



GRAVE CRIMES AND OFFENCES IN THE NORTHERN COASTAL DISTRICTS OF MADRAS PRESIDENCY

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Cite This Article: Dr. B. Roja, "Grave Crimes and Offences in the Northern Coastal Districts of Madras Presidency", *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Page Number 22-29, 2018.

Abstract:

The subject of crime has varied interpretation at different places and at different times, but at the bottom crime is nothing but failure to live up to the recognized standard of the society. An act done by a person intended or not intended which cause death or grievous hurt or any damage or lost of property without permission of the owner was said to be an offence. Crime was inevitable in the Northern Coastal Districts of Madras Presidency as it was densely populated, well flourished with fertile agricultural lands and agency tracts inhabited by numerous criminal tribes. Cognizable offense and non-cognizable offenses were dealt under the Indian Penal Code and the culprits were punished. Various grave crimes such as murder, dacoity, robbery, theft and other crimes like cheating, forgery, counterfeit of currency, infanticide, culpable homicide, rapes, etc., were of frequent occurrence in this region. The motives for these crimes were political, socio-economic reasons, communal causes, faction fights, family disputes, sexual jealousy, labour troubles, unseasonal conditions and other offences.

Key Words: Grave Crime, Offences, Civil Procedure Code, Criminal Procedure Code, Code of Evidence, Criminal Tribes, Cheating, Forgery, Counterfeiting, Kidnapping.

The Northern coastal districts of the erstwhile Madras Presidency of the British India included the districts of Ganjam, Jeypore, Vizagapatam, West Godavari, East Godavari, Kistna, Guntur and Nellore.¹ The region included the Northern most part of the present Andhra Pradesh state and the Southern part of Orissa state, also known as Coastal Andhra region.² In 1936, the districts of Jeypore and Ganjam along with some parts of the Vizagapatam were transferred to the newly formed Orissa Province.³ Most of the geographical areas consists of three natural divisions namely, the delta, the uplands and the agency tracts with long coastline. Crime was inevitable as it was densely populated, well flourished with fertile agricultural lands and agency tracts inhabited by numerous criminal tribes. Both primary and the secondary source materials are used to study various grave crimes of this region under socio- political, economic, religious conditions.

For the administrative convenience the British in India had codified a serious of laws such as Indian Penal Code, Civil Procedure Code, Criminal Procedure Code and Code of Evidence based on the principles of English law, which could be applied to the Indian conditions. The first law commission presided over by Lord Macaulay was the Indian Penal Code of 1860 and it came into force in 1862.⁴ This code dealt with the important parts of substantive and procedural civil and criminal law. These codes explained and clarified the meaning of the rules of law in India which were powerful instruments for the expansion of British jurisprudence. Sir Fredrick Pollock described the process of the introducing of English law into India in 1895. The main function of law in the society was to preserve stability and ensure security against disorder.⁵ According to the Indian Penal Code there was no particular definition of crime, but it made a distinction by two types, cognizable offense and non-cognizable offense. Under cognizable crime the police made inquire into the case when reported or come to notice without the reference of magisterial authority. The non-cognizable crime was investigated by the police only after receiving orders from the magistracy.⁶ Offenses such as murder, theft, robbery, dacoity, cheating, forgery, counterfeiting, kidnapping, destruction of any private or government property such as public buildings, forest products, railway stations and lines, etc., under the Indian Penal Code were considered as crimes and the culprits were punished.⁷

Concept of Crime:

Violation of the law is failure to live up to the recognized standard of the community and it becomes a crime. The subject of crime has varied interpretation at different places and at different times, but at the bottom crime is nothing but failure to live up to the recognized standard of the society. Social life is maintained by the preservation and maintenance of law and when these laws are jeopardized, the society punishes it as crime.⁸ When offence was committed, a punishment is awarded to eliminate the wrong doers from the society. The word crime is 'to accuse' has a Sanskrit root verb '*kri*' which means 'to act'⁹ and the word 'offence' is denoted as an act which was made punishable under the Indian Penal Code. An offence committed by any person was liable to punishment under this code. An act done by a person intended or not intended which cause death or grievous hurt or any damage or lost of property without permission of the owner was said to be an offence. The things done in the exercise of the right of private defense was not an offence.¹⁰ In general, the term crime is defined as an act punishable by law. The punishments for the offences in India included fines, imprisonment, transportation of life and death sentences.¹¹ The punishments were awarded to the wrong doers through the rules

