

State of Prison's affair corruption in colonial India during Non- operation movement

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Abstract: British jail administration during the first three decades of 20th Century was unbritish in their character while treating the detenues in colonial jails. It was the revolutionary undertrails and Non- co-operative Movement who compelled them to constitute Jail Enquiry Committee to curb their imperialistic approach towards political prisoners.

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During the British period corruption, injustice, exploitation, immorality and various forms of abuses were rampant in the prison administration. Problems relating to classification of prisoners, food arrangements, clothes, educational facility, meetings with friends and relatives, labour and punishment were issues on which the British authorities acted arbitrarily and Indian reacted in opposition to it. The service record of those officials was considered favourable who punished the maximum number of Indians for the crime of patriotism. Death sentence, severe imprisonment, sending overseas to Andaman and Nicobar Islands were common forms of punishments.

In the years around 1908 the prisoners were not forced to hard labour. They generally made mattresses which were sold in the market¹. Gradually, the policy changed and Indian Patriots who were in Jails were subjected to hard labour and many other forms of brutalities. They were asked to grind 30 seers of corn while standing or prepare 300 yards of rope in a day. The prisoners were generally given briefs of coares cloth, a trouser and a langoti to wear. Their bedding was shabby and stinked due to the lack of water and other cleanliness facilities in the prisons. The food served to the prisoners was of a bad quality. The political prisoners were maltreated like ordinary criminals and dacoits.

The detenu who had the dare to speak against these deplorable conditions in jails were subjected to severest form of punishments. Various new forms of punishments were devised by the prison officials to trouble and insult the prisoners. Cuffs were tied to the hands and feet of those who opposed any behaviour of the authorities or complained against them. This position would continue for a month of even more so that the person with cuffed hands and feet would be unable to sit or lie down in a resting position. 'Kambal Parade' was another devise of coercion in which

prisoners were covered with blankets and hit hard. Similarly in some jails the prisoners were forced to sit for toilets together and get up together on one whistle. Those who defied the rules of this 'Potty-Parade' were tortured 'Matibhanga' was another cruel custom popular in prisons. The prisoner was made to lie down and he was hit hard in the sole of his foot. The Visapur Jail (Bombay) inquiry committee condemned in strict terms the system of potty-parade prevalent in the prisons there².

Various newspaper and Magazines published by Nationalist leaders highlighted the wrong done to Indians in the prisons, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, an eminent Congressman from U.P and the editor of *Pratap* (daily newspaper) and *Prabha* (Monthly Magazine) wrote various articles condemning the jail administration. During his own imprisonment he saw closely the problems in the prison. He wrote in his jail diary: "The prisoners are infected with influenza, the hospitals are full, two prisoners are suffering from Pneumonia, but the superintendent is not concerned. Water and sanitation is in a bad state"³

Many prisoners did not disclose their health problem out of fear that they would be given a wrong treatment. A bottleful of water was a treatment for many diseases⁴. The British official reports displayed a different picture. It was mentioned that the condition of Indians in jail was better than others because the death rate in jail was 2% whereas outside it was 3%⁵. In reality prisoners lost their weight badly due to poor food served to them⁶. Prisoners revolted against bad quality of food. The *Naini Jail riot* on 20 January 1928 in which 4 prisoners were killed and 40 were injured was because they disliked food served by the authorities⁷. The prison authorities used fake balances and insisted that the prisoners' weight had increased due to proper food provided by them⁸.

In February 1926, the prisoners of *Mandley Jail* (Burma) went on hunger strike as a

protest against restrictions on observing religious rites and performing Pooja. The Political prisoners were also not spared from such restrictions. One Arjun Lal Sethi who did not take food without offering prayers went on hunger strike against these restrictions of the prison authorities. The Indian National Congress who was also concerned about the status and condition of political prisoners in British detention passed a resolution in the Calcutta Congress under Mrs. Annie Beasant the President, condemning the Jail authorities⁹. The country was stirred the prolonged hunger strike. The revolutionary under-trials undertook as a protest against the horrible conditions in jails Vishnu Saran Dublis and Mannath Gupta carried on a 46 day agitation in Naini Jail to get proper treatment for political prisoners¹⁰. Senior Congress Leader Govind Vallabh Pant took up the case of Kakori detenues to be treated as political prisoners¹¹.

