, and cholera deaths were attributed to the consumption of unwholesome liquors, diseased pork, sunstroke, unripe fruits, and sometimes muddy river water.

Dr. Norman Chevers, Principal of the Bengal Medical College, estimated the average annual deaths among sailors to be nearly 290 (Gazette: 262). As a consequence of such instances, the colonial government had to restrict liquor sellers, ban unwholesome beer, and look after the safety of the sailors who were becoming prey to the sellers' mischief in the Calcutta marketplaces. The colonial government also took it upon themselves to stop the growing vices in Calcutta by implementing thorough supervision. They took it upon themselves to look for the safety and security of the sailors. In terms of excessive liquor consumption, the colonial government found no better solution than to look for the quality of products consumed and

produced. The colonial government also employed strict inquiries to keep the health of such sailors because, during the spread of cholera, such incidents posed a significant threat to the government and the spread of cholera. Strict supervision of health was necessary to detect Cholera, plague, syphilis, and so on. It was believed that those who went to the marketplaces (Bazar) were prone to deteriorated health conditions, either through drinking or visiting red-light areas.

Reforms in the Sailor Conditions

The sailors' uncontrolled lives in waterways created issues in the form of accidents, shipwrecks, collisions, and traffic, resulting in the decline of the Calcutta ports' condition (Bengal Presidency 1867: 108). The colonial government took severe actions and measures to secure its rule and administrative authority. Therefore, negligence in duty, offence, violence, and discrepancies were severely treated. It was also witnessed that the city's white citizens were disproportionately affected by a large sailor's community since the 1780s (Fischer-Tine 2014: 95-97). While many came to India in search of wealth, specific notable incidents cast doubt on the idea of white supremacy. The government, by the enactment of Act XII of 1859, terminated the pilots from their services being intoxicated while on duty (Marine Department 1865-66:6). Employment conditions improved substantially in the port sector after implementing a system to obtain lead apprentices from the training ships in Great Britain. The improvement of the moral conditions of the sailors and workers was witnessed at that time; a more significant proportion were able to read and write, and they also adopted the method of remitting savings previously expended in debauchery. By 1866, the number of criminal or other misconduct cases against such sailors had significantly reduced. Only one trial was before the Marine Court, which was too trivial (Administration 1885: 16).

The vagrancy among the European was high due to the rising issues of unemployment. Therefore, the colonial government established the Vagrancy Acts in 1869 and amended it in 1874. The primary aim was to secure their placement via special supervision and deport those who were unfit to reside in British India. Many of such vagrant sailors either ended up in jail or the hospital. Therefore, the government was very proactive in looking after such vagrants. The government was taking strict measures to identify vagrants, and as for the best possible solution,

they were either employed suitably or returned to their respective countries. The able-bodied vagrants were easily employed for menial work. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in 1877 to get rid of running of extra burdening of shelter houses merged the alms houses with workhouses.

The governor believed that it was economically sustainable and discouraged vagrancy (Police Administration 1877:5). The merger of workhouses and almshouses was found beneficial. In 1878, it had been measured that 40 sailors were sheltered in almshouses in Calcutta, of whom 14 were shipped to another city, 13 left the almshouse, 5 got employment opportunities, 2 were sent to hospital, and 1 person was transferred to the workhouse (Souttar 1879:6).

The sailors who came to British India were vulnerable to its climate. They were more tempted towards intoxicants and debauchery. The shipowners were responsible for providing security on the first visit to the hostile land. Captain Reddie proposed that ship owners should refrain the crews from discharging in a port unless they provide support and re-ship them if no employment is found. The Board of Trade of the Government of India demanded the attention of the Lieutenant-Governor on such matters. The measure was proposed in a letter to the Secretary of State in 1865 (Gazette 1866: 259-60). Subsequently, the colonial government tried to impose a ban on the heavy drinking of the sailors and educate them to have a better social life and dignity. The government at first restricted the selling of alcohol and kept it limited only to the license holder. The government also restricted the opening and closing hours of such shops. This action helped tremendously in restricting the previously unrestricted sale of alcohol and also brought down the uncontrolled consumption of liquors. The Board of Revenue regularly investigated the nearest liquor shops that the sailors and soldiers had resided or crossed. The government also needed to be ready to give up a sizable chunk of its excise tax income (Abkari July 1903:96).

