

This said, this book leaves the reader wanting to learn more about the vernacularization of state initiatives at the grassroots level. It seems that the author is more successful in describing “resourceful” local people’s manipulation of Qing law to serve their interests (89) than the Republican citizens’ creative use of the new Civil Code. In addition, at points in the book the narrative flow is disrupted by repetition. Despite such minor concerns, this book is a must-read work for anyone who is interested in modern Chinese history, family–state relations, gender, and China’s changing political cultures in the past several centuries.

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## **Radha Kumar, *Police Matters: The Everyday State and Caste Politics in South India, 1900–1975***

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Radha Kumar’s *Police Matters* is a study of everyday rural policing and the historical co-constitution of caste power and police power in twentieth-century south India. Through a study of three southern districts in the colonial province of Madras Presidency—Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Ramanathapuram—Kumar seeks to depart from the existing scholarship on the colonial police which, in the author’s view, has framed it as an institution with sparse presence in the Indian countryside. In contrast, Kumar argues that the colonial police, particularly in south India, was engaged in acts of “routine policing in rural spaces” (2) and was deeply entangled in everyday rural life and politics. The purview of colonial police included more than mere coercion to ensure the functioning of the colonial economy. It was equally engaged in epistemic interventions that transformed rural society, and made it legible to the state, especially through the prism of caste. Kumar crisply puts it thus: “Outnumbered in the vast spaces of the countryside, the Madras police drew on, and reproduced knowledges of caste toward optimizing their resources, so that trading and farming communities received protection, while laboring and so-called criminal communities were monitored” (23).

Kumar also demonstrates how caste groups, as they competed for social mobility, drew the colonial police into rural social conflicts as a resource.

After independence, as the colonial police apparatus passed into the hands of the ruling party, it became embroiled in electoral politics as a coercive instrument used by the provincial government against opposition groups. However, Kumar also shows how political groups turned instances of police violence into a critical discursive tool in their electoral and mobilizational strategies. Thus, in Kumar's narrative, the police appear as a substantial presence in rural south India across the divide of decolonization, both as a function of colonial governmentality as well as through the claims and entanglements of local politics.

For the study of everyday policing, Kumar introduces a new genre of archival material—the records of the police station. In this corpus, Kumar specifically brings out the value of documents called “Part IV records” maintained in police stations since 1922. These documents were “a narrative record on each village within” (11) the station's jurisdiction, were never sent to government archives, and therefore have remained inaccessible to the public. Kumar has studied this material in several police stations and collected a wealth of granular local detail. The deployment of this new archive sets Kumar's work apart from any previous work in police history of South Asia.

The monograph is divided into two parts, with thematic chapters that trace the narrative threads from the late colonial to the post-colonial period. Part I explores, over three chapters, modalities of everyday policing in the Tamil countryside. In Chapter 1, subtitled “Seeing Like a Policeman,” Kumar argues that colonial police were not only involved in curbing rebellion through spectacular violence, but also engaged in everyday minutiae of administration, thereby operationalizing colonial governmentality. The chapter portrays the layout of police stations in the region that created “an even, almost panoptic gaze from each nodal point” (24), the police beats, and the selective policing of congregations such as markets and festivals. Kumar sees the police station as not only a space of law enforcement but also a bureaucratic office generating extensive documentation, and producing, what Kumar has called, “police knowledge” about communities in villages, inventing policing categories such as “habitual offenders” and “criminal tribes.” As Kumar pithily writes, “police writing practices also reframed rural space as state space” (39). The physical structure of the local police station, Kumar argues, was part of everyday rural life, announcing the presence of state power and refracted through caste power which determined differential access to this space. Much of this apparatus of police power persisted beyond the end of colonial rule, even as prohibition laws and organizing elections provided new contexts for the deepening of police power in rural society.

Chapter 2 builds on studies of the materiality of bureaucratic documents in the making of state power and analyses how “police documents,” especially “the First Information Report” (FIR), was not merely a means toward resolution of social conflict but another tool in the arsenal of local conflicting parties. That villagers wanted to exploit the documentary regime of the police in their village conflicts signifies, Kumar argues, yet another evidence for the everyday presence of the colonial police in rural southern India. Chapter 3 is a study of “routine coercion,” both in the everyday depredations of policemen on subaltern subjects, an area of excess built into the discretionary power of

colonial policemen, as well as in instances of custodial violence. Police violence and caste-based violence became intermingled, for instance, in the figure of the “Ayyar constable.” Building on studies of violence and torture in liberal democracies, Kumar argues that police violence was a performance of state power on the bodies of the marginalized, fundamental to the system and not an exceptional moment attributable to individual failings.

