

‘The Prison Within’: Analysing the Intersection of the Subject and the Social in Barindra Kumar Ghose’s *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans*

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Abstract: Prison, as a space for physical and psychological confinement, has contributed to the rise of a global body of literature called prison narratives. These writings, mostly as a mode of resistance emerge from a set of structural, cultural, and psychological conditions of incarceration. Even though certain aspects such as the architecture, modes of inspection and discipline, administrative policies, and confinement of the inmates are some of the defining features central to the concept of prison, the notion of prison conceived in the minds of the prison writers varies across time and space. Moreover, each writer’s experience of confrontation with the penal system is shaped by particular social and material conditions of the time. This present study attempts to situate the prison in both its material as well as symbolic dimensions to see how it becomes a site where the subject and the social constitutively intersect. It attempts to state how prison is also a more pervasive symbolic construct which is part of a broader regime of governance and control that functions by controlling the relationship between the subject/self and the social at multiple points of intersection. The select narrative for the study is *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans* (1922) by Barindra Kumar Ghose who was a political prisoner, convicted in the Alipore Bomb Conspiracy case. Both as a personal and political narrative, it offers a comprehensive overview of the extremely systematic and rigorous system of governance in the Cellular Jail of the Andaman Islands. This narrative remained unattended for a long time until it was finally found, and was published in 1922. The narrative is peculiar in the way it asserts itself as a ‘pleasant and true story’ of the carceral archipelago. This study will also help situate the prison narratives as ‘insider perspectives’ on prison and imprisonment in contrast to the prevailing ‘outsider perspectives’ on the same.

Keywords: Self, subject, social, carceral, prison

This paper is an attempt to read *The Tale of My Exile: Twelve Years in the Andamans*, the non-fictional narrative of the prison-experience of Barindra Kumar Ghose, younger brother of Sri Aurobindo. Ghose was a noted revolutionary and activist during the Swadeshi Movement of early decades of the Twentieth Century in India. It was first published in 1922. The account of Ghose’s life in the Andamans was rarely discussed and was not widely cited. One of the reasons for this historical absence of reference itself is the first statement about how prison and imprisonment as a politico-juridical category operates in society. The current paper attempts to trace how *The Tale of My Exile* connects the external prison structure, its spaces and practices, with the virtual inside of the subject in terms of one’s ethical conscience. The argument is that prison or imprisonment is a system of relations where the individual’s relationship with the external context as well as with the inner subjective self is regulated, altered and controlled through institutional practices and meanings. The paper begins by mentioning the history of prison narratives, and then moves on to discuss some of

the contemporary theoretical postulation on the subject and the systems of surveillance and punishment, and then moves on to argue that the 'prison' is at the same time an actual context of practices and meanings complemented by a virtual order of individual's connections with the self and the contexts. The paper refers to the text to substantiate this argument.

The genealogy of prison dates to the Old Testament Period. There are Biblical references to prisons used for detention ranging from Joseph's imprisonment in Genesis 39 to Satan's imprisonment in Revelation 20 (Marshall 97). Prisons in Biblical and ancient times, usually, in the form of dungeons, cisterns, wells, or underground pits differed from their counterparts in modern liberal democracies in both structure and function. It was more of an instrument for oppression rather than a penal apparatus for justice (99). However, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the emergence of new categories of prisons opened mainly for religious offenders, debtors, political prisoners, and so on. During this period, prisoners were incarcerated notably on account of religious and debt-related issues (Freeman 134). Till the eighteenth century, physical torture formed an integral part of the penal system. Hence, the focus was directed at the 'body' rather than the soul. However, prison as an institution underwent a drastic transformation towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Michel Foucault, in his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, states that two processes were at work in this transformation- the disappearance of public spectacle and elimination of pain- which defined "a whole new morality concerning the act of punishing" (11-12). He observes that the corrective character of the penalty began to become more defined and predominant in the modern mechanisms of criminal justice. The 'body' began to serve as an instrument through which an individual could be deprived of his or her liberty which is regarded as a fundamental right as well as a property. Hence, "imprisonment, confinement, forced labour, penal servitude, prohibition from entering certain areas, deportation- all of them occupied a central place in modern penal systems" (11). The new penal system categorised prisons into Juvenile prisons, High Security and Close Security prisons, psychiatric prisons, Penal colonies, and so on. At present, surveillance mechanics are so advanced that human monitoring, inspection, and tracking systems have become so easy and convenient with monitoring devices like cameras.

