PSYCHIATRY OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR

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Certain acts which are regarded as undesirable are defined by the particular society as crimes. Criminal behaviour, thus is a violation of the criminal laws of that particular society. Apart from the fact that it is a criminal act, it invariably is also a psychiatric problem in the sense that it may be (a) a symptom of an underlying psychopathological state, (b) a manifestation of a character disorder, or (c) an expression of a transient emotional state. In addition to the individual acts of criminal violence, there are a much larger number of white collar crimes committed by respectable members of the society such as fraudulent returns of income or property tax, bribery of public officials, or receiving kickbacks on business deals or sale of substandard goods. In fact such activities have lately become so common as to have become a statistically normal behaviour in certain countries. In India, moneys derived from such activities are commonly referred to as "Income from Above" or the more colourful term of 'Black Money.' The extent of such white collar crimes was revealed by a survey of 1698 adults by Wallerstein and Wyle (1947)—91 percent admitted to have committed one or more of the 49 offences listed in their questionnaire, men had an average of 18 and women an average of 11 adult offences. Some recent Scandinavian studies by Christie et al. (1965), Anttila (1966) showed similar results.

The prevalence of homicide varies considerably in different countries, from a reported low of 0.87/100,000 population in U.K., to a high of 4.5/100,000 population in the U.S.A. Interestingly we find a similar degree of variation in the different states within India. As against an all India average of 2.9/100,000, Manipur and Punjab show the highest rates of homicide—4.6 and 4.5/100,000, respectively (equal to that in U.S.A.), against a low of 1.2 in Himachal Pradesh (Crime in India, 1972). Punjab also leads in the number of offences under the Opium Act—this one State alone accounting for 70 per cent of all crimes registered under this head in the entire country. India is a large and diverse country, with different religious and cultural groups—Historically Punjab has been subjected to innumerable invasions from the west, as a result the people developed a relatively easy going and devil—may care attitude towards life and material possessions, since both were liable to be lost. On the other hand, bravery and killing of the enemy was glorified—somewhat akin to the values of the early American settlers. In this social climate committing a murder over a minor dispute or for his honour is not uncommon. Similarly the very high level of opium abuse and opium smuggling is again based on necessity. This is a predominantly agricultural community, and due to shortage of labour, the farmers have to work round the clock to get the wheat harvested in time, for this purpose they start taking opium to relieve their fatigue. Some of these subsequently go on to become addicts.

Thus in addition to the individuals indulging in a major criminal activity act as a homicide, and the non-deviant criminals indulging in white collar crimes, we now have a third group which I would term the socially condoned criminal. Here

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the criminal activity is rooted in and to some extent encouraged by the society in which he lives, e.g. high level of alcohol and opium use in Punjab. Other obvious examples in this country are the practice of child marriages, sati, and the ‘dowry deaths.’ A society rooted in tradition is more likely to come in conflict with the enlightened modern laws of the land thus giving rise to unlawful activity, e.g. in India a majority of marriages are still arranged often many below the legal marriageable age and involve the giving of large sums as dowry in total disregard of the anti-dowry laws. Besides, any girl not bringing sufficient dowry is often subjected to humiliation and abuse, and in the rare case even leading to suicide or murder.

**Social Function of Crime**

Since criminal behaviour exists in every society, the thesis that it serves an important social function, and that society therefore indirectly generates crime was first put forward by Durkheim (1958), and supported by the work of Unsitalo (1969) and Tornudd (1971) who formulated the ‘necessity doctrine,’ the doctrine of the ‘utility of crime,’ and the doctrine of ‘optimal crime,’ without accepting the theory in toto, the utilitarian function of crime is evident from the following observations:

(a) The criminal maintains and promotes societal cohesion by providing them with a common task (Makola, 1974).

(b) The ritual of punishment released the aggression pent up in the society at large into relatively safe channels (Phillipson, 1971).

