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The Experience of Torture and Resistance within the Colonial Prison in Bengal: Re-reading Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's Memoir, In Search of Freedom

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Abstract:

*This paper aims to investigate the use of bodily torture by the British government within prisons, notwithstanding its legal suspension, by reevaluating Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's memoir, *In Search of Freedom* (1958). Additionally, we will examine the militant revolutionaries' use of diverse survival tactics like as forced petitioning, hunger strikes, and the establishment of social bonds, which challenge the whole authority of the colonial power. The colonial rule established its credibility as a modern state by implementing carceral detention instead of public punishment and physical torture. Nevertheless, the testimonies of the revolutionaries reveal the true nature of this enlightened endeavour, since their stories of their time in prison demonstrate the ongoing exercise of absolute authority, including the right to inflict suffering. This study explores the methods of prison torture and the strategies employed by revolutionaries to fight and subvert colonial control.*

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

Introduction: T.B. Macaulay supervised the establishment of the Prison Discipline Committee in 1838, aiming to modernise the criminal system in British India. Macaulay's primary objective was to eradicate the deliberate tyranny of the Company and establish a systematic framework for governing and overseeing the colonial people (Cohn 64-65). It was expanded to encompass the meaning of the principle of legal governance. The development of judicial standards is therefore understood to be the expression of modernity and the result of the rational thinking influenced by the Enlightenment in Western societies. Nevertheless, the concept of the modern state during the colonial era is contingent on the unique circumstances and mostly serves as a means of communication in India, given the historical existence of political prejudice. The imperial objectives, which emphasised socio-economic status, class, race, and caste hierarchy, appeared to contradict the colonial legal system and its intended purpose of advancing the interests of the colonial state and its citizens. The Mutiny, however, further compounded the prevailing position. During the early 1800s, the British viewed native society as exotic and different, but not necessarily

threatening... However, they began to see it as untrustworthy and believed that strong punitive actions were necessary (Waits 147). Hence, it sparked a clear-cut confrontation between the oppressive, prejudiced government and the subjugated populace who ardently yearned for emancipation. of the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a substantial increase of aggressive nationalism in Bengal. Prisons were mostly used to suppress this political unrest. Consequently, the colonial jail undergoes a transformation into a site characterised by intense repression and cruelty, rather than functioning as an establishment for the purpose of maintaining control and discipline over the criminals.

During the early twentieth century, it is noteworthy that revolutionaries starting recording their experiences through several mediums, including newspapers, periodicals, autobiographies, and memoirs. The action had two main objectives: firstly, to increase awareness among the colonised population about the violent realities within the colonial state, in order to put pressure on British authorities to implement reforms in their oppressive regime; and secondly, to promote the widespread spread of nationalist consciousness. As a result, there is a wealth of stories documenting the history of custodial torture and the numerous means of resistance employed by those subjected to it. The paper seeks to illustrate, by reevaluating Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom* (1958), the enduring presence of physical punishment and psychological torment in the colonial prisons of Bengal, despite their purported commitment to equality under the law. Furthermore, it will also investigate the persistent rebellion and opposition displayed by revolutionaries against this aggressive type of control.

The Memoir of Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee: In colonial India throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, there was a noticeable rise in the production of life writings, such as autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs, by political prisoners, both male and female. These works not only serve to rally the people in the anti-colonial activities, but also depict the lives of the revolutionaries as closely intertwined with the historical and political context (Ghosh 60). Life writings encompass a wide range of literary expressions and have seen a significant change since the 1980s. Initially focused on life experiences, they have now evolved to explore the notion of self in a more complex manner. This underscores the necessity of reassessing the disregarded personal accounts, as it fosters a conversation between their firsthand encounters and the historical backdrop, without diminishing their unique viewpoints (Howes 1-3). In their seminar work, "Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives," Smith and Watson assert that the challenge of analysing life writings stems from the intricate narrative tropes, historical context, metaphorical tendencies, and the changing course of time periods (10). This study situates Jogesh Chandra's memoir within the wider scope of nationalist uprisings and revolutionary campaigns, while ensuring that his personal perspective is not restricted.