of Indian Penal Code.¹² The punishments were rigorous with hard labour and the other was simple imprisonment. The fines were of two types individual and collective. Under various sections such as 238,302, 303, 392to 399, 402, 449 to 452, 454, 455, 457 to 460 of the Indian Penal Code, different offences were dealt. The offences such as murder was dealt under sections 302, 303, dacoity under sections 395, 396, 399, 402, robbery under sections 392,393,394,397,398, housebreaking under sections 449 to 452,454,455,457 to 460, of the Indian Penal Code.¹³

Motives for Crimes:

The motives for crimes were social, economical, political and religious. Most of the murders were related to family disputes and sexual jealousies,¹⁴ where as dacoity, house breaking, cattle theft were mainly for economic reasons. The crimes in the Northern coastal districts of the Madras Presidency were related to political, socio-economical and religious offences such as factional riots, labour troubles, agrarian strikes, communal tensions, and other offences.¹⁵ The people of this region responded greatly to the freedom struggle through agitations and participated in the national movement for the Indian Independence which resulted in political unrest. Communal riots and disturbances between the religious groups also contributed to a number of crimes in these districts. Crime is always committed in one form or another and the type and the magnitude of crime changed from place to place. Most of the region covered with agency tracts and the forest offences were common such as theft and smuggling of the forest products.¹⁶ Some of the habitual criminals who committed various types of crime were notified under the Criminal Tribes Act XXVII of 1871, most of them were wandering tribes.¹⁷ Such criminals were punished under the Indian Penal code.¹⁸ Under the Madras Children Act 1920, nothing was an offence committed by child less than twelve years of age.¹⁹ Punishments for such crimes and offences were dealt under the Indian Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, Civil Procedure Code, the Evident Act and other related Acts.

Classifications of Crimes:

The crime can be classified into professional, organized, spontaneous and instantaneous.²⁰ The grave crimes were murder, dacoity, robbery, theft and other crimes like cheating, forgery, counterfeit of currency, infanticide, culpable homicide, rapes, etc., were of frequent occurrence in the Northern coastal Andhra region of Madras Presidency. Other common crimes were theft or destruction of the government property such as the public buildings, telegraphic lines, canals, bridges, roads, offences related to the railways were thefts in the running passenger trains from the passengers, passenger sheds, goods shed and yards, mail and luggage vans and railway materials.²¹ The public nuisance was an act of illegal omission which causes any common injury, danger, obstruction or annoyance to the public. Negligent act likely to spread infection of disease dangerous to life were punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which extended to six months, or with fine, or with both.²² The following are some of the crimes and offences occurred in the area of the study.²³

Theft:

This is an offence related to the property, whoever intending to take dishonestly any movable property out of the possession of any person without that person's consent was said to commit theft. The punishment awarded to the culprit for the theft was imprisonment for a term of three years or fine or both.²⁴ Sometimes the culprit was punished with imprisonment for a term of seven years and was also liable to fine depending upon the intensity of the theft. In the coastal Andhra, theft cases mostly were jewel thefts, cycle thefts, pick pocketing and thefts of telegraph and telephonic lines.

Cattle Theft:

Cattle thefts were very common and caused very serious loss both direct and indirectly to the community mainly dependent upon the agriculture. Cattle were stolen for their hide, personal jealousies, for consumption and to restore by payment of black mail.²⁵ Sometimes the cattle were poisoned due to personal jealousies. Such offenders were punished under the section 215 of the Indian Penal Code.²⁶ Most of the cattle thefts were committed by the members of the criminal tribes and the tribes *Dombas* of Jeypore district were famous for cattle theft for the sake of skins. The system of branding with distinctive letters and numbers on the skins which had died a natural death or been honestly killed, and the possession by the tribals, skin merchants or others of unbranded skins was considered as suspicious and were arrested.²⁷ The *Lambadis* in the district East Godavari, Kistna, Guntur were mostly accounted for cattle thefts.²⁸ The introduction of this system had resulted in the decrease of the cattle theft in most of the these districts of Madras Presidency. The annual numbers of thefts were large as this region contains many nomadic castes and tribes whose hereditary occupation was crime, vast illiterate population with low standard of living, less earning abilities and opportunities, unemployment and the high prices of the food grain were also a motive for the theft. Cattle theft was widely prevalent form of crime in these districts as it contained vast agency tracts.

