

## **Nigel Akkara: From A Sociological Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Nigel Akkara is a businessman and actor in Kolkata, India. But as a teenager he went astray reaching the abyss of crime and then underwent an extra-ordinary transformation. He was arrested in 2000 and charged with crimes ranging from murder, extortion, and kidnapping. While confined at the Presidency Correctional Home in Kolkata, India, he redefined his life with a positive goal and vision through culture therapy under the tutelage of noted Indian classical dancer Ms. Alokanda Roy. The present article aims to analyze the socio-criminological factors that lead him to deviate from the conventional path. The article is based on both primary and secondary data.

### **Keywords**

Underworld, Gangster, Culture Therapy.

### **Introduction**

The underworld, like the undergarment, is hidden, but stinks when brought out in the open. The performance of criminals in underworld are both revolting and riveting. While their acts provoke extreme feelings of hostility and horror among all of us, we are at the same time invariably drawn to the representation of the same acts in the media and the arts-the blow-by-blow account of their murderous operations in press reports, the extravagant fictionalization of their actions in thrillers and detective fiction, the graphic re-enactment of their gory deeds in films and other forms of entertainment. It is these which make the stuff of newspaper scoops, best sellers, and box office hits in the movie world. We derive a vicarious excitement from their consumption in the cloister of our safe homes or theater halls. What makes crime occupy this peculiar space in the public mind, where both revulsion and fascination co-exist? It may have its origin in our collective sub-conscious of childhood memories which were nurtured by fairytales about demonical witches and sorcerers, ghost stories of spooks and ghouls, myths about rakshasas and asuras (demons)- who were depicted as both evil and mighty, who roused fears but also some sort of awe-inspiring respect for their magical powers. We have inherited from our collective childhood this legacy of engrossment with the mysterious spheres of evil and have sub-consciously passed it on to our adulthood, where it has taken the form of morbid obsession with the living underworld of criminals. The underworld becomes a fairy world to grown-ups who visit it – through the media – to watch and listen to adult performances of acts of horror. Our modern imagination has found a replacement in the equally impenetrable and mysterious underworld, which

perennially supplies it with a flow of sensational events. The larger-than-life performance of the real-life criminals of today substitutes for the stories of supernatural deeds of the demons and monsters that fed the appetite of childhood minds of yore. What makes them interesting is that these people are not acting on a sudden impulse. We may morally disapprove of their acts, but we have to acknowledge that they are endowed with a high-calibre talent that enables them to chalk out a long term strategy and devise the necessary tactics to achieve their goals (Banerjee, 2009). But the actors reining this world are inaccessible hence to explore their facets of life are more challenging.

Social Scientists are interested in individual and social factors such as poverty, broken-family, illiteracy, financial and economic insecurity, social environment, corruption etc that can lead an individual to deviate from the norm. Dawood Hasan Ibrahim Kaskar, the noted Indian gangster went astray despite having a father in the police force. Dawood Ibrahim was initiated into crime as a pawn in the hands of the Mumbai police and went on to wipe out the competition and eventually became the Mumbai police own nemesis (Zaidi, 2012). Abu Salem's father was a noted criminal lawyer in the legal fraternity of Azamgarh (Zaidi, 2014). Both belonged to highly principled parents. Born to superstar parents actors Sunil and Nargis Dutt, Sanjay Dutt received the very best that life had to offer. He is believed to have been troubled as a youth and later fell upon difficult times, turning to habitual substance abuse during his teens. Having 'cleaned up his act' and kicked his drug habit, Sanjay cultivated fresh interests and hobbies including acquisition of firearms. Sanjay procured AK-56 (delivered to him by Abu Salem). After the Babri Masjid demolition, during a raid, in addition to the AK-56, police had found five other firearms stacked away in his home. All those involved in delivering the weapons and grenades to Sanjay Dutt's house were booked under TADA, including the superstar himself (Zaidi, 2014). Manohar Arjun Surve popularly known as Manya Surve, was an infamous Indian urban dacoit and gangster in the Mumbai underworld. He was a B.A. graduate from Kirti College (Wikipedia, 2015). Ashwin Naik became the don of the fledgling Amar Naik gang after the death of his brother in 1996. Ashwin had three siblings but none of his siblings managed to study beyond matriculation, though their father Maruti Naik wanted all of them to study. Ashwin studied at Dr. Antonio Da Silva High School and Junior College of Commerce in Dadar, and had been involved towards technical education since class eight. His fascination for aeroplanes and his leaning towards engineering saw him study aeronautical engineering. However, when he joined the Hindustan Aeronautical Academy, he had to quit within a year, unable to handle the harsh ragging of senior students. He went to London and graduated as a civil engineer (Zaidi, 2014). In India youngsters belonging to affluent families as well as coming from humble socio-economic

background have been perpetrators of crime. In Indian context a unanimous homogeneous conclusion is difficult to arrive on factors / social situations that can compel an individual to deviate.

