
Review Essay

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MAHUYA BANDYOPADHYAY and RIMPLE MEHTA (Eds.), *Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India*, Orient BlackSwan, 2022, 356 pp., ₹1210, ISBN 9789354421884 (Paperback).

Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India is a volume edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta that focusses on carceral logic, gender justice and resistance drawing from the experience of women in prisons in India. It consists of three parts—‘Narratives of Resistance’; ‘Confronting Institutional Spaces’; and ‘Humane Prisons? Challenges of Governance’. The 12 essays that make up this collection range from testimonies of women who have survived incarceration and torture to prison administration and reforms therein. The narratives include vernacular accounts of women who have survived incarceration and torture. Among the women interviewed and narratives examined by the different authors in this volume are women political prisoners (Naxalite and anti-Emergency resisters) and women jailed for non-political crimes (under the Indian Penal Code and other special legislations). The narratives of these two classes of women are distinct, as also their experiences of the ‘beforemath’ (Li, 2022) of incarceration, the prison and their anticipation of the aftermath. Drawing all the chapters together and moving between them, this review essay will attempt to open out the volume in terms of some overarching themes.

A volume on this subject is timely, if not somewhat overdue, given the rapidly intensifying carceral climate we are living through in the present, more so since the first pandemic lockdown. There has been recent writing on ‘carceral minorities’ during the pandemic—a term Pratiksha Baxi and Navsharan Singh (2020) use for women, queer and non-binary prisoners, and the older pathbreaking work of Rani Dhavan Shankardass (2012) on women in prison, including importantly psychosocial and intellectual disabilities and women’s carceral experiences. While there are provisions for ‘segregation, security, pregnancy, childbirth, and family care, healthcare, and rehabilitation for women prisoners’, as Upneet Lalli points out (p. 242), the fact remains that working physical arrangements for women are fewer than for men, a fact matched by the understaffing of women’s correctional facilities, with fewer women recruited at every level (p. 245). Madhurima Dhanuka points out that over 68 per cent of women prisoners are undertrials, and only 24 of the 1,339 prisons in India are women’s prisons (p. 270).

Whether in terms of ethnographic research or prison memoirs, or policy and judicial interventions where women and non-binary persons in custody are

concerned, there is only a sprinkling of work that awaits further exploration to cascade into a field of study. Prison memoirs and prison writing by men—especially political prisoners—have registered a relatively strong presence. The few that immediately come to mind are Varavara Rao (2010), Arun Ferreira (2014), Ramchandra Singh (2018) and G. N. Saibaba (2022)—all in relation to radical left politics. There are also older, lesser-known writings by men in the vernacular, awaiting translation and circulation. While women have been active in these movements, held leadership positions, and been imprisoned for their politics, resistance and advocacy as well, this presence has not translated into too many published reminiscences that might give us insights into the gender formations that constitute carceral logic. This collection brings together a valuable range of work from diverse disciplinary locations on a subject awaiting deep exploration.

Violence, Abandonment and ‘Ethical Loneliness’

In terms of overarching themes the volume helps us reflect on, violence is central and figures in a multitude of different forms in different sites ranging from the beforemath to the anticipation/fear of the aftermath. The prison itself is a site of brutal treatment that leads to the forging of solidarities and kinship by choice among co-sufferers: torture, resistance, sexual humiliation and assault—in a routine form that is every day and incremental; and in an exceptional form that is episodic; with retribution, punishment and deterrence structuring treatment within the prison.

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta pose critical questions in their introduction:

How is the prison as an organisation gendered? In what ways do the threat and the actual use of violence, explicitly or implicitly sexualised, feature in the management, control, and treatment of female prisoners? Is it possible to trace narrative continuities between female prisoners’ experience of prison life and their experience outside the prison? (p. 5)

Layering this further, Bandyopadhyay in her chapter explores the possibilities of deploying Jill Stauffer’s (2015) theorising of ‘ethical loneliness’ in the context of mass violence and abandonment to understand the trauma, pain and harm experienced by women in prison. For Champarani, ‘[t]he family, the border, the brothel, the hospital, and the jail are ... spaces of control, encapsulating constraints of varying degrees and violence’ and there is a ‘seamlessness to her mobility and journey through these disparate sites’ (p. 98). Rani’s term in Aligarh District Jail after being convicted of killing a child to ‘cure’ herself of barrenness at the behest of her conjugal family after abandonment by her natal family illustrates this further. Shireen Sadiq’s account of this case (p. 121) and others of violence by women on family members (the murder of an abusive husband) speaks to the ways in which patriarchy traps women into cycles of violence, incarcerating them

in the beforemath of the jail term in inescapable ways. Accounts of torture are counted in the hours of the days, as in Sharmila Purkayastha's account of Malaya Ghosh's memoir of 64 days in Lalbazar. The memoir was published in Bengali in 2011, thirty years after she survived. 'Torture narratives', Purkayastha says, 'have no telos other than the end of torture... The torturer's masculinity remains sheathed in silence ... the torture is not just a combination of physical and mental pain; it is deeply gendered and deeply sexual too' (p. 63).

Through all these forms, however, violence interlocks with surveillance to maim, harm and abridge lives and lifeworlds in very specific ways for women political prisoners, for women convicted of ordinary crime, and for women non-citizens in prison for illegal entry. The experiences of non-binary and queer prisoners and women with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities are left unexplored in this volume, barring one account of lesbianism among recidivist women.