Robbery:

Robbery is either theft or extortion, this offence is committed in the presence of the person by putting him in fear of death or hurt, then and there to deliver up the thing to carry away things by force. Punishment for committing robbery was rigorous imprisonment for a term of ten to fourteen years and was also liable to be

fined. Highway robberies, field robberies, house robberies and mail robbery were commonly occurred in this region.²⁹

Dacoity:

Dacoity was the legal term used by the British in India for a system of robbery by gangs and it was derived from 'daka parna' meaning to plunder.³⁰ The dacoits were robbers by profession and dacoity was used to mean any robbery carried out by a gang of not less than five persons with a common cause. The crime, dacoity was said to be committed when five or more persons conjointly commit or attempt to commit a robbery, every member of the gang was said to committed dacoity. Sometimes, the dacoity was committed with murder, in such cases every member of the gang were punished with death or imprisonment for life or rigorous imprisonment for a term of ten years and they were also liable to fine.³¹ Dacoity or robbery, with attempt to cause death or grievous hurt, when armed with deadly weapon, such offender were punished by imprisonment of not be less than seven years. The dacoity committed by wandering or habitual criminals was punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term of seven years and were also fined.³² In the region, highway dacoities, field dacoities and house dacoities were common. The travelling by night was not safe as there were frequent occurrence of road dacoity.³³

House-Breaking:

House-breaking was an offence under the Indian Penal Code, illicit entry into a house or a building for the purposes of committing theft was said to be house breaking. Property possessed by the culprit is called as stolen property, if such property criminally misappropriated or the person who possessed such stolen property was punishable under the code.³⁴ The offenders were punished with imprisonment for a term of three months or with fine up to five hundred rupees, or with both. Habitually dealing in stolen property, whoever habitually received or dealt in stolen property knowingly were also punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment of either description for a term of ten years, and also be liable to fine.³⁵ The offence of house breaking was classified according to the method used.³⁶ In this region, house breaking was committed habitually by ex-convicts, criminal gangs and temple burglars.³⁷

Murders:

The murder is death caused intentionally by an act of a person. Punishment for murderers was death or imprisonment for life and the culprit was also liable to fine. Punishments were given according to the severity of the offence committed. For such crime, they were punished with imprisonment for life or with life conviction with fine or punished with death.³⁸ The motives for murder were sexual matters, family disputes, factions, robbery and other causes.³⁹ The only class of murder in which the police can take preventive steps was factions.⁴⁰ A number of cases of murder related to sexual jealousy, disputes about land, village factions and plunder for gain were recorded from these districts.

Counterfeiting Currency Notes:

Counterfeiting currency notes or bank notes is an offence and whoever counterfeits or knowingly performed any part of the process of counterfeiting, any currency note or bank note were punished with imprisonment for life or with imprisonment of either description for a term which extended to ten years and were also liable to fine.⁴¹ A number of such cases were recorded in this region.

Cheating:

Cheating was an offence, whoever, by deceiving any person, fraudulently or dishonestly induces the person or to any property to any person such an act or omission cause damage or harm to that person in body, mind, reputation or property was said to 'cheat'. Punishment for cheating was imprisonment for a term of one year or with fine or with both.⁴² A number of cheating cases were notice and recorded.

Justifiable Homicide:

Justifiable homicide means death caused by doing an act with the intention of causing death, injury that likely to cause death such offence was called culpable homicide or Justifiable homicide.⁴³ The deaths treated as justifiable homicide were caused by private parties in exercise of their right of private defense and few cases were occurred in the region.

Political Disturbances:

Besides the general crimes, the period 1937 to 1947 was a peak time for the freedom struggle and the British issued new ordinances to control the political situation and under this all assemble were declared unlawful, holding Indian flags, singing the national songs, public speeches and the All India Congress Committees were also declared unlawful.⁴⁴ The British government resorted to severe policy of repression during the Non-cooperation Movement, Civil disobedience movement, Quit India Movement and till the Independence.

