

Socio-Spatial Explanation of Crime: A Study on Kolkata Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

Crime is an integral part of human society. The pathological disorder of crime varies spatially. A prominent difference in the nature of crime can be envisaged in rural and urban areas. Urban areas often show more number of reported crimes than its surrounding rural counter parts and the nature of crime is more complicated in urban areas. The present study tries to unfold the nature of urban crime with special emphasis on Property crimes and Drugging, in the light of various social theories of crime. To have a better understanding of these theoretical explanations of criminality, Kolkata have been chosen as a field of ground reality. Kolkata as a melting pot creates tremendous forces which enhances huge accumulation of people from various socio-cultural backgrounds help to create distinct neighbourhoods with distinct spatial entity. This kind of variability in environment within a city generates different forms of crime and delinquency.

Key words: *Crime, Conflict, Subculture, Urbanism, Labelling.*

Introduction

Criminality is like an instinct in human nature. For a long time, criminality is defined in the context of biological or psychological characteristics of the offenders. From this point of view, the causes of criminality entirely depend upon the individual traits of the offender. This kind of an explanation diverts our view from the greater social and environmental context within which a crime was being committed. There is nothing wrong to say that a crime is a kind of mal activity which is carried out by an individual or a certain group of people. Their aspiration to commit such offences cannot be solely attributed to their personality traits. Even if it is attributed to their personality traits, then one have to remember that environment and

society has a great role to play in shaping up one's personality. There are numerous theories which tried to link the factors like environment, poverty, unemployment, cultural norms, and societal rules with the nature of crime. Social changes brought changes in the nature of crime. In rural societies, where the communities are closely knitted, the rate of crime has to be lower than the urban counter parts. Urban centers are full of heterogeneous population with high density. Due to their varied nature and different place of origin, urban community is not well interwoven. High rate of migration, huge population gathering, creation of slums often create dangerous subgroups or 'Residuum' (Phillips, 1977; Jones, 1982).

Objective and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to explain the causes of certain forms of urban crimes and their spatiality (like theft and drugging) from the view points of different social theories. Ecological theory of Chicago School, Situational theory of crime analysis, Urbanism Hypothesis of Louis Wirth, Theory of Social conflict, Radical Approach of Criminology and views of Cultural criminology are considered for this

explanatory work. Apart from the theoretical justification some statistical methods like bivariate and multivariate correlation; simple mapping techniques are being used. The study has been supplemented by the data support collected from Head Quarters of Kolkata Police and Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The police station wise data have been converted into the ward wise data according to their place of occurrences of criminal incidences.