For a social scientist the life of Nigel Akkara is fascinating. An ordinary middle-class Christian boy, who as a teenager went astray reaching the abyss of crime. Crime is easy to get into, but it can be very difficult to change one's direction once those first few steps have been taken (Quillen, 1991). But this former underworld gangster is an exceptional – a 'rarest of rare' since he underwent an extraordinary transformation and got reformed through culture therapy at the Presidency Correctional Home in Kolkata under the tutelage of noted Indian classical dancer Ms. Alokanda Roy.

### **Nigel Akkara's Childhood and Adolescent Years**

Nigel Akkara belonged to an average middle-class family. His family originally hailed from Kerala in South India but had settled in Kolkata, West Bengal, Eastern part of India. Akkara grew up in a modest social environment. His father died when he was eight years old. A mother is the primary care-giver in both the traditional and single-parent families. A mother occupies a unique position of influencing a child's mental growth and development. After his father's death his widowed mother had the sole responsibility of supporting the family financially and bringing up Nigel and his younger brother. Hence she had the double burden of combining paid work with unpaid family care-giving task and responsibility. His mother made an earnest endeavour to provide education to both her sons. Akkara, a Roman Catholic, studied at St. Xavier's Collegiate School and College, an institution founded and run by the Society of Jesus, a Catholic Minority Religious Body. While speaking about his childhood he reminisces, 'by the time mummy would return I would fall asleep, she would feed me in that way...when I had slept' (as in original, interviewed on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2014). It implies in his formative years he would be left alone for a considerable period of time. Nigel in his formative years was extremely ill-tempered, aggressive and stubborn. He was a hypersensitive child and reacted to any minor provocation. He lambasted a boy physically and verbally when he found him bullying his younger brother. On another occasion he tilted a bamboo stick in such a manner that a child standing nearby got hurt. His mother would scold him. He says, 'I often bunked school. Though I hate going to church, mother always took us there on Sundays. But I always managed to slip away. I was rough and shouted at her when she tried to make me understand (Poddar, 2014 ). Perhaps...I did not understand or nobody could make me understand at that point'(De, 2012 ). Perhaps Nigel failed to understand his mother or the 'method' adopted by his mother to explain him further created a gulf between them. Somewhere perhaps at that point of time there was a 'failure of communication and

lack of understanding between him and his mother' which lead to a 'strained relationship' between mother and son. It can be interpreted that in case of Nigel during his formative years perhaps some deep-rooted emotional needs remained unfulfilled. Psychological factors such as unfulfilled emotional needs, hypersensitive attitude and aggressive nature may have created 'imbalances' in his personality which in future pushed him to the world of crime.

### **Role of Teachers in His School Life**

According to him during his formative years there was a lack of guidance in his life. As a student of prestigious St. Xavier's Collegiate School, Kolkata, he would sit on the last benches inside the class room. Though he was not fond of studies but he never flunked in school – in fact he was intelligent enough to study for a few months only to get promoted. He excelled at outdoor activities especially rugby. In his school teachers had their favourite students and practiced nepotism. They preferred students coming from rich families. They would hardly pay 'individual' attention to him or average students in terms of merit and income-group. The teachers had a habit of finding faults among students who were average in studies as well as belonged to humble families and would often punish them for simple mistakes, whereas the so called rich students were excused even if they made mistakes' (Akkara, 2014). Such attitude of teachers perhaps created a negative impact upon his young mind. It is a universal fact that no one is born a criminal. Circumstances force them into crime. Most crimes committed during adolescent stage are in a fit of rage. Even though St. Xavier's Collegiate School and College boasts of world famous alumni, it is quite surprising that nobody realized in the school that one particular student named Nigel was slowly stepping into the world of crime. At the same time for one deviant student the entire school can't be blamed.

