

Calcutta Research Group cordially welcomes you to the Friday Lectures @CRG, on 6 June 2014.

Prof. Ranabir Samaddar will speak on 'Policing a Riot-torn City: Kolkata, 16-18 August 1946'.

(Abstract)

The police as an arm of legality have to operate in the field of illegality. While it knows the rules on the basis of which it will relate to prisons and other legal institutions of punishment, and this is precisely its institutional function of discipline, the Great Calcutta Killings raised the question: Can discipline be the basis of its relation with an illegal entity – the crowd? In order to manage legality will it not have to employ modes of security and therefore surveillance on groups of extremely mobile bodies? Police is trained to deal with the organisation of an isolated illegality. Its institutional practices create expert knowledge of delinquent behaviour. But what if the society turns delinquent and what will it do when it will find that its function of discipline cannot automatically ensure security of the population? The police guards against delinquency, but has it ever learnt properly to secure city as territory and thereby secure population?

The phenomenon I discuss here was evident in the Great Calcutta Riots. It related to the mutually constitutive relation between the police and the crowd, which makes the connection between reason of the state and reason of governance highly contingent. In the case of the Great Calcutta Killings was it that the colonial state was breaking down, it had no strategic reason any more, and hence there was a loss of direction to the police apparatus in those calamitous days? Or, was it that with the failure of the reason of governance in the form of police rationality in those times, the reason of the state made no further sense?

The police with its manifold functions relevant to security, protection of life, property, public health, education, trade, commerce, housing, etc., make sense only in a city. Yet, in the Great Calcutta Riots the police appeared as a fragmentary institution at sea swimming aimlessly in the swirling waves of different demands of life – politics, commerce, protection, security, possession and control of urban territory, and management of risk.

The apparatus of police built by the colonial state was based fundamentally on the obedience of the individuals and individual subjection to the institution of law and order - a total and exhaustive obedience in the conduct of individuals to whatever the imperatives of the colonial state were in relation to protection of economy, commerce, trade, education, health, territory, and security of life. The success of the apparatus depended on a smooth relation between these imperatives and thus between different functions of the police. The Great Calcutta Riots showed that there may be moments when the smooth relation will break down, when the bounds of obedience will be broken, and politics will be conducted no longer in civilian frame, but in the frame of war. In those moments the link between the reason of state and that of government may collapse. The complete failure of police as an apparatus will come out in the open.

These issues will come up in the frame of a discussion on policing a riot-torn city, Kolkata 16-18 August 1946.