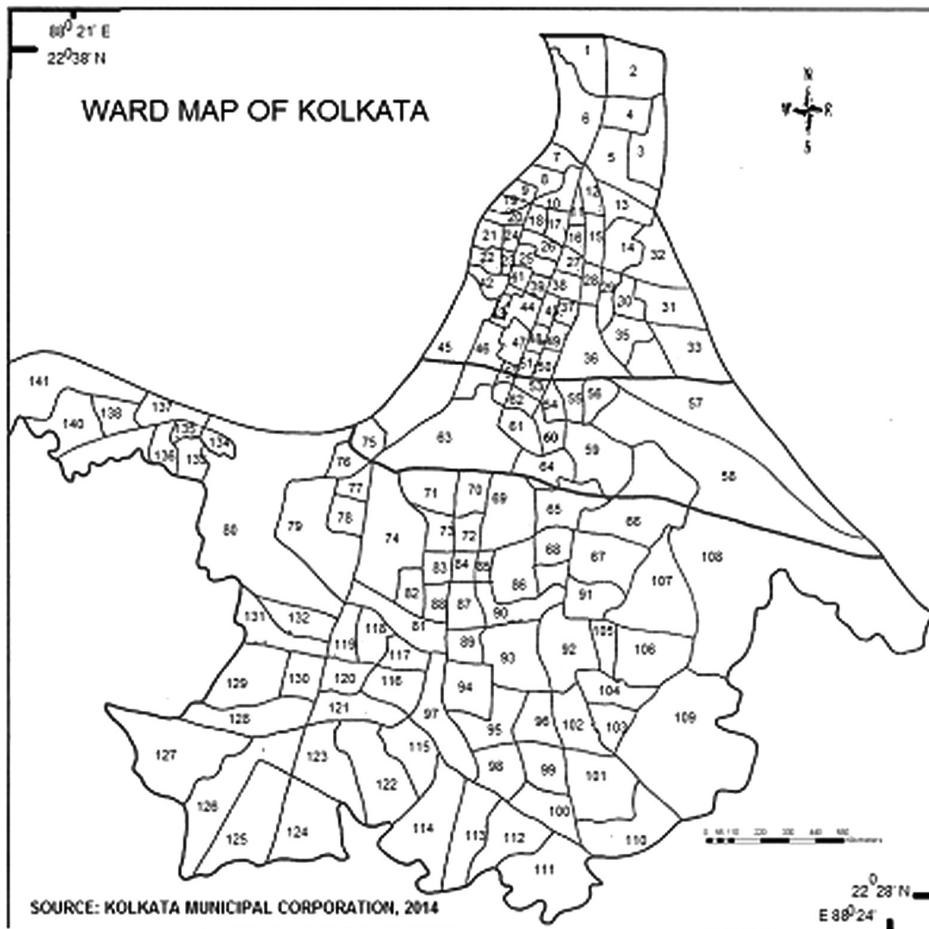


Figure 1

Study Area

To understand the phenomena of crime from various theoretical standpoints, Kolkata has been chosen (Figure 1). This city has a multiplicity in its nature of demography, economy and above of all cultural heterogeneity. Thus the criminal incidents show a varied nature keeping pace with socio-spatial variability. Total numbers of one forty one wards are there in Kolkata metropolitan area. The wards are stretched from the bank of Hooghly river in the west to Eastern Metropolitan (EM) Bypass in the east; North 24 Parganas in the north to South 24 Parganas in the south. Nature and intensity of crime varies from the port areas of west to real estate dominated east of Kolkata.

Environments and areas of high rate of offence

From the view points of ecological understanding of crime, there are certain neighborhoods which are demarcated as

areas with high offence rate. The slum areas are often seen to be highly crime prone in nature. The social constructs of the slum areas make those areas vulnerable to criminality. The residents are often seen to commit offence. In these slum areas, social disorganization is the main reason for criminality (Shaw and McKay, 1942). Social disorganization is linked with multiple occupancy dwellings, abundant properties, broken windows, residences of industrial labours etc. (Bottoms et al., 1992). (Plate 1 and 2 See page 188). In Kolkata there are few pockets which are known for frequent occurrences of property crimes like theft and pick pocketing. These types of crimes are mainly carried by the people who are in need of money or greed of money. A huge number of cases of property crimes are reported in the economically well off neighborhoods (Figure 2, 3). It is quite obvious that the offenders will always target the posh areas for committing property crimes.

