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## Of Captivity and Resistance: Women Political Prisoners in Colonial India (1915–1947)

Sudhanshu Kumar

M.A. History, UGC-NET JRF, Department of History, University of Delhi

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### ABSTRACT

While colonial historiography has extensively covered social reforms regarding Sati and child marriage, the specific experience of female political prisoners remains largely underexplored. This study investigates the incarceration of women in India between 1915 and 1947, analyzing the prison as a tool of imperial domination rather than just punishment. Using Radhika Singha's concept of a "despotism of law," the paper examines how the colonial state criminalized political dissent to control the population. Despite enduring harsh conditions and the trauma of family separation, women transformed these carceral spaces into sites of resistance. Drawing on insights from Mushirul Hasan and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, the research argues that prisons functioned as "crucibles" that forged political identities and fostered deep solidarity. Through the writings of figures like Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali, this study illustrates how women asserted their agency from behind bars, challenging both colonial authority and patriarchal norms to redefine the nationalist struggle.

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### Introduction:

Impacts of the colonial rule on Indian society have been studied from varied angles on different themes. There is ample literature available on the issues and problems related to women but most of them deal with Sati, infanticide, child marriage, education, condition of widows, etc. However, we hardly have any research on crime by women and the treatment accorded to female prisoners by the colonial courts and prisons. The research by Indrani Mukherjee do touch upon the issues for Bengal and Priyam Singh's on United Provinces but my paper attempts a slightly different perspective considering not just the offence



committed, but also the social environment and the imposition of an alien system of justice for control and domination. During the colonial period in India, women political prisoners endured harsh and often inhumane conditions in prisons. They were subjected to overcrowded cells, poor sanitation, inadequate food, and limited medical care. The challenges were compounded by gendered oppression, as women faced additional scrutiny and restrictions due to societal norms. Many were separated from their families, including children, causing immense emotional and psychological trauma. Despite these hardships, women prisoners displayed remarkable resilience and strength, emerging as symbols of defiance against the colonial regime. The writings of these women offer invaluable insights into their experiences and struggles. Autobiographies, letters, diaries, and poetry penned by figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kriplani, and Kamala Das Gupta reveal their reflections on freedom, sacrifice, and resilience. For instance, Sarojini Naidu's letters from prison often combined personal anguish with hope for the nation's liberation. These writings also highlight the collective spirit among women prisoners, who found solace and strength in shared experiences. Through these narratives, they documented not only the brutalities of incarceration but also the strategies of resistance and solidarity that emerged within the confines of prison walls. Women political prisoners played a crucial role in the nationalist struggle, both inside and outside the prison. They organized protests, including hunger strikes, to demand better treatment and rights for prisoners. In some cases, they even managed to influence the nationalist discourse from behind bars. For example, Aruna Asaf Ali, a prominent leader during the Quit India Movement, inspired fellow prisoners and maintained the morale of that outside prison through her steadfast commitment to the cause. Similarly, Kalpana Dutt and other revolutionary women used their time in jail to strategize and strengthen their resolve for future activism.

The experiences of women prisoners also underscored the intersection of gender and nationalism during the freedom struggle. Their participation challenged traditional patriarchal norms and brought women's issues to the forefront of the nationalist agenda. While fighting for India's liberation, many women simultaneously laid the groundwork for feminist discourse, asserting their right to equal participation and recognition. The stories of women political prisoners reveal the multifaceted nature of India's struggle for freedom. Their writings and sacrifices highlight the gendered dimensions of colonial oppression while showcasing the indomitable spirit of women who not only fought for the nation but also for their dignity and equality. This area of study remains a vital lens through which to understand the broader dynamics of resistance, nationalism, and gender during colonial India.

The study of carceral spaces, while a well-established sociological field, has only more recently been applied with a specific, intersectional lens to colonial India. Foundational works on prison sociology,



such as those by Donald Clemmer and Gresham Sykes, established the study of prisons as distinct social systems, analyzing the psychological toll of long-term imprisonment and the creation of a “society of captives.” While these works provide a universal framework, their application in a colonial context requires significant adaptation.

In colonial India, the prison was not merely a tool for punishment but a central instrument for enforcing state authority and imperial ideology. Scholars like Ujjwal Kumar Singh argue that this function remained remarkably consistent from the colonial to the post-colonial era,

demonstrating how state institutions continued to use carceral power to manage dissent. This enforcement was often enacted through spectacular displays of “state violence,” as explored by Taylor C. Sherman, who argues that punishment served as a political “spectacle” to assert dominance. Central to this project was the very definition of “crime.” David Arnold contends that under colonial rule, politics and crime were deliberately conflated; political resistance was frequently labeled as criminality, and serious crimes were treated as political rebellion.