The presence of extremist sections inside the Indian National Congress significantly influenced the rise and spread of revolutionary terrorism in Indian politics during the 20th century. The revolutionaries placed greater importance on achieving their goals quickly rather than on the effectiveness of persuasion. To get finances for the purchase of weapons

and other resources, they actively participated in Swadeshi movements. In addition to several other regions of the country, they specifically showcased their work in Bengal, Punjab, and Maharashtra. This occurrence resulted in the formation of several covert youth terrorist organisations. The Anushilan Samiti, a clandestine organisation, was created in Calcutta by Pramatha Mitra, while Pulin Das established a similar covert society in Dacca, along with other significant groups such as Sadhana Samaj and Swadeshi Bandana. Furthermore, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee played an active role in the Non-Cooperation Movement organised by the Congress. Later, he joined the revolutionary nationalist organisation, but quickly grew disenchanted as the activity abruptly stopped. He then aligned himself with the activities of Bengal's Anushilan Samiti on a temporary basis. Subsequently, he assumed a crucial position in the establishment of the Hindustan Republican Association/Army in Kanpur in October 1924, with the primary aim of overthrowing colonial rule by an armed rebellion. The group underwent a further rebranding and became recognised as the Hindustan Socialist Republican group. In 1925, he was sentenced to everlasting imprisonment as a result of his participation in the Kakori Robbery. He has been incarcerated many times in various prisons across India, including Rajshahi Central Jail, Calcutta Presidency Jail, Berhampur Jail, Lucknow Central Jail, and Agra Central Jail. His autobiography, *In Search of Freedom*, serves as both a testament to his prolonged battle for Bengali militant nationalism and an exploration of the inner workings of colonial prisons. The narrative provides a detailed portrayal of the prison's living circumstances, including the dismal state of the communal cell and solitary confinement. It also describes numerous terrible torture tactics employed, along with the strategies employed by the revolutionaries to fight such cruelty. However, in order to comprehensively grasp the process of glorifying oppression and the subsequent act of resistance, it is essential to first analyse it from a theoretical standpoint.

Body and the Issue of Torture: Prior to the introduction of the British, the incarceration of offenders as a means of punishment was not a customary practice in Bengal. Convicted criminals, including murders, were subjected to punishments like as impalement, burning, or limb amputation. On the other hand, dungeons were exclusively utilised for the confinement of political prisoners (Banerjee 546-47). Michel Foucault analysed the effectiveness of power in contemporary governmental structures in his work "Discipline and Punish." He explored how modern systems of governance have replaced obsolete rules with supposedly compassionate and morally just ones. Foucault juxtaposes these two distinct penal systems as manifestations of the state's disciplinary and sovereign authority. According to his observation, punishment has transformed into a metaphorical concept that is prohibited in criminal procedures. Instead, this new punitive system primarily focuses on constraining, prohibiting, and restricting the physical movement of the human body. The concept of punishment has evolved from the physical infliction of pain to the restriction of individual freedoms within a political framework (Foucault 11). Hence, Foucault's study demonstrates a symbolic shift from the exercise of absolute authority in the mediaeval period, which permitted acts of homicide, to the implementation of disciplinary authority in

contemporary society, which primarily seeks to regulate and govern both the physical and psychological aspects of individuals. The implementation of the jail system in British India is recorded as a means of reinstating benevolence and politeness, but in reality, it was oppressive and harmful.

Nevertheless, Foucault himself acknowledges that power is formative, invariably accompanied by opposition. Foucault argues that the exercise of power is not just a matter of institutional authority or a static structure. Instead, it is a dynamic process that is developed, changed, and organised. Power creates its own mechanisms that may be more or less adapted to the specific context. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of both the movement of prisoners inside correctional institutions and the hierarchical structure of authority in order to fully understand the dynamics of power at play. The spatial exchanges among inmates, whether conscious or unconscious, may be seen as a type of resistance against power and should be acknowledged as an act of subversion. Atreyee Sen's study on imprisoned women associated with the Naxalite movement exposes the practical limitations present in the Foucauldian discussion on disciplinary authority. Sen states that the Naxal women collaborated with the general offenders in jail to develop informal strategies for survival. These tactics were intentionally utilising loud music, clapping, and laughter to divert the attention of the guards (Sen 920). Hence, the penitentiary has constantly operated as an autocratic establishment within the colonial authority, but with instances of subversion and resistance being evident in that particular setting.

Physical Torture in Colonial Prison in Bengal: In his work, *In Search of Freedom*, Jogesh Chandra delineated two distinct manifestations of confinement, one characterised by clemency and moderation, and the other distinguished by harshness and anguish. While he himself did not experience harsh punishment, he faced the discretionary use of jail power in suppressing Bengali insurgency following the split in 1906. Jogesh Chandra mentioned his fellow members of "Anushilan Samiti" when talking about his time in Rajshahi Central Jail. He discussed political detainees such as Prafulla Roy from Sylhet, who was first arrested in Dacca Jail and later transferred to Rajshahi Jail. He also mentioned Naren Banerjee from Banaras, who was accused in the Banaras Conspiracy Case along with other convicts from the state. Chatterjee states that both persons had experienced mistreatment. Chatterjee displayed much apprehension for his fellow countrymen who were imprisoned in the Rajshahi central jail as a result of their participation in revolutionary endeavours. His account had a conspicuous expression of discontent, as he voiced his objection. He noticed that the prisoners were wearing a garment that only covered their upper torsos, coupled with a pair of shorts. The participants were required to wear an iron collar around their necks, which passed through a wooden plate hanging from their chest. The plate exhibited numerical data, along with the dates of conviction and subsequent release. The only tool they had available was an iron saucer, which served several functions including eating meals, drinking water, washing clothes, and even bathing. Every prisoner must strictly follow a traditional eating plan consisting mostly of a small serving of whole grain rice, lentils, and other vegetables (Chatterjee 111). The jail enforced a rigorous system of