As a child he would steal biscuits from the nearby roadside tea stall (Mukherjee, 2014). Growing up, he used to gaze endlessly at the picture of a former army general Mr. Shankar Raychowdhury that he had put on his wall, dreaming of becoming an army officer too someday. In fact he pursued his dream to this extent that he once joined National Cadet Corps (NCC) under Bengal Artillery Battalions at Fort William for two years (Akkara). His childhood desire indicates that he was fond of power, authority and wanted to lead. His physical stature (he is six feet tall with broad shoulder) enabled him to project a self-styled macho image. He would constantly pick up fight with someone. He perhaps took pride in the fact that he could fight with anyone. Minor infractions of the law, if unchecked, may escalate into major criminal activities. He came under the influence of bad company from the ninth standard (i.e. approximately when he was fourteen years old) on wards and started deviating. He would interact with 'bad' boys of Thakurpukur, Pailan, and other adjacent areas (interviewed on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015). As a teenager he would

spend time drinking and smoking with his companions. He says, 'during college life, we do not understand what we are doing. At that point friends are more close to us. At that point drinking and bullying around with friends is very normal' (Paul, 2015). But he would never disclose information about his 'new', 'bad' companions at home to his mother. Edwin H. Sutherland in Differential Association theory asserts that crime is learnt by association with others. The central hypothesis is that crime is not unique or invented by each criminal separately but, like all other forms of human behavior, it is learnt from direct contact with other people. The learning takes place in small informal group settings, and develops from the collective experience and personal interaction as well as from particular situations. It can be interpreted that Akkara learnt crime traits by getting associated with such 'bad' companions. The Differential Association theory asserts that the learning involves both the techniques for committing the offences and the motives, drives, rationalizations, values and attitudes for its committal i.e. why it is committed. Finally, whether a person takes part in criminal activities depends on the amount of contact they have with criminal activities or with those who support or are sympathetic towards criminal activities. A person becomes criminal if there is an excess of definitions favourable to the violations of the law over definitions unfavourable to violation of the law (Williams, 2008). For Nigel absence of mother at home for long hours, lack of guidance at school, longer and more frequent exposure and association with 'bad' companions and their particular type of behavior and attitude created conditions favourable to the violation of law. Akkara's initiation into the world of crime started at the age of fifteen. It happened at a barber's shop, where he regularly went for a shave. That day he got into a fight, and at the end of the incident, a person lay dead (Ghosh, 2014). According to him, 'strange but I did not feel the slightest remorse at what I had done. I felt powerful and in control and enjoyed this feeling which spurred me on to bigger crimes' (Chatterjee, 2012). Thus as a teenager following E. Lemert he became a 'primary deviant'. According to Labelling perspective primary deviant is seen as rule breaking, and generally has nothing to do with labels because the deviant act is neutralized or normalized or denied. It could be normalized if others around them also commit similar acts, making them seem slightly disreputable rather than criminal. Moreover at this stage an individual is not yet been convicted and have therefore been able to maintain their self-image. Those concerned have not yet changed their self-image in response to societal reactions to their behavior (Williams, 2008). He quickly became a part of different gangs involved in kidnapping, extortion, and contract-killing. At around the age of sixteen he formed his own gang, thereby commanding an army of 30-40 delinquents (Ghosh, 2014). By the time he was seventeen years old, he left his home and was constantly on the run, leading a vagabond existence, dodging the police (De, 2012). Thus it can be interpreted that Nigel shunned his 'humble and protective' family life and was desperate enough to lead his own life by taking 'risk'.

## His Yesteryear Life in the World of Crime

He enjoyed the thrills and chills of the 'job'. In his own words, 'I lived two lives, one during the day and the other during the night and did not allow the two to clash. I had absolutely no moral compunctions about my crimes and one thing led to another till I found I was not the invincible person I thought I was'(Chatterjee, 2012). He was intelligent enough to complete his school and college education even as he began his journey into the world of crime. He hardly attended college classes, bribed a college peon to see his basic attendance requirement and coaxed a studious friend from another college to appear for his weekly Saturday exams (Poddar, 2014). By the time he was twenty-two, just out of St.Xavier's College he had been arrested and charged with seventeen crimes ranging from kidnapping, extortion, to murder (Chatterjee, 2012 and Making of Mukhtodhara, 2012). Thus following Labelling perspective Nigel became a 'secondary deviant' – he persistently broke the law, both as a way of making a living and as a way of life. It is the members of society, and particularly the police after arrest, courts after their verdict give a label of 'criminal' to a secondary deviant. The individual so labeled are treated differently from others and the effect of this depends partly upon their ability to deal with the consequences and how they then view themselves (Williams, 2008). He says, 'I could never imagine that I could be good and do any good work which can benefit others.... I was like a beast...just like beasts like 'raw' meat not 'cooked' food... I had 'jungle' attitude (De, 2012). I was 'aggressive', 'stubborn' and 'violent' (interviewed on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015). He remained unrepentant throughout. He says, 'I wanted to lead and it never occurred to me that what I was doing was wrong' (Mukherjee, 2014 ). Initially in prison he was one of the most difficult prisoners to handle. He was rude, ruthless and arrogant. Later on when dance therapy classes were introduced at the Presidency Correctional Home, and Nigel was asked to participate in dance therapy classes by the jail authorities, he had asked the superintendent of the correctional home, 'do goondas (local parlance of hoodlums/ gangsters) wear ghunghroo'?(Making of Mukhtodhara, 2012). In due course of time the individual accepts the label thereby becoming a 'secondary deviant'. Nigel accepted the label of 'hard core criminal' and this criminal label is to be the overriding identifying label for the next few years of life in prison as he internalizes the attributes and characteristics of the label.