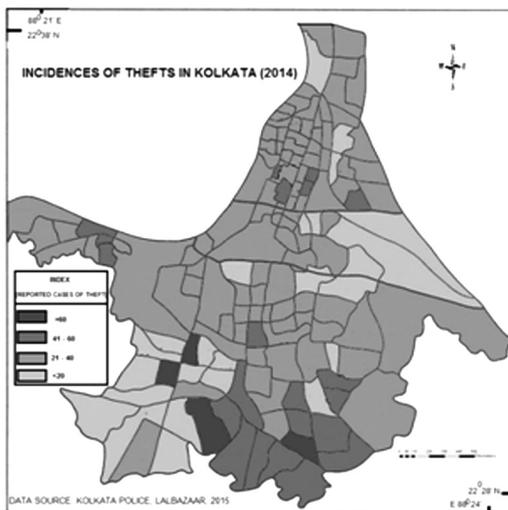


Fig. 2

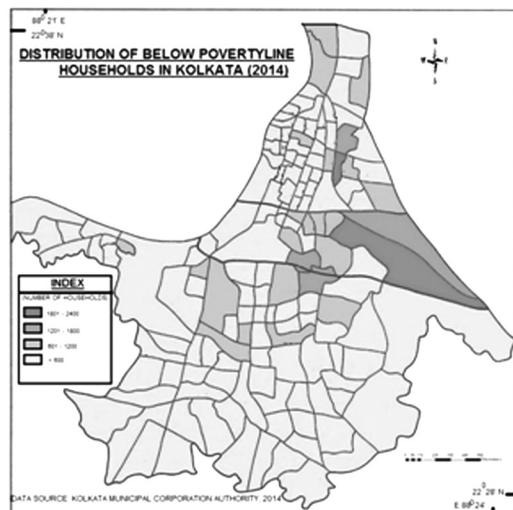


Fig. 3

It is clearly seen that the wards with highest percentage of Below Poverty Line households are showing the lowest number of reported cases of theft. From the view point of Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1968) it is logical for the offenders not to choose the poverty stricken areas for committing the theft (Table 2). In those relatively economically backward areas the outcome the offence will be low. Another issue may lead to the commitment of the property crime that is unemployment. Unemployment is also associated with wealth or lack of it. The non working population often chooses to do some petty property crimes for the sake of survival. The unemployment leads to poverty, which in turn give rise of property crimes (Table 1). If crime increases with unemployment, this might indicate a feeling of unfair treatment,

but it might also show that the resultant inequality in economic position, the pure fact of poverty, or boredom and free time might be factors in the equation of crime. But there are some other views about this explanation of property crimes in relation to unemployment. In fact, in case of Kolkata non working population or marginal workers concentration is not showing any significant relation with the incidences of property crimes (Table 3). Crow et al. (1989), Box (1987), Long and Witte (1981) all conclude that crime and unemployment are related, but the relationship is not constantly strong; and that it is probably true for very localized pockets than for an entire urban center. This correlation is consistent in the case of young males mainly. Unemployment is mostly associated with the juveniles who commit property crimes.

Table 1 : Correlation between BPL Household, Nonworking Population and Marginal Workers of Kolkata

		BPL HOUSEHOLD	NON WORKER	MARGINAL WORKER
BPL HOUSEHOLD	Pearson Correlation	1	0.602**	0.509**
	Sig.(2 tailed)		.000	.000
	N	141	141	141
NON WORKER	Pearson Correlation	0.602**	1	0.822**
	Sig.(2 tailed)	.000		.000
	N	141	141	141
MARGINAL WORKER	Pearson Correlation	0.509**	0.822**	1
	Sig.(2 tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	141	141	141

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Table 2 : Correlation between BPL Household and Property Crimes in Kolkata

		PROPERTY CRIMES	BPL HOUSEHOLD
PROPERTY CRIMES	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.533**
	Sig.(2 tailed)		.000
	N	141	141
BPL HOUSEHOLD	Pearson Correlation	-0.533**	1
	Sig.(2 tailed)	.000	
	N	141	141

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Table 3 : Correlation between Working Composition and Property Crimes

		NON WORKER	MARGINAL WORKER	PROPERTY CRIMES
NON WORKER	Pearson Correlation	1	0.822**	-0.271**
	Sig.(2 tailed)		.000	.000
	N	141	141	141
MARGINAL WORKER	Pearson Correlation	0.822**	1	-0.225**
	Sig.(2 tailed)	.000		.000
	N	141	141	141
PROPERTY CRIMES	Pearson Correlation	-0.271**	-0.225**	1
	Sig.(2 tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	141	141	141

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Crime as a Natural Manifestation

Social conflict theory views the problem property crime in a different view. The conflict view gives more recognition to the fact that within any sizable society there groups with conflicting needs and values. From this emerges a general discussion of struggle which arise over power, status and the desirable, but often scarce, resources of society. This conflict can be generated

through the economic inequality. This idea of conflict in terms of economic inequality has a long history of discussion. Karl Marx (1848) predicted the collapse of capitalist society through the conflict between labour class and the capitalists. Economic inequality creates a sense of deprivation among the people living below poverty line. This feeling of deprivation often takes a form delinquent behaviour. Economic

inequality draws a line between the haves and have-nots in the society. Around this line of separation a gray zone of conflict arises. The poor people feel exploited by the well off people. From Marxian view point of crime delinquent attitude of the exploited people against the upper class people is a natural manifestation of their struggle. Crime is one of the means of opposing the oppressors, though Marx thought that crime is an imperfect form of opposition.

