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Torture, Body, and Resistance in the Colonial Prison in Bengal: Re-reading Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom*

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Abstract

This paper, through a rereading of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's memoir, *In Search of Freedom* (1958), intends to explore how the British government continued to employ corporeal torture within prison, while legally suspending it. On the other hand, how the militant revolutionaries adopted various survival strategies including forceful petition, hunger strikes, and even forming the collective bonding, that defy the absolute control of the colonial state will also be explored Through the introduction of carceral imprisonment, abandoning the public spectacle of punishment as well as the infliction of physical torture, the colonial rule claimed its legitimacy as the modern state. However, the accounts of the revolutionaries unmask the veil of this enlightened project as their penal experiences show the continual application of the sovereign power, the right to pain. Thus, this paper presents the penal torture techniques as well as the strategies of the revolutionaries that act as the resistance to the British authority and the subversion of the colonial rule.

Keywords: Body; Colonial Prison; Hunger Strike; Resistance; Torture.

Introduction: The Development of the Colonial Prison in Bengal

Historically, under Macaulay's direction, the Jail Discipline Committee was established in 1838 with the goal of modernizing the penal system in British India. The main intention of Macaulay was to end the Company's intentional despotism and set up an organized structure for managing and regulating the colonial population (Cohn 64-65). It was extended as the signification of the British rule of law. The emergence of judicial norms is therefore implied to be the manifestation of modernity and the

outcome of enlightenment reasoning of the West. However, the idea of the modern state throughout the colonial period was context-specific, and largely acted as a discursive tool in India due to the historical presence of political discrimination. Imperial goals that prioritized socio-economic condition, class, race, and even caste hierarchy looked to be at odds with the colonial legal system and its implementation, which should have meant to further the interests of the colonial state and its subjects. The Mutiny, on the other hand, made the current situation more complicated. "In the first half of the nineteenth century, the British saw native society as exotic and different, but not altogether dangerous... was now regarded as untrustworthy" strongly required severe punitive measure (Waits 147). Therefore, it brought forth a direct conflict between the tyrannical, discriminatory state and the colonised people who were fiercely desiring for liberation. During the initial decades of the twentieth century, there was a significant rise in militant nationalism in Bengal. As a means to quell this political agitation, prisons were predominantly utilized. As a result, the colonial jail transformed into a place of severe repression and brutality instead of serving as an institution of control and discipline for the outlaws.

In the early twentieth century, it is worth noting that the revolutionaries began documenting their experiences through various mediums such as newspapers, magazines, autobiographies, and memoirs. There were two primary motivations behind this action: firstly, to raise awareness among the colonized population regarding the internal violent realities of the colonial state, thereby exerting pressure on British authorities to initiate reforms in their oppressive regime; and secondly, to facilitate the widespread dissemination of nationalist consciousness. Consequently, the history of custodial torture and their various methods of defiance were abundant in their accounts. Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate, through a rereading of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom* (1958), the persistence of corporeal punishment and mental torture within the colonial prison in Bengal, despite its legal claim of equality. Additionally, it will also explore the continual defiance and resistance exhibited by revolutionaries against this violent form of domination.

Revolutionary Memoir: Contextualizing Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee

Notably, in the early twentieth-century colonial Bengal, there were several political prisoners, both men and women who recorded their life and experiences during revolutionary insurgency in life writings including autobiography and memoirs. These accounts besides mobilizing the people in the anti-colonial movements, present lives of the revolutionaries which

are deeply embedded in the turbulent historico-political time (Ghosh 60). The term, life writings which serve as a comprehensive category including various forms of literary expression, takes a notable shift in the post 1980s transitioning from a primary emphasis on life itself to a more nuanced exploration of the concept of self. This highlights the need to re-examine the overlooked personal narratives, as it establishes a dialogue between their lived experiences and the historical context, without undermining their individual perspectives (Howes 1-3). Furthermore, Smith and Watson argue in their seminal work, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* that the complexity of analysing life writings lies in its narrative tropes, historical timeframe, metaphorical inclinations, and the shifting trajectory of chronological period (10). Thus, this paper contextualizes the memoir of Jogesh Chandra in the broad terrain of nationalist insurgency and revolutionary movements without delimiting his subjectivity.