He says, 'I was greedy for wealth and power. I used to watch rich students come to college and splurge on things I wanted to have. Those instincts drove me to become a criminal' (Chatterjee, 2012). During his gangster days Nigel was an atheist. He recounts, 'I used to ask who the hell is God. Man has the power to kill. Man has absolute power' (Mukherjee, 2010 ). I didn't feel what I was doing was wrong. I never realized there was no shortcut to achieve things in life' (De, 2012).

Nigel never had a 'totally deprived' childhood or life. His mother made an honest effort to provide the 'best' as much as she could with her single earning. But he got exposed and attracted to the richness, glitz and glamour of the Park street area. (St. Xavier's Collegiate School and College both are located at Park Street). He says, 'then my monthly expenses were two lakhs, as I lived in three-star hotels and roamed in expensive cars (Gupta, 2011). Three things lead me into the world of crime: greed, the ambition to be superior and aggression' (Chatterjee, 2012). Some individuals see their present position as comparing unfavourably with others; they desire more; they often feel they deserve more; but if there seems to be no legitimate chance of acquiring more, they may use illegitimate means. Thus if relative deprivation is present, feeling of envy and injustice will be present and might influence behavior (Williams, 2008). According to R.K.Merton, there are ways of adapting to strain caused by restricted access to the socially approved goals and means. There exists approved goals of society but legitimate means are replaced by other non-approved means, then that mode of adaptation is known as innovation. Nigel aspired for money, power, fame but lacked the legitimate means to reach his aspiration, hence followed illegitimate means to reach his goal. Criminologists such as Walter Reckless in his containment theory explain delinquency as the interplay between two forms of control: internal (inner) and external (outer). Inner containment which was never clearly specified by Reckless includes self control, good self concept, ego strength, well-developed super ego, high frustration tolerance, high resistance to diversion, high sense of responsibility, goal orientation and ability to find substitute satisfactions. Outer containment was viewed as social environment includes family and school reinforcement of social norms and values, effective supervision and discipline, reasonable opportunities for social activity, availability of alternatives to deviance. There are variety of 'pushes and pull' towards deviant behavior that all individual experience. The effect of inducements to commit delinquent act depends on the strength of an individual's inner and outer containments. If the self-concept were bad, outer social controls would have little effect on the individual and delinquency would be more likely to result. On the other hand, an individual with a good self concept could withstand weak external social control and resist committing delinquent acts. In case of Nigel, during the formative years, both the inner and outer containment (to a large extent) failed, thereby allowing him to deviate into the world of crime.

### **His Life in Prison**

He became involved in a situation that cost him his freedom for life for around eight years and seven months. Around twenty-two police personnel were deployed to arrest him (De, 2012). A 'humanely' encounter followed which lead Akkara to a skirmish with the police personnel. Finally he was arrested in a state of unconsciousness in the year 2000 (interviewed on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2015) For eighty