Riots and Disturbances:

Unlawful assembly was an offence against the public tranquility. An assembly of three or more persons was designated as an unlawful assembly who had common object of disturbing the law and order was punished⁴⁵ with imprisonment of either description for a term which extended to six months, or with fine, or with both. Joining unlawful assembly armed with deadly weapon was also punished with imprisonment for two

years or with fine or with both. Rioting referred to force or violence used by an unlawful assembly, every member of such assembly was guilty of the offence and were punished either by a term of two years or with fine or with both. Rioting, armed with deadly weapon, whoever was likely to cause death, was punished with imprisonment for three years or with fine or with both. Rioting and unlawful assembly were frequent during this period and they were due to agrarian disputes, labour disputes and the fundamental sectarian hostility existing between the Hindus and Muslims. Voluntarily causing disturbance to any assembly which was lawfully engaged in the performance of religious worship, or religious ceremonies, were punished with imprisonment for a term of one year or with fine or with both. A number of such offences were recorded, there were mass political agitations especially during the national struggle for freedom, agrarian strikes and communal unrests. There was a wave of labour unrest in some of the districts which resulted in series of strikes. The relations between landlords and tenants grew worse and there was widespread agrarian unrest in the deltas areas.⁴⁶ The faction fights were also common in the most of the districts and to contain this the British government had established police out-posts to check such fights.

Agrarian Disputes:

In the Northern coastal Andhra, the *zamindars* used harsh methods for collecting the revenues and this had strained their relationship with the *ryots*. The relations between landlords and tenants grew worse and there were widespread agrarian unrest and anti zamindari agitation in several places in the deltas areas. The regional *ryot* associations had formed in many districts demonstrated propaganda marches advocating the abolition of zamindari system. These agrarian movements had created public unrest. Under the leadership of Ranga N G, the grievances of the *ryots* were represented to the British government.⁴⁷ The working classes in some villages of Amalapur taluk in the East Godavari district formed themselves into a union and struck down work during transplantation and harvesting season demanding higher wages. In the Madgole area of the Vizagapatam district an attempt was made by 10,000 hill folk to undermine the authority of the Muttadars on the advice of two individuals and they were warned. In the Kistna district an intensive campaign of *stayagraha* and social boycott was instituted by the *ryots* of the Munagala zamindari against the zamindari system. These rebellious agrarian movements created political unrest.⁴⁸ With the constitution of the Estate Land Act Enquiry Committee, vigorous propaganda was commenced by agrarian leaders in several taluks in Kistna district against the zamindari system. Actions under Section 107 Criminal Procedure Code had averted. Agrarian movements in various parts particularly in Kistna district especially in 1938-39 disturbed the public peace.⁴⁹ In the agency tracts of the Vizagapatam, new ideas of liberty and self government carved a spirit of unrest in the parts of Modgole zamindari in the Vizagapatam district and under Section 110 of Criminal Procedure Code, order was restored.⁵⁰ Throughout the period of study the agrarian unrest prevailed, there was vigorous propaganda against the zamindari system.

Labour Disputes:

The agricultural labours and the workers struck down work demanding enhanced wages led to unrest and violent clashes, resulting in a number of strikes.⁵¹ A labour dispute in the tobacco factory at Chirala in the Guntur district resulted in a riot.⁵² On 14th February 1939, a riotous mob of 2000 workers staged a stay-in strike in the Chittavalasa Jute Mills in the Vizagapatam district and refused to leave the mill. In many strikes to stabilize the police had to open fire to restore order and prompt action was taken against the leaders under the Defense of India Rules and adequate police *bandobast* was provided in the mill area.⁵³ There was a wave of labour unrest in most of the districts resulting in strikes.

Social and Communal Tensions:

Communal feelings between the Hindus and Muhammadans became very sensitive during religious festivals, the two communities use to clash on account of disputes over the Hindus procession in front of mosques and wearing of tiger disguises during Dasara festivals. The Muhammadans on the other hand were opposed to both processions and disguises. When both these communities clashed, the Hindus burnt the factories, shops and properties owned by the Muhammadans and they in turn looted Hindu shops and burnt their houses. There were frequent clashes between high caste and low caste Hindus over caste superiority. The persistence of inter communal bitterness and political restlessness account for the increased number of public disturbances.⁵⁴

Escapes:

They were many incidents of prisoners escaping from the jails and from the custody while taking them to prisons or courts. Officers were convicted for offences committed in their official capacity and were convicted under the Indian Police Act and the Indian Penal Code for negligence.⁵⁵ Harboring offender who had escaped from custody or whose apprehension has been ordered was punishable with imprisonment for life.⁵⁶ A few isolated cases of escapes were recorded from this region.