The involvement of extremist factions within the Indian National Congress played a substantial influence in the emergence and proliferation of revolutionary terrorism within the realm of Indian politics in the 20th century. The revolutionaries prioritized expeditious accomplishment over the efficacy of persuasion. In order to procure funds for the acquisition of weaponry and various other resources, they even engaged in Swadeshi movements. Apart from several other parts of the nation, they particularly exhibited their activities in Bengal, Punjab, and Maharashtra. This led to the emergence of multiple clandestine youth terrorist groups. Groups like Anushilan Samiti, a secretive organization, established in Calcutta by Pramatha Mitra, and other secret societies in Dacca like Sadhana Samaj and Swadeshi Bandana, founded by Pulin Das were particularly influential in this period. Similarly, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee actively participated in the Non-Cooperation Movement of the Congress. Subsequently, he became a member of the revolutionary nationalist organization, because he soon became disillusioned due to the movement's sudden cessation. He then temporarily associated himself with the operations of Bengal's Anushilan Samiti.

Later, he played a pivotal role in the formation of the Hindustan Republican Association/ Army in Kanpur in October 1924, with the primary objective of effecting the removal of colonial rule through the armed uprising. The association underwent a subsequent renaming and came to be known as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. In 1925, he was subjected to lifelong detention subsequent to his involvement in the Kakori Robbery. He had been imprisoned several times in different jails in India

including Rajshahi central jail, Calcutta Presidency jail, Berhampur Jail, Lucknow central jail, and Agra Central jail. His autobiography, *In Search of Freedom* not only stands as the testimony to this long struggle of Bengali militant nationalism but also provides the internal dynamics of colonial prison. His account includes the description of the living conditions of jails, the poor state of the general convict cell and solitary confinement, various violent torture techniques as well as the methods adopted by the revolutionaries to resist such brutality. However, to understand critically this process of extolling repression and their act of resistance, it must be considered theoretically first.

Body, Power, and the Inscription of Torture

The practise of imprisoning criminals as a form of punishment was not practised in Bengal before the arrival of the British. Criminals, even murderers, were sentenced to impalement, burning, or limb amputation, while dungeons were solely used to hold political prisoners (Banerjee 546-47). In 1849, India's colonial government banned the public display of executed convicts' bodies and *godna* (inscription on bodies), which involved branding the condemned. According to Bentham's principles, Bengal's colonial penitentiaries changed from fort-like structures to compact edifices with sturdy walls and iron gates, strategically located in secluded locations. The Jail Code of 1864 and the Jail Act of 1894 justified a strong jail infrastructure with a reliable water supply and sanitary facilities. This perspective indicates the authority of the British government and its strategy of carceral imprisonment, notwithstanding its flaws. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault examined this efficacy of authority in modern government systems, in which so-called humane, morally righteous laws have replaced outdated ones.

Foucault compares these two different punitive systems as expressions of disciplinary and sovereign power of the state. Punishment, he observes, has become a metaphorical notion that is kept invisible in criminal proceedings, this new penal system rather restricts, forbids, and limits the mobility of the human body. Punishment has changed from inflicting pain to suspending liberties within a political paradigm (Foucault 11). Therefore, Foucault's analysis shows a symbolic transition from sovereign power in the mediaeval era, which allowed killings, to disciplinary power in modern times, which tended to take control over body and soul. The introduction of the prison system in the British India thus stands as the marker of restoring kindness and civility in its official records, but coercive and detrimental in practice.

However, as Foucault himself indicates that power is constitutive, which is always accompanied by resistance. He points out that "the exercise of power is not a naked fact, an institutional right, nor is it a structure which holds out or is smashed: it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation" (Foucault 792). Hence, it is imperative to underscore the significance of both the lateral mobility of incarcerated individuals and the vertical arrangement of authority within correctional facilities to completely realize its power dynamics. One could argue that the conscious or unconscious spatial interactions among prisoners suggest a form of resistance against power, and should also be considered as an act of subversion. For instance, Atreyee Sen's research on incarcerated women affiliated with the Naxalite movement highlights the empirical shortcomings inherent in the Foucauldian discourse about disciplinary power. According to Sen, the Naxal women engaged in collaborative efforts with the general convicts within the prison to establish informal tactics for survival. These strategies included the use loud music, clapping, and laughter deliberately to distract the guards (Sen 920). Therefore, the penitentiary has consistently functioned as an authoritarian institution in the colonial regime, though the presence of subversion and resistance can also be observed in that context.

Physical and Mental Torture in Colonial Jails in Bengal

In his autobiography *In Search of Freedom*, Jogesh Chandra presented two distinct forms of imprisonment one characterized by leniency and moderation, and the other marked by severity and torment. Although he did not personally go through severe punishment, he encountered the discretionary exercise of prison authority in suppressing Bengali militancy in the aftermath of the partition in 1906. When recounting his period of confinement at Rajshahi Central Jail, Jogesh Chandra made reference to his comrades from Anushilan Samiti. He talked about political prisoners including Prafulla Roy from Sylhet, who was initially apprehended in Dacca Jail and afterwards relocated to Rajshahi Jail, as well as Naren Banerjee from Banaras, who faced charges in the Banaras Conspiracy Case along with other state prisoners.