discipline, which involved suppressing the physical bodies of the inmates. This was done to convey a warning to the colonised people of India as a whole. Eliane Scarry asserts that physical pain, although first voiceless, eventually expresses itself and reveals a narrative. This narrative highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence of the three subjects: physical pain, voice, and tale. Within this particular environment, the colonial administration consistently reinforces its sovereign authority and the prerogative to inflict torture and execute individuals, through the arduous and agonising circumstances of imprisonment.

The British government implemented the Defence of India Act in 1915, following the enactment of the Ingress into India Ordinance statute in 1914. The legislative measures were enacted to restrict the movement of persons leaving and returning to India. The prison has a crucial role in managing this violent insurrection, in addition to enforcing these rules. Despite modifications to its repressive methods in the 1920s, the jail administration nonetheless maintained its authoritarian authority, as seen by the treatment of political detainees in Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's *In Search of Freedom*. The relationship between the mechanisms of control and power in the colonial system and the use of jail power was highly significant. The latter played a major role in showcasing the supremacy and invincibility of the imperial authority (Singh 5).

Resistance through Hunger Strike: To resist the authoritarian regime, the political detainees in Bengal, particularly during the early 1900s, employed hunger strikes as a means of protest. In colonial Bengal, the act of abstaining from eating in prison was not only a refusal, but rather a strategic tool employed for political purposes. In the 1920s and 1930s, incarcerated Indian convicts utilised hunger strikes as a means to secure their release or expedite parole, particularly those convicted of rebellion and sabotage. Prison hunger strikes, although similar to public fasting as a peaceful form of protest influenced by Gandhi, have caused considerable public outrage that presents difficulties in finding a resolution via discussion. It is crucial to clearly distinguish between fasts and hunger strikes, as both involve purposefully abstaining from eating. The term "fast" can also include a religious connotation that may not be associated with the concept of death. Nevertheless, the notion of a hunger strike, motivated largely by intention, carries the possibility of resulting in a fatal consequence (Telumbde 10). Within the confines of a jail, the act of eating food has a dual purpose. It not only nourishes and maintains the physical well-being of the body, but also enables the individual to carry out the prescribed disciplinary tasks effectively. Therefore, abstaining from eating functions as a form of resistance against the ruling power, refusing to be assimilated into the oppressive system of the colonial administration. It is both a subjective action and a communal type of protest. Refusing to eat undermines the power dynamic between the colonial state and its subordinate subjects. According to Bosworth and Carrabine, the unexpected emergence of individual agency and the decision to deviate from the official rules and timetable in jail results in a form of autonomy and resistance inside the very authoritative prison environment (505).

In his memoirs, Jogesh Chandra provided a comprehensive account of the hunger strikes. At noon, as soon as the plate of food was served, he immediately kicked it away. He stated that he refused to touch the food unless he was transferred to a different jail or the conditions were improved (Chatterjee 93). Subsequently, an additional ten prisoners joined and initiated hunger strikes in Calcutta Presidency Prison. Nevertheless, the jail administration made every effort to invalidate their strike. Jogesh Chandra noted that, even after a period of five days, no authorities, including the jailor, Superintendent, and warder, appeared. On the sixth day, all three convicts were released from confinement, assessed, and then returned to their enclosure. Ultimately, the government was obliged to send them to Rajshahi prison.

Conclusion: Hence, Jogesh Chandra Chatterjee's memoir, *In Search of Freedom*, argues that the colonial jail in Bengal serves as a controlled environment for the colonial government to conduct unofficial activities beyond the realm of the judiciary. While the use of physical torture or harsh corporal punishment was officially banned, the personal testimonies and descriptions of their time in prison reveal the oppressive nature of the governing authorities. Nevertheless, it would be challenging to confine the debate on punishment inside a unified concept, especially in the context of colonialism. Jogesh Chandra's narrative reveals that the jail is a space characterised by ambiguity and liminality, since the prisoners have a limited sense of autonomy and agency from their perspective. Furthermore, the revolutionary employs the colonial jail as a means to nullify the whole authority of the colonial regime and its oppressive actions. Thus, the colonial state exploits the penal authority as the site of exercising its sovereign power whenever it apprehends any dangers, however it is prone to contestation, opposition, and subversion.

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