The government focused on the sanitation of sailor homes. To control the overcrowding of sailors at Flag Street, the government shifted the sailor homes from the Lal Bazar areas. The residing capacity was enhanced in new sailor homes. The colonial government tried to reduce the rising unsocial activities through sanitation and behavioural control (Fischer-Tine 2009: 135). The Christian Missionaries were very concerned regarding the immoral activities of job-seeking, fortune-seeking mariners or sailors. The missionaries uplifted them through moral

conversion, truth, and dignity. Time and again, the missionaries were seen trying to convert and preach to them the ways of God and holiness. A home for needy European mariners opened in 1837, and the Calcutta Mariners's Friend Society was founded in 1822. The home had a savings bank, a library, and well-decorated rooms. Every day, a resident superintendent led Divine Service, and on Sundays, Christian missionaries preached to rehabilitate the morale of the sailors. The missionary's upliftment programme decreased the crime rate and social discrepancies. Mrs. Rouse contended that in 1872, Christian missionaries in Calcutta disregarded European seafarers' moral and social advancement. Missionary efforts were only partially effective since sailors could not be entirely freed from corrupt occupations and relationships, even though the home's membership increased significantly (Dutta:17-18).

As already mentioned above, the quality of the alcohol was always a concern for the colonial government. The price reduction increased the consumption of cheap quality liquor. As a consequence of cheap quality, it also affected significantly upon the health of the sailors. Such kinds of liquors were sold by the licensed liquor shop owners. The colonial government was needed to look after the increasing number of alcohol shop-owners. The Fair Haven Lodge of the Independent Order of Good Templars was established for the welfare of sailors and soldiers. The society was concerned about the too many licensed liquor shops on Bentinck Street and near the Kidderpore Docks. The volunteers of the associations recommend that licenses be granted and renewed with more careful consideration and that 'Local Opinion' be incorporated into the new 'Excise Bill' in every instance (Abkari April 1904: 60-61).The Rev. Shaw, a Methodist Episcopal Mission to Seamen in Calcutta, advocated for different moods of alteration, such as reading books and light beverages such as coffee. Shaw urged the Temperance Federation to send books, newspapers and magazines to the Seamen's library and coffee room (Abkari July 1904: 95).

The Indian Government appointed a committee to examine the reforms needed in the existing excise system. The Excise Committee of 1905-06 recommended that the government look after the issue of drinking and vagrancy and provided several solutions to the government and local administration. Among their significant observations, they found that the liquor shop owners were greedy, and they used to trigger drinking. Therefore, the committee suggested that it was

necessary to restrict those liquor shop owners and put some responsibility on them to look after the safety of their customers. Because they were the primary witness and immediate supervisors of all the incidents close to their liquor shops, it was strictly suggested that the liquor shop owners be charged for any misconduct from the drinkers on their premises or in liquor shops. If any license-holder liquor shop owners were found to be neglecting the order and convicted for breaching the law, that shop owner was to be charged, punished and, according to the gravity of the situation, that shopkeeper's license would be cancelled. If such methods were applied, the quarrels, immoral activities, and acts of violence could only be subdued (Orders of the Government 1907: 5-7).

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it was inevitable that the colonial government faced many issues regarding job hunting and fortune-seeking mariners and sailors in the mid-nineteenth century. The abolishment of the Emigration Law allowed lakhs of sailors coming from Europe and other countries to colonial Bengal, either to find jobs or do business. However, most of them had to face unemployment and financial crises, and it was hard for those persons to either get or secure accommodation, food, or shelter in colonial Bengal due to the lack of boarding availability for sailors. Therefore, such sailors had to live a vagrant life on the streets and corners of Colonial Bengal.

It was those unemployed sailors and mariners who took up heavy drinking, and such drinking resulted in the increase of criminal activities in society. Such notorious activities from such sailors heavily hampered the society of Bengal. Therefore, the notion of a "Civilized Race" was hampered severely by those people. Therefore, the government had to enforce special laws, regulations, and restrictions on the sailors and alcohol shopkeepers. The government also had to appoint new officers and employ special police officers to find the vagrants and the loafers on the street. Such officers were used to detect them, and after that, only the able-bodied men were put into labour work, and others were sent to their respective nations. The government also realised that such sailors were crucial for their business, labour work, manual labour and various other profitable aspects.

Therefore, such sailors were not to be discarded that easily. Hence, some specific measures were taken, such as providing licenses to some specific shopkeepers to sell liquor, employing a Port Magistrate to ensure the decorum of the port and so on. The government also restricted the consumption rate of alcohol. It used a special task force of medical practitioners and doctors to look after the safety of such sailors against the woeful quality of alcohol, which was affecting the health of sailors. The government also took extreme measures with the help of the Christian Missionaries to educate such sailors and to make them morally fit for society. Therefore, it had been pronounced that the government tried to efficiently manage the critical issue of the vagrancy and drinking problem created by the sailors. It was also crucial for the government to minimise the damage done by such sailors. Therefore, shopkeepers were held responsible for any misconduct happening at their premises. That's why it had been time and again pointed out that the Colonial Bengal Government handled the issue of such immigrant sailors in such a way that it only helped the betterment of the society and upliftment in the woeful conditions of such sailors.

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