According to Chatterjee, both individuals had been subjected to abusive treatment. Chatterjee expressed significant concern for his compatriots who were incarcerated in the Rajshahi central jail due to their involvement in revolutionary activities. A note of expressed dissatisfaction, voicing their complaint could be noticed in his account. He observed that the

convicts were dressed in a garment that covered only the upper half of their bodies, along with a pair of shorts. The individuals were obligated to don an iron ring encircling their necks, which traversed a wooden plate suspended upon their breast. The plate displayed numerical figures, as well as the dates of conviction and subsequent release. The sole equipment at their disposal consisted of an iron saucer, serving many purposes such as meal consumption, drinking water, clothe laundering, and even bathing. All the inmates had to adhere to a customary dietary pattern that primarily included a modest portion of unrefined rice, lentils, and various vegetables (Chatterjee 111). This strict disciplinary control within the prison was maintained through the bodily repression to imply a cautionary message to the colonized population of India in general.

Notably, in the context of expressing physical pain and the human body, Eliane Scarry has observed in her book, *The Body in Pain* (1983) that a single subject may be divided into three different kinds of subjects. They include the inexpressibility of pain, the political consequences of pain's inexpressibility and the material and communicative inexpressibility or the nature of human creation. She further added that "physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story, and the story that it tells is about the inseparability of these three subjects, their embeddedness in one another" (Scarry 3). Thus, these accounts of the political prisoners regarding the practice of torture within the colonial prison not only tell the stories of their determination in the face of the hellish torturous condition of the prison but also showcase that the colonial governance kept reminding the colonial subjects about its sovereign power or the rights to torture and kill through this practice.

This torture takes a different form when the prisoners are sent to solitary confinement. Upon being sent to solitary confinement at Calcutta Presidency jail, commonly referred to the 44 cells, Jogesh Chandra encountered the challenging circumstances of a deteriorated cell environment. He had been incarcerated in the Presidency jail during the years 1916, 1917, and 1918, but in 1924, he witnessed an unusual kind of torment technique. Several individuals had frequently been summoned to the Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D) office for official questioning. He mentioned "that was new type of mental torture. They had small chambers. We were taken individually to separate chambers and were forced to sit for hours. Each chamber had two small chairs and a small table. To sit for hours in this condition was a terrible strain on the mind" (Chatterjee 263). Thus, the British government unable to enforce corporeal punishment resorted to employ psychological coercion.

These accounts provide the impression that the use of solitary confinement in Bengal's colonial jails necessitates the existence of two aspects that could not be more different from one another: harsh confinement within prison walls and strict oversight by prison officials. The concept of 44 Degrees is characterized by its one-of-a-kind spatial dynamics, which subjected the colonial people to psychological strain and caused them to question whether or not they actually existed. According to Lisa Guenther, in contrast to the unrestricted freedom to participate in day-to-day activities that individuals who are not incarcerated have, prisoners are limited to a low level of human contact, which undermines their ontological framework and makes it difficult for them to develop any sense of subjectivity (XV). Additionally, prisoners were not allowed to form any concrete connections with other people. As a result, the practice was an atrocious form of psychological torture that was applied to prisoners in the colonial jail system, particularly against the militant revolutionary.

In 1915, the British government introduced the Defence of India Act, alongside the preceding 'Ingress into India Ordinance law' in 1914. These legislative measures were implemented with the aim of imposing limitations on the mobility of individuals departing from and re-entering India. Prison in addition to these laws serves as a pivotal institution for the management of this violent insurgency. Although after 1920s prison administration had to change some of its coercive techniques, the case of the political prisoners as observed in Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom* would show that prison continued to hold its autocratic power. The interconnection between the colonial system's methods of control and power and the application of prison power was significant as the latter served the crucial purpose of demonstrating the dominance and unassailability of the imperial authority (Singh 5).