The eminent literary critic Victor Brombert remarks that "prison haunts our civilization" to draw our attention to the fact that prison contributed to the birth of many canonical and non-canonical writings (Sobanet 3). Prison narratives could be of various kinds including accounts of life in the prison, autobiographies, disputatious writings against the State or it could be a creative literary piece of work as simple as graffiti. In order to cope with their social exclusion, prisoners tend to put down their feelings and thoughts in their moments of isolation. These myriad forms of narratives in the form of autobiography, memoirs, letters, testimonies, fiction, and so on led to the rise of prison narratives as a literary genre.

Earlier, one of the major forms of prison narrative was prison letters which were followed by the first-person narratives of the prisoner's experiences and accounts in the sixteenth century (Freeman 133). The stories of brutality and accustomed bureaucratic practices were sometimes counter-balanced by themes of spirituality and enlightenment. At present, however, prisons need not be a location to write a prison narrative; for instance, a narrative about prison or a prison memoir written outside the prison locale also falls under the category of prison narratives. Moreover, there are plenty of other comparable narratives concerned with the theme of confinement which appears in myriad forms like in underground buildings, on islands, in asylums and so on. They pertain to the incarceration of the self as well as the mind rather than the body. The settings of the novels and plays of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett contribute to the existential crisis and alienation experienced by the characters.

The earliest prison accounts in India can be traced to Sangam Literature which includes the collection of poems such as *Purananuru* (Hart 17). The prisons in the ancient and mediaeval periods acted as spaces for the spiritual emancipation of prisoners which led to the birth of many poetic

compositions. A case in point is the prison *Bhajans* composed by Bhadrachala Ramdas (1620–1688). However, prison narrative as a genre underwent some modifications in terms of both form and content in the colonial phase. With the emergence of colonial modernity and English education, the prisoners experimented with modern forms of narrative styles and techniques such as prose narratives. The freedom fighters, driven by a sense of unity and national pride regarded jail going as their patriotic duty and felt the urge to sustain their new nationalistic self-consciousness through their writings. This led to the birth of a plethora of prison narratives ranging from prison memoirs, diaries, and testimonials to autobiographies.

Prison narratives largely deal with the personal accounts of life in and around prison. It can be about the prison as an institutionalised space with a specific function, or it can be about the symbolics of the same. The symbolics can be of the experiences of imprisonment, of associated notions such as self, other, and freedom, or of the socio-political and cultural dynamics that support the larger political institutions. In any sense, though prison narratives are often written by former inmates or by those who have had direct experience of the prison system, it can pose larger questions pertaining to the general socio-political existence of human beings. These narratives offer unique insights into the reality of prison life including the actual experiences of being a prisoner, the semantic-semiotic-political dynamics of the prison system, the function of the prison within the structures of power, the prison as a space that reciprocally define and validate the space ‘outside’ of it, and the prison as a material and symbolic tool that aids systems of governance.

Though narratives on prison have been existing from the ancient times as field-notes, literature, art and first-person accounts, legal documents and so on, prison comes to the centre of the socio-political and existential discourse predominantly in the 19th century especially in the European context. Works such as “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave” (1845) and “The Prison-Door” (1848) are known examples. Earlier conventions of narrating the prison had looked at prison as a space where a self is confined to a cell and left with itself and its thoughts. And attempts were to look at how the self would get affected and transformed across its interactions with the prison and its practices. And most of these instances would consider prison as a punitive institution where only the ‘anti-social’ would be kept. This concept of prison as a site of punishment dates back to ancient civilizations. The narratives surrounding these ancient prison systems often reflected the questions of religious values and ethics of the time. The prison was seen to be a means for social order and control.

