

Jinee Lokaneeta, *The Truth Machines: Policing, Violence, and Scientific Interrogation in India* (Hyderabad: Oriental BlackSwan, 2020), 264 pp.

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Jinee Lokaneeta shows how scientism can legitimize gaming of the legal system by its own protectors. Her book unpacks some questionable forensic techniques of our times to bring into focus the interactions between technology, policing and the rule of law. Common citizens, even judges and the media, take comfort in the fact that modern machines can be a civilized alternative to physical torture. She makes it evident that serious violations of human rights occur in the name of science. The main players of the game, that is, the police, doctors, magistrates and cyborgs (humans and machines combined), enact an elaborate fact-finding ritual while the courts and the public string along. The book cautions that the cure of the truth machines can be worse than the disease of police brutality.

The book's main emphasis is on the everyday part of forensic 'science' and the state's use of coercive power over the bodies of those in custody. It studies three modern techniques of interrogation, viz. truth serum or narco-analysis (which uses drugs and chemicals), brain scans (which records brain's neuronal activity to track deception) and lie detectors or polygraphs (which track physiological responses like respiration, heartbeats, blood pressure, etc.). The author also takes the reader through the debates around these techniques in scientific and legal communities. She interviews multiple stakeholders and uses well-known case studies to examine why these are not legally admissible and why acquittals happen despite 'medicalization of falsities'.

The police are central to the subterfuge because they have the custody of the suspect and it is part of their duty to extract a confession which could lead to a conviction. However, the author demonstrates with theoretical and ethnographic research that the doctors, magistrates and forensic psychologists routinely go out of the way to help the police in getting those confessions. And this happens at the cost of betraying the human body or brain through superficially scientific means. The truth machines represent

the technical solution, she explains, for the ills of the criminal justice system. This is how a liberal democracy seeks to resolve the tension between law and excessive violence, she maintains.

Lokaneeta, a political theorist, connects the dots to depict the big picture of everyday violence in a Foucauldian sense where torture is justified eventually by confession. Foucault defines the use of scientific knowledge as ‘micro physics of power’ illustrating that power and knowledge imply one another. Lokaneeta maintains that the liberal state too promotes a logic of power through a foundation of violence. Everyday policing is thus a visible site of state power. She takes forward the Weberian idea of bureaucracy and the state’s monopoly over legal coercion and goes on to propose that everyday practice of policing in India is much more contingent and much less rule based. Her fieldwork shows that this contingency factor, ironically, makes the truth machines a matter-of-fact choice for the police.

The author’s use of ethnography and fieldwork to assess the scientific foundations of truth machines is exhaustive. My minor quibble is that the gold mine of her normative research material, which has direct import on moral harm or wrongful convictions, gets somewhat eclipsed by the demands of political theory. Nonetheless, this is an extremely important critique of modern forensics, a missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle of India’s flawed criminal justice system. The book is a ready reckoner not only for academics and practitioners but also for lawyers, judges, journalists, activists and anyone else interested in police reforms and the rule of law.

To Lokaneeta, forensic techniques serve as a tool to analyse the relationship between state power and legal violence. She proposes a desegregated conception of a ‘contingent state’ which can make an exception from routine violence in conflict areas and crisis situations. The liberal and the security state is able to justify violence and, to an extent, evade scrutiny of law for a higher purpose of defending sovereignty. She argues that the ‘scaffold of the rule of law’ tends to buckle under lame procedures in cases involving terrorism. She quotes several terror suspects including Abdul Wahid Sheikh, a Mumbai schoolteacher, who was arrested, tortured, but finally acquitted, in the 2006 Mumbai train bombing case, to illustrate ‘criminal racialization’ and feminization of young men mostly on the basis of their religion and masculinity.

In such a backdrop the truth machines are innocuous developments at the margins of police practice, she explains, and a part of constant innovations to ‘create new confessional sites’. The author closes the issue on an optimistic note, invoking the nascent area of State Violence Studies, with its focus on human bodies as sites of state power, in order to connect the dots between law, state, and violence embedded in society.

ORCID iD

Vipul Mudgal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1021-2413>

Vipul Mudgal 
Common Cause (India)
E-mail: vipulmudgal@gmail.com