This “despotism of law,” as Radhika Singha terms it, was built on a legal framework designed to manage and control the colonized population, often by defining “criminal classes.” This legal and ideological project was deeply intertwined with racial and social hierarchies. Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of the “social bandit” an outlaw viewed as a hero by the populace provides a lens for understanding resistance that the state deemed criminal. Elizabeth Kolsky’s work highlights the racial bias of the legal system, noting how British residents were granted special privileges and immunities from prosecution, reinforcing a clear divide between the colonizer and the colonized. This hierarchy was further codified through racial pseudo-science, as scholars like Clare Anderson have shown in their study of how colonial powers used prisoners’ bodies to create racial typologies. The Andaman Islands, as detailed by Satadru Sen, became a key site for this carceral project, a “convict society” designed for both punishment and discipline.

While this historiography illuminates the structures of the colonial penal state, much of it implicitly centers the male experience. Scholars like Rani Dhavan Shankardass have specifically called for a deeper focus on women prisoners, whose experiences, needs, and challenges were distinct. My focus on the unique experience of women political prisoners.

The existing literature on women in the nationalist movement provides a crucial starting point. Mushirul Hasan, for instance, argues that for nationalists, the prison was not a deterrent but a “crucible” that forged



political identity, becoming a “rite of passage.” He significantly integrates the experiences of women like Sarojini Naidu and Vijayalakshmi Pandit into this narrative, arguing their “lived experience” of confinement was central to the nationalist ethos.

The most direct engagement with this topic comes from Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, who argues that the colonial prison had a paradoxical effect on women activists. While intended as a site of humiliation and control, it “inadvertently created a unique site of female community and resistance.” Within the prison walls, isolated from the outside world but united by their cause, women forged powerful bonds of “sisterhood and solidarity.” For Thapar-Björkert, the prison was not merely a place of confinement but a transformative political site a “crucible” that reshaped women’s personal and political identities, solidifying their nationalist consciousness and turning an instrument of colonial power into a catalyst for their political awakening.

Women political prisoners were mainly from the middle classes and most of them had stepped out onto the streets for the first time. It was a challenge for these women who had led secluded lives in *purdah*. The Hindi magazine *Chand* talked about the ‘heavenly sight’ of women stepping into the public space and courting arrest:

Our readers would be surprised to know that the number of women who have gone to jail for taking part in the freedom movement is maximum in Bengal. In other *purdah*-ridden states of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and the Central Provinces, women have not shown less bravery and strength. Now all those people who opposed education for women and who spoke against their liberation can gain some lessons from this heavenly sight.

Women participated in the nationalist movement through diverse activities, ranging from leading processions and delivering anti-colonial speeches to picketing and hoisting nationalist flags. These actions frequently led to arrests under both ordinary laws and emergency ordinances. While men typically received harsher sentences for similar offenses, women were generally detained for periods ranging from a day to a year. Upon their release, prominent Congress leaders were often present to pay fines and post bail, effectively assuming a “guardian” role for the women. The Strategy of Economic Coercion (*Kurki*), the colonial state utilized financial penalties as a primary tool of suppression. *Satyagrahis* often faced a choice between paying fines or accepting imprisonment; repeat offenders frequently faced both. When activists evaded arrest or failed to pay, the police resorted to *kurki* a punitive measure involving the sealing of homes, auctioning of domestic animals, and burning of crops. This



ensured that the political actions of a single individual resulted in collective punishment for the entire family.

A Legal Stranglehold To counter the Civil Disobedience Movement, the government instituted a series of draconian ordinances in 1930 to bypass standard legal procedures:

Surveillance and Detention: The *Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance* allowed for indefinite imprisonment and warrantless searches.

Censorship: The *Press Ordinance* and *Unauthorised News Sheets Ordinance* banned nationalist newspapers and independent pamphlets.

Property Rights: The *Unlawful Association Ordinance* gave the state unrestrained rights to confiscate the wealth and property of associations deemed unlawful, without the benefit of a court trial.

Martial Law: The administration retained the power to declare martial law at will.

Social Stigma and Middle-Class Vulnerability The fear of state retribution deeply affected the middle class, particularly those in government service. Families often discouraged women from participating because the involvement of a wife or daughter could lead to the dismissal of male relatives employed by the state. The social and economic pressure was so intense that some families, particularly in-laws, publicly disowned women activists to protect their own livelihoods. A notable example is Raj Kumari Gupta, whose in-laws published a disclaimer in a newspaper to sever ties with her revolutionary activities.

A primary site of resistance was the control over food. The text argues that women used hunger not just as a tool of protest, but as a mechanism of solidarity. When jailers attempted to break spirits by withholding food from those who refused to apologize for misconduct, women developed secret networks of support. Stronger inmates would covertly feed nursing mothers and those unable to sustain hunger, thereby neutralizing the jailer's power to punish. This suggests that women transplanted "domestic" values of nurturing and neighbourhood solidarity into the harsh public sphere of the prison, creating a resilient support system that defied the isolation intended by the state. The incarceration of women effectively dismantled two major colonial narratives. First, the presence of women in these "male-dominated spaces" disproved the British stereotype of the Indian woman as weak, docile, and subordinate. Second, the state's brutal response to female protesters exposed the hypocrisy of the British



claim to be “civilized” guardians of social progress. By physically assaulting women and clearing them off streets, the British government lost its moral high ground as a protector of the “women’s cause”, revealing the raw violence underpinning their rule.

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