A significant shift in the way we look at prison has happened with what we can call the ‘discursive turn’, especially with Foucault and other political theorists of the post-1950s, when they started looking at the individual as constituted subjects, and society as sites of constitutive discourses, and the reality between these two as relational, complementary, intersubjective, symbolic, and normative. As he states, “the self is not a fixed entity, but is constantly shaped and reshaped through power relations and discursive practices” (Foucault, 1984, p. 152). It is in this context that we started looking at prison as a specific socio-political tool that, while handling certain socio-political categories of people such as criminals or outlaws, reciprocally effectuate the definition and maintenance of the larger society out there. This definition happens from the exterior of the institutional space of the prison but it also has an interior operation when it comes to the question of subjectification or subject-formation.

A fruitful discussion of this can be seen in Michel Foucault’s 1975 book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In this book Foucault outlines a theory on how the modern prison system is an example of the institutionalisation of the subject within a normative discourse. Foucault examines the history of punishment and how it changed from the ancient regime of torture and public executions, or the right take life, to the modern system of incarceration and parole, where the subject is constituted within a system of normative surveillance and the symbolics of the prisons. He argues that the modern system is based on the idea of promoting reform and rehabilitation, rather than

retribution and deterrence. The prison takes a broader sense here where it applies to all across society as a matter of socialisation/ institutionalisation/ subjectification.

Foucault suggests that the modern prison system is a form of 'discipline', and that the aim of this discipline is to produce docile bodies that will comply with the juridical system of laws and norms, not based on any 'fear of a sovereign' but based on a 'sense of normality'. He says, "the carceral system must be understood as a network of disciplinary mechanisms, which penetrate the entire social body." (Foucault, 1977, 225). He uses the metaphor of the 'panopticon', adopted from the prison model of Jeremy Bentham, to illustrate how modern societies are structured in such a way that their citizens are constantly watched and monitored, and their behaviour is regulated and controlled. This regulation can be in terms of juridical discipline as well as a medical normality. Foucault also argues that the prison system is an example of how power is used to construct and maintain social subjects through surveillance, categorization, and corresponding spatial practices of confinements. If it is an outlaw, jail comes to the scene, whereas if it is madness, hospital comes to the scene. In both these cases, the basic function is that of surveillance and disciplining. He states that power is a way of controlling and limiting the behaviour of individuals, and ultimately the subjects are produced within the complex mechanism operating in these systems in the form of 'relations of power'. He states, "the prison is not simply a place where people are locked up, but a complex system of power relations that produces and reinforces social hierarchies" (Foucault, 231). Furthermore, Foucault argues that punishment and surveillance are used to generate a 'knowledge of the subject' where the subject is categorised into normal/abnormal binaries and treated accordingly. Hence the prison as a space has a reality beyond its material limits. It has a symbolic dimension where it exists as a defining agent of the subject's (and the society's) normality.

The idea of prison as a symbolic agent operative within the process of individual's subjectification has a wider implication. Narratives of prison experiences show that the perspective of the narrator is crucial in the definition of the prison. The narrator's position as the insider/outsider, inmate/guard etc vis a vis the prison has much to do with the axiology of prison. In fact, the emergence of prison narratives as a genre in academia focuses mainly on the insider perspectives on prison and imprisonment. In *The Tale of My Exile*, written by Barindra Ghose, Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, is an intriguing account of this insider-perspective of prison and imprisonment. This account of his life in the Cellular Jail at Port Blair in the Andamans shows how this material structure called prison soon sets an axiology of its own where it translates itself into the prisoners psychological interiority, as a prison within, in terms of the individual's memory, ethical self image, idea of life, sense of being and belonging in the world etc. Even the mobilities and transportations narrated in the book then becomes a symbolic transportation from the physical experience of imprisonment to the symbolic, psychological dimension of the same. It is a dehumanising process where the convict begins to experience an erasure of qualifications. The first step towards this is the movement from a human individual to a numbered convict and then finally to a numberless dead. As the book states, "each has to carry a wooden piece, 3 inches long... on which... the date of conviction and the terms of sentence are written. It is called the neck-ticket and there are 3 kinds, the rectangular, the circular, and the triangular" (1). The wooden identifier bears the number and that becomes literally fixed to one's body thereby initiating one's transformation from a human individual to an objectified prisoner.