(c) Violations of norms and their punishment help in fixing the limits of these norms and promote knowledge of them (Tornudd, 1971).

(d) Crime can create new behavioural forms that foster the continued adaptive ability of the society and in the attainment of certain goals, e.g. Socrates, Mark and Gandhi all breached certain legal norms in the attainment of their goals.

(e) Last but not the least, crime invariably possesses entertainment value esp. sensational cases of murder or rape, etc.

**Major Crime and Mental Illness**

Most studies have shown that an overwhelming number of persons committing murder are normal (92 per cent—Somasundaram, 1980). Of the abnormal persons again only a minority (1 per cent) were suffering from a psychotic illness. An earlier study by Venugopala Rao (1968) gave a figure of 2 per cent, as compared to 7 per cent reported from Hong Kong (Wang and Singer, 1973), 11 per cent for Scotland (Gillies, 1976), 3.2 per cent for U.S.A. (Wolfgang, 1932). Regarding the type of psychiatric illness responsible Guze et al. (1962) in their study of 223 criminals implicated alcoholism in 43 per cent of these crimes, and drug addiction in another 5 per cent—schizophrenia, depressive illness, mental retardation and epilepsy accounting for less than 1 per cent each. In India on the other hand schizophrenia has been the most frequent diagnosis (Somasundaram, 1960; Varma and Jha, 1966). Kishore et al. (1970)—in their study of 400 criminal mental patients make the interesting observation that although schizophrenia was the most frequent case diagnosis, a detailed study of the records showed that a majority (over 75 per cent) actually suffered from an acute psychotic episode, generally occurring during the period of their trial or shortly after their conviction, and suggest that these are not cases of schizophrenia but an acute reactive psychosis, and not directly related to the commission of the crime. This is an important observation stressing the role of the stress of the trial procedure and imprisonment in producing psychiatric breakdown, and also to the
frequency of the 'acute psychoses'—which are not clearly schizophrenic, but are frequently seen in India and have hitherto been ignored because of the use of western criteria for diagnosis. In our own studies of patients diagnosed as suffering from acute schizophrenic episodes, and schizo-affective psychoses, we also found that a majority of these were not cases of true schizophrenia, but either suffering from an affective illness or an acute psychosis (unclassified) (Singh and Sachdev, 1981).

**Personality and Crime**

What do we know of the personality of these non-psychotic criminals. It has generally been reported, e.g. Megargee (1966), Singh and Verma (1976) that a majority do not have any previous criminal record (84 per cent)—In our series of 42 out of 50 murderers, of the remaining, 4 per cent had a previous conviction for minor traffic violations, another 4 per cent for fighting and theft, while only 8 per cent had a bad record of multiple convictions for burglary, narcotics offences etc. In fact Magargee and Mendelson (1962) reported that extremely assaultive criminals in fact scored lower than non-violent criminals and normals on a personality scale related to hostility and lack of control, this was further confirmed by the findings of Blackburn (1966) that extremely assaultive offenders were significantly more over-controlled, introverted, and conforming and less hostile than the moderately assaultive group.

Given his relatively stable, overcontrolled personality, what is the state of mind at the time of committing the offence, and how do they react thereafter. Very little attention has been paid to this aspect in the literature, in our series in 42 per cent of cases, the murder was planned and carried out in a cold and calculated manner, in about a third (36 per cent) the attack was impulsive and carried out in a state of strong emotional excitement, anger, or jealousy and in only a quarter (26 per cent) was the crime committed under the influence of alcohol. Immediately after committing the crime, 40 per cent of all subjects experienced intense subjective distress, amounting to panic in 4 cases (8 per cent). Another 14 per cent felt sad and guilty, 2 (4 per cent) developed a temporary amnesia for the episode, and 2 (4 per cent) drank to excess to try and forget the tragic events. Thus nearly 3/4th of all murder had an unpleasant emotional reaction, the remaining 28 per cent stated that they felt no abnormal reaction, while two of them stated that they actually felt a sense of relief and pride at having completed the task successfully.