Spatiality and the Containment of Time

Different essays in the volume provide us with insights into the spatiotemporal frames of prison life—already a securitised enclosure in which time loses its dynamic texture and in a sense stands still, shuttling between routinised chores and the outer limit of the period to be served out. And yet time, although incarcerated in space, is inherently mobile. What does this mobility do to the character of the prison that is a fixed and bounded space? Focussing on the interlocking of the spatial and the temporal in her chapter that provides an account of the experience of Bangladeshi women in correctional facilities in Kolkata, Rimple Mehta observes, 'space and time take on specific significance in a circumscribed institution where there is a scarcity of space and an abundance of time' (p. 202). She points to the alienation that results from the disjuncture between 'embodied time' and 'prison time'—both within a bounded space and by the travels in the mind to times past; and navigating the present, circumventing the imposition of 'prison time' (the monotonous repetition of mandatory chores, for instance) through gossip and forging intimacies. Kanupriya Sharma in telling 'many tales of love' focusses on intimacies, the 'romantic relationships with male prisoners, prison guards or "new" men outside [which] mostly developed through a tactical negotiation of time, space, and movement [shaping] the way women organised their life inside prison' (p. 141).

What is this *inside* of a prison? The spatiality and its containment of time through practices and architecture may be comprehended through Sadaf Modak's mapping of the Yerwada Women's Central Prison and the Mumbai District Women's Prison. The freezing of time (the present condition of women prisoners in Byculla prison, Modak finds, is similar to the conditions described in the report of the Indian Jails Committee in 1919–1920), and the crushing of space with the common areas in the prison being occupied by men—'since whatever is not the female section is the male section' (p. 182)—reproduce spatial segregations outside within the prison as well, while holding time

captive. In a manner of speaking, women negotiate the spatial confinement and the incarceration of time straddling colonial and postcolonial realities, both, in more senses than one.

The persistence of objective realities of carceral structures and practices may be understood somewhat differently through the lens of recidivism—the ‘refusal’ to ‘change’ marking both. And yet, by Mangala Honawar and Vijay Raghavan’s account, the timelessness is ruptured from within through an accumulation of power a recidivist presence makes possible, which includes disobeying heterosexual order and authority, with jailors reporting increased lesbianism among recidivist women (p. 220).

Frozen, linear or cyclical, time and space interlock in very many different ways—the embodiment of space interlocking with embodied time. While culture therapy and prison theatre would certainly be therapeutic, as is evident from B. D. Sharma’s account of correctional facilities in Murshidabad district (pp. 287–306), the suspension of time and space that prison theatre enables would require concomitant institutional transformations in order to move towards humane incarceration. Although a contradiction in terms, this is the unresolved core of carceral institutions that have very specific implications for women and non-binary persons incarcerated.

Sexual and Reproductive Justice

Koteswaramma, in her interview with Uma Chakravarti, places the question of reproductive labour at the centre of her prison experience, when she recounts how the women returned the rations their male comrades sent to the women’s prison so that the women could cook for them saying, ‘we haven’t come to prison to cook for you. The government has given us a holiday. We will not cook for you’ (p. 34). She then goes on to describe how they converted their prison time into ‘female time together’ (p. 34) with female camaraderie enabling their everyday resistance against prison authorities. And yet, this ‘joy’ was underwritten by the pain of leaving children behind at home and the separation and suffering of children and their mothers. Penelope Tong, drawing on her social work practice, observes that the familial, domestic and private domains occupy a central place in thinking through women’s relation with crime and incarceration (p. 315). It would also apply to political prisoners and could play out differently for women variously located in relation to the family. For instance, it could differ depending on whether they were strongly integrated into the family, or have a tenuous, weak connection although still part of a family, whether the families are involved in or accept crime, whether women pursue illegal livelihoods without the knowledge of families while supporting the families, or whether women are located outside the family and kinship network (pp. 318–319).

Political prisoners especially recount experiences of sexual humiliation, of torture by male officers, of pregnant women being shot, of resisting being reduced to the body that is tortured, by recounting the lives of the mind and the heart, of love, in the dark recesses of the prison. The sexual and the reproductive lives

of women are intertwined in their memories of violence and solidarity, of incarceration and resistance. As Sharmila Purkayastha observes pertinently, sexual torture was part of women's experience in Lalbazar, although the women themselves did not name it as such (p. 71). And Malaya Ghosh, whose testimony she examines, speaks of a silent protest among women constables to the inhuman way in which she had been tortured, and yet again of the 'conscience' of a policewoman who fled on seeing her years later (p. 79).

The narratives of experiences of violent intimacy, of sexual and reproductive harms and of abandonment by the family by non-political prisoners offer the counterpoint to the narrative of political prisoners in the accounts in this volume. And yet Koteswaramma's account of reproductive labour signals the deeper familial oppressions political women either suffered silently or resisted. Across all these instances, the attempts to recover the space of bodily autonomy, of desire, of love within carceral contexts crystallise into an everyday resistance.

Conclusion

The profound question the volume leaves the reader with is, whence will an 'architecture of hope' (to borrow from Lalli in this volume, p. 249) spring from? All the essays in the volume perform acts of listening, of hearing and empathising with experiences of pain, harm, risk, torture, retrieval, resistance, love and solidarity—some of these through personal interviews, others through participant observation, through reading written testimonies of prison times, and through offering opportunities and possibilities for stepping out to perform their lives to an audience that they hope will hear, thereby giving them an opportunity to break out even momentarily from the cycles of abandonment and loneliness. Both the speech and the listening are focussed on the excavation and re-telling of past experiences, of memory. For persons incarcerated, it is a cascading connect with the listening world outside that may ultimately pave the way for ideas of release. This volume performs the act of listening and in that makes an important contribution to an idea of justice in carceral times.

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