The second part of the book, “Policing Popular Politics,” contains the last two chapters, and moves the focus toward the policing of protest. Chapter 4 explores colonial and post-colonial policing of public assemblies. It demonstrates how the colonial state perceived all social congregations and protests as essentially threatening to order and deployed violent means to curb them. This included punitive policing where the cost of the additional police required to repress protest in a locality was defrayed by taxes levied on its residents. Thus, Kumar argues, the exceptional and the everyday of police violence were in a continuum. Kumar observes that often protests turned violent in response to colonial policing of demonstrations rather than as an expression of any primordial form of politics. The final chapter explores the imbrication of policing with caste and electoral politics after independence when the new Congress government deployed police coercion to control labor unrest, communist insurgencies, and opposition parties. In tandem, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the main opposition party in Tamil Nadu, and political leaders such as U. Muthuramalinga Thevar and Immanuel Sekaran, navigated street politics in consolidating caste identities. Police violence itself became colored in hues of caste identity when Thevar dominated police forces inflicted violence on Dalit public processions. Instances of police violence became events around which mobilizational politics was crafted. Caste power, in Kumar’s chapter, appears to be in a constant dialogue with police power.

*Police Matters* is a treasure trove of new archival material, with invaluable insights and elegantly written. However, the book’s central thesis might have limited the possibilities inherent in this new material. Kumar has hitched the entire study to an older debate about the strength or weakness, presence or absence, of the state in Indian countryside. All evidence and argument in the book are ultimately made to argue that the colonial police was a substantial presence in the everyday life of rural society. The burden of demonstrating this has led Kumar into overstating the book’s departure from the existing literature and prevents a more fruitful dialogue with the scholarship so far. Kumar sees all previous arguments about the thin or sporadic presence of the colonial police in the countryside as arguments describing “state absence,” and counters these with evidence of everyday presence and entanglement. No doubt, David Arnold, in his pioneering monograph on the police in Madras presidency, emphasizes mainly the exceptional moments in rural policing. However, Arnold does not equate the sparse presence of the state with a notion of absence. Arnold argues that colonial police power was “adaptive” and police action “selective,” in order to efficiently deploy police resources. The identification of “turbulent regions” and “dangerous classes,” he argues, accomplished precisely this purpose. Kumar’s emphasis on the production of police knowledge for the optimization of scarce police resources appears to be only a

further development of Arnold's "adaptive-selective state" thesis, rather than its opposite. Here, Kumar would have benefited from recognizing that Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's 1998 essay, "Police and Public Order in Bombay, 1880–1947," was the first work to bring home the value of studying "everyday policing" in colonial India, albeit for an urban setting and with very distinct implications. Chandavarkar had argued for a move toward studying "the daily operations" of the police rather than its "administrative design," and demonstrated the deep links between the power of the city police and the politics of the working-class neighborhood.

In part, it would appear that Kumar has applied insights parallel to Chandavarkar's into a different spatial setting. Arguably, Kumar's addition of colonial governmentality into the analytical framework sets it apart. However, it has done so without engaging an important dimension of everyday colonial policing and the nature of colonial power indicated by Chandavarkar. In the wider literature on the colonial state, the limited presence of state apparatuses in the Indian countryside has been theorized as a function of its collaboration with local centers of power such as landlords, or what Anand Yang has called "the limited Raj." The monopoly of legitimate violence claimed by the colonial police remained in practice always an unsettled matter, primarily because it sanctioned, through commission and omission, the power of the armed retainers of powerful local potentates across the Indian countryside, facilitating extraction of surplus to run the colonial economy. The outside of the state apparatus was not a realm left untouched. It was rather the domain of a deal between colonial rulers and Indian elites. The "limited Raj," then, was a system and not an absence. Kumar's intellectual adversary, that is, the argument about state absence, appears to be a straw figure.

On a different note, the history of village watchmen, a key institution across British India for rural policing, remains only lightly touched on in the book. The *talaiyari*, that is, the office of the village watchman of Madras presidency, emerges only briefly in the context of the discussion of "false cases" in the monograph and not in any conversation with the new work on village watch in other parts of British India by historians such as Erin Guiliani on Bengal and Vijay Kumar on the United Provinces. By limiting the study mainly to members of the formal police force, *Police Matters* has perhaps underestimated the significance of a semi-formalized policing office such as the village watch, an object of study that might have prevented Kumar from thinking with a neat binary between a present state and an absent state.

Nevertheless, *Police Matters* is an excellent addition to the emerging scholarship on the colonial police in India, with a range of new findings about the working of the colonial police, a rich new source base, and a creative narrative arc. Its originality lies in its demonstration of the significance of exploring processes such as spatial transformation, epistemic interventions, and the discursive structure and material life of police documents for police history research. It is spot on in emphasizing just how deep the mutual imbrication of caste and policing is in South Asia.