They demanded that they be treated not as criminal but as political prisoners. The entire nation rallied behind the hunger-strikers. On 13 September, the 64th day of the epic fast, Jatin Das, a frail young man with an iron will died. Thousands came to pay him homage at every station passed by train carrying his body from Lahore to Calcutta¹². Jatin Das's death compelled the British government to bring about the Hunger Strike Bill¹³ to stop the patriots from pressuring the Government. A large number of revolutionaries were convicted in the Lahore conspiracy case and other similar cases and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. Many of them were sent to the Andaman. The British government was determined to stop all efforts of the revolutionaries also C. I. D.s were to in the prisons keep an eye on the revolutionaries. This matter was brought to the notice of the govt. the United Provinces¹⁴.

The bitter experiences in jail were well expressed by Mahatma Gandhi¹⁶ and Jawaharlal Nehru¹⁷ also. Parwati Devi, sister of Prof. JayachandraVidyalankar, wrote about her own experiences in prison. Her work threw immense light on the condition of the Meerut, Agra and Fatehgarh prison¹⁸. The money in the political sufferer fund was also utilized for the political prisoners. Jawaharlal Nehru has written a letter to Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi on dated 15/03/1928 in this regard 'I want to issue from the A.I.C.C. office a concise statement dealing with political prisoners in India. This will be meant for foreign countries and must therefore be brief and

yet quite clear. Can you help me to prepare this? I believe you are in charge of the political sufferers' fund and should have a great deal of useful information. It is possible that we may get some money from abroad, specially the United States of America for political sufferers here. I hope you will be able to send me a lot on political prisoners¹⁹."

Repeated opposition to the government policies regarding political prisoners compelled the British Government to constitute a *Jail Inquiry Committee* on June 5, 1928 under Sir Laus Stuart, Pd. Jagat Narain Mulla and Hafiz Hidayat Hussain were also members of the enquiry committee. The committee hastily submitted its report. Within four months from 15 Nov, 1928 to 14 March, 1929 the paper formalities were completed The committee reported to have visited 6 Central Jails and 31 out of 50 districts were inspected by it. *Montgomery* Central Prison in Punjab, Borstal Institute Lahore, *Kasoor* Sub - Jail, *Baramulla* reformatory farm, Settlements of Criminal tribes, *Moradabad*, *Gorakhpur* and *Bareilly* Central Jails were inspected by it. Moreover, the *Central Hospital for Criminal Lunatics*, Benaras. *Mental Hospital*, Bareilly, *Military Prison* and the *Military Detentions Barrack*, Lucknow were also duly inspected²⁰.

Earlier also on 28 April 1919 a Jail Inquiry Committee was appointed under Sir Alexander G. Cardew, but the committee did not do any notable work. However, it recommended that the Political Prisoners be kept separate from ordinary criminals²¹. This committee had 9 members out of which 7 were Europeans. Only two were Indians-Khan Bahadur Khailifa Sayyid Hamin Hussian (Delhi) and D. M. Doorai (Pudukottai) Raja of Madras were its Indian members.

Conclusion:

The overall situation of the Indian prisons during the British period reveals that they were acting as centres of institutionalised oppression. No doubt the prisons were used by the British to check and control the growing fervour of nationalist idea in the Indians but the Indian reaction to all such arbitrary actions was a greater challenge. The Indian strugglers for Independence while fighting for their motherland countered at each step, every form of severity and barbarity. The institutionalised oppressions in the prisons being one of them.

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