

# India: the prisoners' revolt

British India operated one of the largest prison systems in the world. During the 1860s the inmate population averaged 70,000, rising to 100,000 by the 1900s and 130,000 by the 1930s. Two to three times those numbers passed through the prisons in a single year owing to short-term sentences, numbers matched or exceeded only by the United States and Russia. The prison – an institution lacking extensive pre-colonial precedents – exemplified the British determination to control India.

David Arnold

In Britain and North America in the early 19th century the new penitentiary system had sought to disaggregate prison populations, favouring solitary confinement and reducing prisoners to virtual silence. Owing to colonial parsimony and distrust of subordinate Indian officials, little of this happened in India. Though less than 0.2% of India's total population was in jail at any one time, the British relied on the spectre of prison to discourage crime and combat insurrection. During the 19th century the British experimented with transportation, developed an extensive internal network of district and central jails, formed several prison reform committees, and compiled elaborate prison regulation manuals. But prisoners were seldom entirely compliant, 'docile bodies', to use a Foucauldian phrase. Solitary confinement was rare and instead of silence Indian prisoners were 'as a rule noisy and talkative, listless and slow in obeying orders'. During the long history of the colonial prison, from the 1790s to the 1940s, there were many ways in which prisoners evaded or resisted the restrictions the prison system sought to impose upon them.

Evasion and non-compliance were widespread. Feigning illness or insanity was one way of avoiding work, while being sent to the prison hospital afforded the opportunity of finding an escape route from the jail. Similarly, when prisoners were paraded and dosed with quinine as a prophylactic against malaria, many spat out the medicine as soon as the doctor's back was turned, regarding the bitter drug as little better than poison. Conversely, contraband, including tobacco, opium and bhang, were smuggled into the jail and entered its internal economy. Indeed, much of the effective authority in prisons lay not in the hands of British officials and medical officers but the warders who controlled the day-to-day operations of the jail. For while the British did not trust subordinate Indian officialdom, they did use convicts as warders: prisoners (amounting to 10% of the entire prison population by the 1900s) who were promoted to positions of authority over other prisoners and enjoyed a privileged status within the jail. Critics saw convict warders as a major source of the corruption and violence that occurred within India's jails, and it was often against their exploitation that other prisoners had to defend themselves.

## Escape

Right from the start, prisoners exploited opportunities to escape. Early jails were often buildings converted from other uses and relatively insecure; prisoners could escape by bribing or overpowering their guards, by setting fire to the jail and fleeing in the ensuing confusion, or by smuggling in chisels and files to break locks and fetters. The use of convicts to repair roads far from the jails and with lax or inadequate supervision created further opportunities. In Bengal alone in the mid-1830s, there were 80 escapes from road-gangs, aided by 'fellow feeling' between convicts and guards or by communication between prisoners and their 'unfettered comrades'. In northern India between 1838 and 1843, 923 prisoners escaped, only 260 of whom were recaptured.

Even when they failed to escape, prisoners from time to time overwhelmed their guards and seized temporary control of the prison. Bringing prisoners together in a single place, particularly when they shared some common identity or felt emboldened by their own exploits and numbers, posed particular dangers for jail authorities. In 1834 prisoners at Calcutta's Alipur jail, which held more than 1,000 'hardened' criminals awaiting transfer, seized control, murdered the local magistrate and severely wounded the chief jailor. Although discipline was tightened thereafter, jail takeovers occurred periodically throughout the colonial period, such as at Fatehgarh in 1910, where convicts armed themselves with knives from the jail workshop, and at Palayamkottai in 1925, where Mapillas, imprisoned after the Malabar Rebellion four years earlier, took over the jail. But escape was not driven by internal forces alone. In a raid on Agra jail in December 1846, 50 to 60 armed men scaled the walls, drove off the sentries, and released 192 prisoners. Most were recaptured, but of the 51 prisoners who fled, 15 were killed and 12 wounded.

Partly in response to such defiant episodes, from the mid-19th century the colonial authorities embarked on a jail construction programme modeled on Pentonville prison in London. Extramural labour was scaled down and emphasis given instead to the creation of jail industries that would ensure a more disciplined labour regime while helping to meet the costs of jail administration. These changes reduced but did not eliminate prisoners' opportunities for escape. In fact, jail industries gave rise to new forms of resistance. In the 1840s prisoners at Agra and elsewhere in the northwestern provinces objected to being made to work in flour mills. In a carceral version of 'everyday resistance' (to echo James C. Scott), they 'continued wilfully to injure the machinery, and to throw them out of gear, and themselves out of work for 4 to 5 days at a time'. Since the machines cost Rs 1,000 to 1,500 apiece, the provincial Inspector of Prisons was hardly pleased by this 'spirit of resistance'. When prisoners in the 1860s and 70s refused similar tasks, they were put on a reduced diet, but this merely seemed to make them determined to 'resist even more obstinately than before'. They were flogged in an attempt to reduce them to submission.