**The victim of criminal acts**

Very little is known about the victims of crimes, except the fact that in a majority of cases of violent crime, the offender and victim are known to each other, and often are related to each other. However, some recent Scandinavian studies suggest that the risk of victimisation is not random but is concentrated on a small percentage of the population. 1/4th of all victimisations are concentrated on 1 per cent of the respondents, 1/2 of all acts concerned only 5 per cent of respondents. Wolf (1972) suggested that there is a high risk group of subjects with regard to their age, sex, occupation, locality of residence, and membership of special groups. Further studies could possibly help to define more clearly the persons more prone to criminal assault, something akin to the accident prone individual.

**Drug and Crime**

Much has been written about the association between drug use and criminal activity. The general public tends to see drugs as some sort of demon which possesses the user and pushes him to commit violent
crimes. In fact, no drug known will inevitably cause violence—the violent act is necessarily a complex of events involving the personality and motivation of the user and his relationships to others. Alcohol is the most often implicated drug particularly among youthful offenders (Guze et al., 1962; Singh and Verma, 1976). However, it must be remembered that drinking patterns are age and group specific, and may form a part of the individuals general maladaptive behaviour pattern, or in some cases it may facilitate his acting out behaviour, but only rarely does it prompt criminal behaviour in the non-problem drinker. Similarly all evidence to date suggests that individuals do not become more violent after addiction to opiates even when they remain criminal. Similarly research to date contradicts claims linking use of amphetamines, cannabis, tranquillisers, and barbiturates to crimes of violence, sexual crimes or accidents.

The Prison Environment

Very little scientific study has been made of the prison culture and its effect on the inmates. Balvig (1974) in his study of the inmates of Danish borstals showed the existence of two distinct cultures a delinquent and a non-delinquent one, with a few belonging to the no-mans land. In the delinquent culture he found the highest internal and least external interaction, a clear hierarchy, with a high solidarity and the most rule breaking behaviour, and minimal psychiatric impairment. The non-delinquent culture is essentially an extension of the normal culture outside the prison. It is more individualistic, with relatively less psychological interaction between the inmates, who are still primarily concerned with their standing in relation to the society outside and their representatives i.e. the prison staff. They are generally compliant with little rule breaking activity, but are more prone to have nervous breakdowns and personality deterioration the longer they stay in prison. It does not seem to be a matter of free choice as to which culture the new inmate will belong to, but is dependent on his earlier criminal activity. In our own studies of inmates of central jail, Amritsar, we noted a similar division of the inmates into the larger non-delinquent group, and a smaller delinquent group. The later comprised mainly of the psychopathic or deviant personalities, on interview they appeared uninterested about their predicament and suffered no psychiatric breakdown, and apparently had a close relationship among themselves. Five of these were opium addicts, and they confessed that they were still getting their supplies smuggled into jail. In another study of the inmates of a remand home for women (Singh et al., 1976a, b) we again found a similar grouping of the delinquent and non-delinquent inmates. An interesting finding in this study was that nearly half (52 per cent) of the delinquent girls had marked guilt feelings over their misconduct. It is possible that in these girls environmental or social factors were more important in determining their criminal behaviour, than a basic personality defect and hence more willing to improve with therapeutic intervention. In fact 12 girls who were clinically diagnosed as having a psychopathic personality did not show any guilt feelings. Further, the delinquent group tend to see themselves as more extrovert, dominant and aggressive in social interaction, and hence more likely to clash with authority, whereas the non-delinquents see themselves as meek, submissive and introverted in social interaction. Thus it is evident that for a majority of subjects who have a basically healthy personality, incarceration in jail for prolonged periods produces a process of psychological breakdown, whereas for those already belonging to the delinquent culture we help them to develop or strengthen their delinquent identity. If this is true
you would all agree with me that this is a highly unacceptable outcome of putting people in prison.

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