Offences of the Criminal Tribes:

The criminal tribes were classified into two categories, settled and wandering. The settled tribes were agriculture labour and were involved in petty cases of crime. The wandering tribes moved in gangs and their livelihood was hunting, snake charming, acerbate performing and by crimes such as theft, burglary, dacoity and

various forms of cheating. The reasons for these tribes to commit crimes were lack of property, vagrancy, lack of stability and general purpose in life, restlessness and aimlessness. The classification of crime and the restriction on the movements of the habitual criminals had controlled the crime in these districts.⁵⁷ The criminal tribes had committed many offences both organized and unorganized crimes and some of the cases of interest were as follows, in 1939, a gang of four *Bouriah* criminal tribe members of the United Provinces committed burglary in the palace of the *zamindar* of Kasimkota in the Vizagapatam district and stole property worth Rs. 15,000. They were arrested by the head constable of Anakapalle police station in Vizagapatam district and the railway police at Vizianagram.⁵⁸ A receiver of the stolen property and his sister murdered a notorious *Donga Yenadi* of the notified criminal tribe when he demanded the return of the stolen property.⁵⁹ The notorious *Yerakala* dacoits headed by *Kondigadu* were attacked by the villagers of Isukatipuravaram of the Guntur district, he and two other members of the gang they were killed. The criminal tribes also cooperated with the police and village officers in crime control by providing information about the culprits. In 1938, a *Yanadi* tribal fellow from the Nellore district gave information to the village vigilance committee members about the culprits in the case of housebreaking and theft.⁶⁰ The application of the Abeyance System of criminal tribes had contributed in the reduction of all forms of crime.

Other crimes and offences that have occurred in the Northern coastal districts of Madras Presidency were infanticide which was a common offence committed mostly due to fear of social disgrace or domestic discord and also due to superstitious and ignorance. Gambling was common offence in the districts especially during the festival seasons. Kidnapping was an unlawful act which was punishable by the penal code.⁶¹ Cases of children-lifting for sacrificing were recorded in many parts especially in the Sabhari valley of the East Godavari Agency was common. The provisions of certain sections of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act were applied in the region especially in Bezwada, Cocanada, Rajahmundry, Vizagapatam, Ellure and Vizianagram.⁶²

The following table shows the various grave crimes occurred during the period from 1937 to 1947 in the Northern coastal districts of Madras Presidency.

Years	Theft	Cattle-theft	Roberry	Dacoity	Housing-Breaking	Murders
1937	3699	537	65	11	1441	192
1938	3738	548	92	21	1705	207
1939	3698	568	64	21	1301	224
1940	3995	575	71	16	1643	214
1941	3825	539	64	11	1531	209
1942	3983	596	64	20	1329	215
1943	4022	569	89	17	1531	218
1944	4113	510	69	19	1551	216
1945	4127	507	50	19	1676	214
1946	4932	546	48	6	1877	238
1947	5573	599	76	27	2515	248

Source: Report on the administration of the Police in the Madras Province for the years 1937-47.