## Messing with caste

The colonial authorities attempted another reform in the 1840s: replacing money doles given to prisoners to buy and cook their own food with a system of common messing. The British hoped this would decrease costs, but they also believed that caste 'privileges' were incompatible with the functions of a modern prison system. At Chapra jail in Bihar, in June 1842, the 620 prisoners were divided into 52 messes, each with its own prisoner cook. The cooks, however, were the first to rebel, as common messing violated caste hierarchies by forcing higher and lower castes together. Ten cooks were whipped for disobedience, but then the prisoners revolted en masse; though unable to break out of the jail, some 3,000 to 4,000 townspeople gathered in their support. Peace was restored only when the magistrate, believing force could not prevail against such strongly held 'prejudices', suspended common messing.

Further messing-related disturbances resulted in the deaths of 22 prisoners at Allahabad and Patna jails in 1846. By the end of that year, the messing system had been introduced, wholly or partly, into 25 of the 40 jails in the northwestern provinces, but many officials continued to believe that it was unenforceable. Although high-caste prisoners – Brahmins and Rajputs, whose caste status seemed most at risk from common messing – led these protests, the authorities admitted that 'the prisoners one and all are opposed to it'. It was possible to see prisoners' invocation of caste as something of a contrivance. One official remarked how, when common messing was first introduced, 'it was a matter of great surprise how many [caste] subdivisions arose, which nobody had heard of before'. Some, he thought, were 'got up by the prisoners themselves in order to throw obstacles in the way of the scheme'. Nonetheless, the Bengal and NWP governments felt obliged to proceed with caution and without 'doing violence to the prejudices or the feelings of the people'. The accommodation of caste within the prison ensured that the social hierarchy outside the prison was replicated within it: low castes were obliged to work leather or act as scavengers; those of high caste, or who had the wealth to bribe warders, lived a more comfortable existence and gained exemption from some of prison's more arduous and degrading tasks.

The co-ordinated responses of north Indian prisoners to the messing system and other grievances showed how much communication existed between prisoners in different jails and how ready they were to complain about what they saw as unfair or discriminatory treatment. It worried the British that prisoners enjoyed support from Indians outside the jail, who believed the administration was deliberately using prison regulations to break caste and impose Christianity. Further, many of the rebellious prisoners came from precisely those castes – Brahmins and Rajputs – that the British recruited into the Bengal Army: indeed, many of the prisoners' grievances echoed those of the sepoys. Unsurprisingly, opposition within the jails, and public support for it, carried over into the

Mutiny and Rebellion in 1857, when a number of prisons were attacked and their inmates liberated. The prison had come to symbolize the alien, intrusive and oppressive nature of colonial rule.

## Prison as resistance

The rise of nationalism and other political movements bred a new type of prisoner. Although their separate status was not fully recognized by prison authorities until the 1930s, these political, generally middle-class prisoners, while tending to distance themselves from those they looked down on as common criminals, brought a new spirit of resistance to the prison. Their methods included hunger strikes to force the authorities to make concessions over diet, dress, access to newspapers and visitors, and the performance of religious and political observances. Nationalist prisoners also enjoyed wide support among the Indian public, their grievances publicized to a degree unmatched in the 19th century by newspapers, debates in the legislatures and formal petitions and resolutions. The harshest treatment was meted out to left-wing revolutionaries, some of whom were force-fed or otherwise brutally treated. The fatal fast of the revolutionary Jatindranath Das in 1929 obliged the British to concede separate status for political prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

Do these acts of evasion, protest and occasional outright resistance matter? They did not bring about the overthrow of the colonial prison system or even modify the brutality and degradation that characterized much of its operation. Nevertheless, this aspect of prison history is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it shows the importance of the prison to wider histories of Indian resistance, the relative permeability of the prison to outside influences, the continuing connectedness – through rumour and riot – between the jail and society at large, and how an oppressive social hierarchy could be replicated within jail. Second, although many prisoners were abused, flogged or half-starved for their defiance, prison resistance and revolt did have some impact on the colonial authorities in India, prompting them – for pragmatic rather than humanitarian reasons – to investigate prison conditions (as, for instance, in the wake of the Alipur jail riot in 1834). Protests did not lead to the abandonment of common messing in the 1840s and 50s, but they did delay its implementation and impressed on the British the need to accommodate what they saw as prisoners' caste 'prejudices'. Third, a circularity or symbiosis developed between the opposition the prison helped to arouse and the operations of the colonial regime. Just as prisons were condemned as 'schools' for the very crimes and vices they were intended to suppress, so they helped to generate (and to symbolize) resistance to colonial rule. But even with the mutineers and rebels of 1857-8, and the 'jail-going' Gandhians of the 1920s and 30s, the British saw little alternative to using the prison as one of the principal tools of coercion and containment. Their dependence on it to keep order guaranteed the colonial prison system's place as a battleground, and thus no less a tool, of the Indian resistance the system's 'evolution' and efforts to stamp out actually fueled. ◀

## Note

1. For the protests of political prisoners and the colonial response to them, see Singh, Ujjwal Kumar. 1998. *Political Prisoners in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

David Arnold is Professor of the History of South Asia at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His book *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape and Science, 1800-1856* will be published by University of Washington Press in 2006.

da2@soas.ac.uk