seven days he was in police custody in different police stations in Kolkata. He says, 'you cannot imagine the torture I went through in 'interrogation', that went on for 87 hours, in police custody, the most brutal treatment any human being can be made to suffer. They pulled off my nails one-by-one, they broke my fingers and my legs till I could hardly walk (Chatterjee, 2012). The skirmish he had with the police personnel as an under trial lead to the addition of yet another case to the charge sheet submitted against him. He reminisces, 'I was so violent, wild and out of control that I had to be shifted from the Alipore Central Correctional Home to a solitary cell at the Presidency Correctional Home where I spent three years from 2004-07... (Chatterjee, 2012). In prison, Nigel was kept in solitary confinement in a six by eight feet cell. He was not allowed to mix with anyone or interact with other inmates. For security reasons after every fifteen days his place of abode in prison was changed (Making of Mukhtodhara, 2012). Social isolation, deprivation, silence, darkness are constant companion of an inmate for twenty-four hours of each day of solitary confinement. Through such means there is a perennial reminder of freedom that an inmate has lost because of committing crime. Prisoners yearn for good and free life. He was found to be one of the most 'difficult' inmates for his raw aggression and defiance. Once he attempted a jail break. He reminisces, 'I was caught, beaten with rifle butts, till I vomited blood and collapsed. They thought I was dead. The injuries were serious but miraculously I recovered' (Poddar, 2014). He lost around 20 kilograms of weight due to custodial torture which in India is referred as third degree (De, 2012). But instead of crying, the treatment made him more aggressive, more violent and more angry. During the first six years in prison, Nigel felt like a caged tiger – angry, violent and unrepentant (Mukherjee, 2010). Prisons not only incarcerate an offender but they brutalize an individual physically, psychologically and spiritually until death is preferable to any existence in such a prison (Quillen, 1991). Once incarcerated the 'rational', 'civilized' world forgets that prisoners are still human beings. There are a lot of injustices within the justice system of our country. Even in the twenty-first century with the advent of electronic and social media well as with the intense activism of human rights group the institution of prison remains shrouded in secrecy and at times the 'truth' (facts and occurrences) remain hidden from public eye.

### **Prison as Correctional Home and Reformation Phase of His Life**

In India theoretically the objectives behind imprisonment has moved from incarceration, deterrence to correction where reformation and rehabilitation occupies a pivotal role. Keeping in mind the philosophy of prison reform, the state of West Bengal has repealed the old prison act and introduced the modern West Bengal Correctional Services Act (henceforth WBCS Act), 1992, on and with effect from 14<sup>th</sup> April 2000. Such an act ushers a paradigm shift from the colonial legacy of

punishment towards a new philosophy of correctional approach for the moral reformation and education of the inmates in order to facilitate their reintegration with the mainstream society in the post release period (WBCS Act, 1992). The Department of Correctional Services, Government of West Bengal, India has introduced the culture therapy programme with the help of mainstream resource person and trainers (Chatterjee, 2012). Culture therapy involves training prison inmates in different performing arts that form an integral part of Indian culture – music, theatre, dance, recitation, paintings, sculpture and sports through production-oriented workshops, with the help of mainstream resource person and trainers (Chatterjee, 2012). A unique experiment initiated by noted dancer Ms. Alokanda Roy at the invitation of Mr. B. D. Sharma IPS is the dance therapy, a part of culture therapy. As an impact of this dance therapy he underwent catharsis thereby transforming his life. Today Nigel Akkara is a reformed person. He has set up his own house-keeping and private security business named Kolkata Facilities Management where ex-prisoners are employed. Till date forty-four ex-prisoners have been mainstreamed by him. In 2011 Akkara got an opportunity to play a lead role in a semi-biopic *Mukhtodhara* and henceforth has been involved in acting ventures.

## Conclusion

As a researcher I may write on prison related issues but I have not personally experienced the 'brutal' life inside. Nigel has 'lived' it. The environment perhaps has brutalized him to a point where perhaps he cannot trust anyone. His character has multiple-shades. He has experienced the bad, the ugly, and the good. In spite of his newly acquired fame, money, social recognition, he appears very lonely at heart. Loneliness and insecurities will always be there with a person like him who has undergone physical and mental trauma in early life which he described as his 'worst experience'. From sociological perspective Nigel Akkara is a product of malfunctioning of important social systems. Jim Quillen, who was imprisoned at Alcatraz in his autobiography wrote, 'this autobiography was written with the sincere hope that this part of my life will serve as a deterrent to anyone who might venture into any criminal activity. The quest for the so called 'easy money' thought to be available through crime is a myth. There is no easy money and the only reward reaped through crime is incarceration or death'(Quillen, 1991). Nigel Akkara's life is a living example to this society, especially to deter youngsters from crime and criminal activities. It goes without saying that the ultimate price an individual has to pay for getting involved in crime and criminal activities is too high for any amount of monetary benefits and extravagant life style. Hopefully his life becomes an inspiration that if a person works hard, has confidence, grit and social support he or she can mend his life towards a positive goal.

## Abbreviations

- B.Ed. : Bachelor of Education  
 IPS : Indian Police Service  
 TADA : Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act.

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