The above table shows an increase in the volume of the grave crimes towards the Independence was due to increase in the general offences along with the political offence. This period from 1937 to 1947 was a peak time for the Freedom Movement and the people of this region had actively participated. To control the political situation the British declared certain acts such as assembling, public speeches, holding Indian flags, singing the national songs as unlawful. Abnormal rise in the price as of food stuffs, cloth and other necessities of life aggravated the prevailing general economic distress which coupled with the failure of monsoon and the suspension of the Criminal Tribes Act tended to swell the volume of crime. The unfavorable seasonal conditions of the year 1938 had an inevitable effect on the volume of crime which showed an increase especially in the districts of Vizagapatam with 14.6 percent and in East Godavari with 11.1 percent. Other reasons for the increase in the crimes were the adverse conditions created by the pre and post war times. The rise in the labour strikes, political unrest, communal tensions, the activities of the communists and the local factions in most of the districts also contribute to the increase in the crime rate. In the years 1938 and 1939 the volume of crimes excluding offences under the Special and Local Laws and the nuisance sections of the Indian Penal Code, the total number of true cases of cognizable crime had increased. In relation to the prices of the two staple food grains rice and *cholam* which had steadily increased since 1940. In the following years there was increase in the volume of crime, the murder cases in the districts of Vizagapatam and Guntur alone contributed highest number of cases in the Madras Presidency which recorded as 52 each. It is recorded abnormal increase in the district of Nellore and was also high due to communal disturbances and in the districts of East Godavari and Kistna were recorded low in this year. There was an average increase in crime in all districts during 1944 and 1945 due to the extraordinary high prices and the other adverse conditions created by the war.⁶³ The most noticeable was in the district of Nellore which recorded 24.0 percent and in West Godavari it was 20.2 percent.⁶⁴ The North-East monsoon set in late and caused heavy rains in Guntur and Nellore districts. The unprecedented heavy rains in the month of December caused many rivers to flood and caused damage to the standing crops and irrigation

works. There was a wave of labour unrest in most of the districts resulting in strikes. Crime was almost high in 1947 in all the districts due to the high prices of staple food grains. The South-West monsoon was ill-distributed and late, thereby the cultivation of both the dry and the wet crops were delayed. The North-East monsoon was a failure which resulted in serious damage to the crops resulted in widespread labour, communal and agrarian unrest. Due to the Freedom Movement, there were an increase in the number of riots, communal tension, the activities of the communists and the local factions especially in Nellore and Kistna districts.⁶⁵ The other districts were free from serious cases of rioting, except in four cases in East and West Godavari, Kistna and Guntur, firing was opened when mobs attempted to rescue gamblers later they were arrested. On one occasion when a merchant in village of Nellore district had refused to sell rice at a controlled rate, so enraged villagers had attacked him and attempted to loot his house. The communal tension during important festivals prevailed as usual between Hindus and Muslims. With the consequent on the transfer of power on 15th August 1947⁶⁶ the Indian government had to handle both cognizable and non-cognizable offences which were high.

Crime Statistics:

The British government had introduced the practice of collection and collation of the crime statistics for a better centralized control. The statistical crime data on all offences were collected and were used as a tool of management to understand the cause of crime and as an index of the efficiency of the judicial procedure. From this data the action was taken under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code. A system of classification of crime and criminals was introduced by Inspector General of Police, Hamilton, to maintain a regular record of professional crime and criminals and to assist investigating officers in the prevention and detection of crime.⁶⁷ The crime records containing the criminal history of individuals and localities were maintained for each village for effective control of crimes.⁶⁸ For statistics under the crime and offences the government relied on the police department. Crimes were first reported to the police station, either by the magistrate or by the beat constable, or by the complainant. The First Information Report was prepared which was the first step taken by the police before investigation. A revised curriculum of training for Sub-Inspectors was designed to concentrate attention upon the practical and scientific investigation of crime on modern lines was introduced in the year 1939.⁶⁹ To meet systematic outbreak of the crime, the police beat and patrol systems were altered and special parties of police were organized, it had resulted in important captures.

Conclusion:

The Northern coastal region of Madras Presidency was no exemption to crime as this area was vast, highly populated and economically rich and most of the region was agency area. Murder, dacoity, robbery, theft and other crimes like cheating, forgery, counterfeit of currency, infanticide, culpable homicide, rapes, etc., were of frequent occurrence. The motives for these crimes were related to political, socio-economical and religious causes. The period 1937 to 1947 was a peak time for the freedom struggle, the people of this region had actively participated in the National Movement. During this period, unlawful activity of the freedom fighters such as assembling, public speeches, holding Indian flags, etc., created political unrest. There was an increase in the volume of general crime due to post war and unseasonal conditions along with the socio-political crimes. The crimes committed by the criminal tribes were controlled by proper registration under the Criminal Tribes Act to rehabilitate them by the provision of Reformatory Settlements. There was active co-operation of Village Vigilance Committees, adequate control by the police over looting gangs and bad characters, the enforcement of the system of joint responsibility for the good conduct of criminal tribe members and the effective help rendered by the Central Crime Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department, and District Intelligence Bureaux kept the professional crime under check. The British government had introduced scientific methods and measures from time to time to combat with the crimes.

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