Eastern Metropolitan Bypass is a very important ring road laid on the periphery of Kolkata. Here in these above mentioned plates an important issue of socio economic gap has been depicted. The part of Beliaghata slum has been shown in the pictures (Plate 3 and 5, see page 189) which is situated along the EM Bypass (Plate 4, see page 189) and just at distance of 70 feet, on the opposite side of Beliaghata slum there is Hayat Regency (Plate 5, see page 190), a posh hotel. The physical distance may be negligible, but the social distance between the two sides of Eastern Metropolitan Bypass is immeasurable. It not just a matter of economic inequality here, but the cultural gap in this piece of urban landscape is more pronounced. The people of Beliaghata slum and the people who are attached with that posh hotel belong to two entirely different societies. The social organization of this area is dominated by the idea of differential association of people. A conflict could arise between these two groups who belong to different cultural background (Sellin, 1938). Very often the slum dwellers of Kolkata are pressurized to evacuate their residential places by some real estate developers. Their vision is to make money by making the city landscape beautiful by making well

fashioned high rises. A conflict between the slum dwellers and these powerful groups of real estate developers is inevitable. Here, crime is not an abnormality, but rather is the natural response to an attack on their way of life (Vold, 1958). Very often the economically powerless groups lose their home in the process of slum eradication and becoming homeless they often become to commit street crimes like snatching, theft, assault of general public. This kind of cultural conflicts and conflict between two separate power groups could give rise to the formation of youth gangs. This would generate unsophisticated organized crimes like burglary, robbery, vandalism in the urban areas (Dahrendrof, 1959). Formation and activities of youth gangs are symbols of urban subculture.

Urban Subculture

Kolkata is said to be the cultural capital of India. The rich cultural heritage of this city is celebrated throughout the country. But culture has a role to play behind criminality. Cultural criminology studies the phenomena of crime in correlation with culture, style, media culture, identity and space (Ferrell and Saundars, 1995). In urban centers like Kolkata, the local culture and way of living of the inhabitants are very much influenced by the representation of society by the media. Media symbolizes certain group of society (young people mainly) as dangerous, notorious, as a threat to society. They are represented as folk devils (Cohen, 1972). These groups become feared, and ostracized, they were seen as in need of greater control. This kind of rejection is a major cause behind the formation of criminal subculture in urban society of metropolitan cities like

Kolkata. Kolkata, which is famous for the traditional Bengali culture in terms of cloths, decent speech, common rituals, but one, can find a parallel stream of culture also. A group of young people are following a particular style, derogatory speech, reckless life style which is quite antagonist to the main stream culture of Kolkata. This is some symbolic issues of subculture. This subculture continuously gathers more like minded people. These communities exist both at street level and may diffused over large geographic areas. In each case the shared style and culture can both unite them and protect them from discovery by those wishing to control their behaviour (Jewkes, 2003). These cultural communities give rise to the illicit subcultures. In Kolkata, the problem of drugging highly associated as a part of urban subculture. This kind of addiction of substance can be seen both in higher and lower economic classes of Kolkata. The nature of substance of abuse changes, but the problem remains the same. There is a seduction of committing this kind of offence which is almost addictive

in nature (Katz, 1988).

Reported cases are high in ward number 127, 128, 125 and 109 in South Kolkata (Figure 4). All the wards are resided by a mixed population from different socioeconomic background. For example ward number 109 (Kalikapur Area) have large number of residential complexes, inhabited by the economically well off people along with the unrecognized slum areas. The slum areas (beside EM Bypass) of ward number 109 are known for drug peddling. Young boys from this ward are often arrested for drug consumption and selling of drug to others. These buyers are mainly belongs to higher class people. On the other hand in case of ward number 59 (Tiljala and Topsia area), the situation is totally dominated by the slum dwellers. Tiljala area has one of the largest recognized slums in terms of population and spatial extension both. The subculture of this unhealthy neighborhood makes the youth often fall into prey of drugging.