Hunger Strike and Other Forms of Resistance

In order to oppose this authoritarian rule, the political prisoners of Bengal especially in the early twentieth century resorted hunger strikes. In colonial Bengal, it was not simply a refusal to eat in prison, it served as their political weapon. "In the 1920s and 1930s, when Indian prisoners convicted of insurrection and sabotage deployed the hunger strike weapon in prison to gain release or accelerate parole" (Shah 110). While prison hunger strikes bear resemblance to public fasting as a form of nonviolent protest inspired by Gandhi, they have generated significant public outcry that proves challenging to resolve through negotiation. In this connection, it is essential to draw a definitive differentiation between fasts and hun-

ger strikes, as both include intentional refraining from food consumption. The term "fast" can occasionally include a religious implication that may not be applied to the notion of death. Still, the concept of a hunger strike, primarily driven by purpose, has the potential to lead to a lethal outcome (Teltumbde 10). Within prison, consumption of food is not simply a substance for keeping a human body fit and healthy; it can be argued that it also keeps a body workable, the ability to perform all the punitive orders one has been assigned to.

Thus, not taking food serves as an act of defiance to the authority, not to be subsumed into the despotic regime of the colonial government. It is simultaneously a subjective act and a collective form of protest. The act of refusal to eat, therefore, subverts the power relation of the colonial state and its subordinative subject. This sudden inception of agency, individual choice not to follow the official order and schedule, Bosworth and Carrabine submit, produces a certain autonomy and resistance within the all-powerful setting of prison (505).

Jogesh Chandra in his autobiography talks about the hunger strikes in detail. "one noon no sooner was the plate of food served than I kicked the plate away" he mentioned that he did not agree to "touch food unless either I (he) was transferred to some other jail or conditions were improved" (Chatterjee 93). Soon other ten inmates joined and went to hunger strikes at Calcutta Presidency jail. However, the jail administration attempted to nullify their strike in every possible way. As Jogesh Chandra mentions that even after five days no authority including the jailor, Superintendent, and warder turned up. On the sixth day, all the three prisoners were unlocked, measured, and locked up again in their cage. Finally, the authority was eventually compelled to transfer them to Rajshahi jail.

Besides, by this serious confrontation, the militant revolutionaries subverted the despotism of the colonial state within the prison through their small actions. For instance, the celebration of Durga Puja that took place at the Rajshahi jail is documented in detail by Jogesh Chandra in his memoir. According to his description, the Jailor was successful in convincing the Superintendent to formally seek approval from the headquarters to fulfil the demand. A financial reward was also given by Sir Hugh Stephenson, who was serving as the Chief Secretary of Bengal at the time. However, the order came with the stipulation that adequate safety precautions be taken. The pandal that was meant for the holy occasion was constructed in front of the main entrance of the penitentiary, which is located within the perimeter of the prison. In the afternoon, all of the inmates, includ-

ing the convicted criminals from the state, converged in the enclosure. That same evening, there was also going to be a movie show. Everyone who was incarcerated was granted permission to congregate outside until midnight in order to witness the show, which was also supervised by the Superintendent. The fact that Jogesh Chandra indicated that the event did not have any religious meaning in this context is crucial. This was done in an effort to shake up their routine and break free from the restrictions of their jail environment (118). They also started a monthly hand written paper in the jail called "Bhanga Kula" (Broken cleaner). He did similar thing in Berhampore jail when Netaji Subhash Chandra wrote an article on the independence of Poland in their paper. Even there, he made the authority to arrange a competitive game of badminton between the detenus and the state prisoners.

These acts of the revolutionaries suggest the defilement of the absolute penal control of the British government. It refers to what Mathieson calls the defence of the weak. Mathieson argues that the presence of interpersonal relationships among inmates and the occurrence of little deeds might potentially foster solidarity and deviate from the established institutional code of behaviour. Additionally, he asserts that the convicts do not necessarily need to act together in order to impact the system. By engaging in behaviours that involve holding authorities responsible, such as departing from established institutional regulations or disregarding greater moral precepts, jailed individuals can wield a significant amount of power over the prison administration (Mathieson, 13-24). Thus, the resistance of the revolutionary as it is located in Jogesh Chandra's memoir not only forced the colonial state to reform their coercive policy, but also served as the tool to survive in that violent condition.

Conclusion

Therefore, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom* demonstrates the colonial prison in Bengal as a kind of laboratory for the colonial governance that carries out extra-judicial activity in an official setting. Although physical torture or severe corporeal punishment was legally prohibited, the life accounts and their penal experiences point to the despotism of the authority. However, it would be difficult to restrict the penal discourse even in the colonial setting to a mere description of torture and repression. The memoir of Jogesh Chandra shows that it is rather a place of ambiguity, a liminal space since the prisoner also shows a limited sense of autonomy and agency. Besides, the revolutionary uses the colonial prison to negate the absolute colonial power and its repression. Thus, the colonial

state utilizes the penal power as the site of implementing its sovereign power whenever it apprehends some threats, albeit it is subject to contestation, resistance, and subversion.

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