Urbanism and Crime

Crime is a major form of social pathological disorder in urban areas. Urbanism can be seen as a way of living which somehow inflames the problem of criminality. Louis Wirth (1938) has contributed his most influential work to explain the sociological views of urbanism. The Chicago School (Park, 1952) is also best known for ecological explanations of urban areas. Thus, urbanism is seen as entailing a distinctive form of social organization, characterized by impersonal relations, social isolation, deviance and many other factors. The segmentalized human relationships in the city weaken the moral sanity and heighten

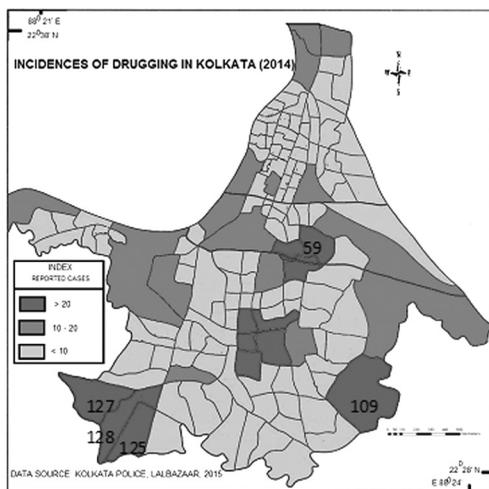


Figure 4

the sense of instability and insecurity (Weber, 1921). Urbanism has an effect on the nature of crime. The lack of societal bonding between the urban inhabitants helps to break the rigid social structure and render informal control on individual behaviour almost ineffective (Wirth, 1938). Thus, cities are more conducive to normlessness and create an environment of deviant activities. If we investigate into the wide range of demographic, cultural or economic factors of urban crime, it will show a difference between the nature of crime in rural areas and urban areas. In case Kolkata, this is also true. The surrounding rural areas have a distinct nature of crime than Kolkata. The nature of crime changes through the rural urban continuum. But it is a matter of controversy. Dewey (1960) argues that there is no strong relationship between among demographic and socio-cultural variables that were thought to form rural urban continuum. Thus, the main thrust should be given on the basic dimensions of inter-metropolitan variation which gives rise of variation in the nature of delinquency. Urban social structure plays the key role in this intra-urban variability of crime and deviance (Berry and Horton, 1970).

Conclusion

The idea of deviant behaviour is very much dependent on the social consensus. No behaviour is criminal or deviant until it is defined and there by labeled by a section of society or by the entire society. To call something a crime is therefore only a reaction to a particular type of behaviour, a reaction that marks the behaviour out as unacceptable to other members of society. That is why the concept of crime differs from

place to place. For example, alcoholism is not a criminal offence in many western countries. But in the cultural milieu of Kolkata taking alcohol is not a sign of decent culture. Even taking alcohol in public places is a matter of obscenity. According to IPC section 268, a person can be arrested for creating nuisance in public after having alcohol. Social labeling is a very important clause in marking an activity as criminal in India. Societal norms and views differ from to rural to urban areas. The moral values and norms keep on changing from rural to urban setups. Thus, the labelling of activities as crime also changes in rural and urban setup. Above of all labelling, the act has to be a violation of law and then only it will be considered as a crime. In our criminal justice system, the prosecution goes only for the offender irrespective of their social cultural background. In legal view one person who committed crime is labeled as a criminal. But ethno-methodology looks at the offenders' position in the social structure. In the urban areas, a man goes through a complicated societal interaction and complex set of cultural multiplicity. This kind of social construct creates some hurdles that make a person offender. In Kolkata, there are certain areas which are perceived to crime prone by the common man. There is a chance of fallacy. For example, the port areas of Kolkata are considered to be a place where smuggling of various foreign goods occurs. Common men often label the entire area (which actually means the entire population) as crime prone, which is illogical. As a consequence of this kind labelling, often the population of these areas remain excluded from the main stream population. This kind of social exclusion

leads to more criminality in the population of that area. Formal labelling is not always a desirable way of controlling crime but informal approach of mutual inclusion of different class of people in a common social platform can lead an informal crime control approach and social cohesion in urban areas.

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