The narrative begins by indicating, though not in any particularly obvious critical positioning, a reference to the system of ethics that forbids one from saying the 'untrue and the unpleasant'. The narrator vouches for himself stating, "I have not transgressed the injunctions of our Shastras by saying either the untrue or the unpleasant" (2). The terminology describing the relationship between the individual and the ethical system itself is put in a very juridical terminology. The actual carceral institution, the prison structure as such, is only a more concrete extension of this virtually existing, symbolic system of ethical survey and moral surveillance. It was Foucault who stated in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* "The soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault, 1978, p. 137). Similar

is the case here as well. On the other hand, it is quite ironical that the spiritual dimension of the same ethical system is also giving the convict a certain sense of consolation and emancipation: "I prayed to God with my heart and soul, "Give me back my life of only this time, I cannot now die at ease and in the plenitude of the bliss that lies in the emancipation from all bondage"" (6). This scenario underlines that 'imprisonment' as an experience and as a concept is essentially ideological.

The narrative also suggests that the prison is not an immovable space for confinement. A prison is where the individual is perpetually kept in a particular relation with the world around him/her, and in turn, with the 'world within'. Hence the convict is not exactly 'out of imprisonment/prison' when he/she physically moves out of the cell or the physical premise. The convict carries the prison and the imprisonment with him/her. That is why as the narrative says, in the transportation boat, "as soon as the door was locked and we were left alone, the whole place became a regular pandemonium" (10). Prison or imprisonment is then the kind of connection that the individual is making with his/her context. The chains and handcuffs, the same faces of inmates, the physical set up of limited mobility, along with the lack of a sense of 'being connected' with others— all these contribute to the concrete markers of the symbolic of prison or imprisonment. While these presences constitute one set of markers of imprisonment, there are certain absences as well that do the same: "we did not see the green grass and blossoming flowers and things like them for seven months" (4). Imprisonment is essentially marked by the introduction of such lacks thereby reciprocally defining it against what constitutes the 'free outside' which is the world of 'green grass and blossoming flowers' and 'the relief of talking to other men'. This is where the experience of imprisonment as well as the institution of prison becomes ontologically tied to one's, to use a Foucauldian terminology, ethical self-relation.

The Andaman being an archipelago has an advantage in terms of introducing these measures of separating the prison-inside from the free-outside. As the narrative itself states, animals such as the cows and buffaloes, and goats and dogs "...like us, have been deported for all their life" (21). The geography of the island itself is conducive to the imagination of the prison space as an isolated, insulated, disconnected interiority where the 'other' in both actual and symbolic sense seize to exist to contrast the subjective 'I'. This is where the prison becomes not just a socio-political model but a psychological model as well. The prison as a juridico-political punitive system succeeds when the structure of the prison, within its inbuilt surveillance mechanisms and panopticon model of operations, replicates itself both inside and outside of the subject. In other words, in an ideal disciplined society, the architecture of the prison will be the architecture of the mind, where the same individual does the function of both the prisoner and the guard.

Even though imprisonment in the Andamans was regarded as a collective experience, its impact on the psyche of the prisoners varied from person to person. The deprivation of freedom and autonomy following imprisonment led to a common psychological deterioration of the prisoners. As the Andaman penal settlement was away from the mainland and differed from it in terms of organisational and institutional structure, the inmates were uncertain about their new environment. While this uncertainty of the penal settlement and the news of life sentence had already generated a shock in the minds of the prisoners, the stringent rules and disciplinary mechanisms contributed to the creation of an aftershock. In an attempt to reform the psyche of the prisoners, the system ended up inflicting both physical and psychological torture. It was difficult for the inmates to keep the body and soul together. This is evident in Barin's description of Ullaskar Dutt's physical and mental condition. Ullaskar was suffering from fever which rose to 105 degrees in the night. On the next morning fever had come down but Ullaskar turned into a completely different man. He became insane (Ghose 85). As Barin states "Some would die by hanging and others would die by going mad" (85). Similarly, a Sikh committed suicide by swallowing a bit of lead (101).

All these instances point to the subjective experience of the prisoners where they struggle to confirm their relationship with the self and their context: they shall either live in physical and mental confinements, within the symbolics and semantics of imprisonment, identifying themselves as convicts, as

bonded people, removed of socio-systemic qualifications, or they shall escape the whole context either through death or descending into madness. Madness in this sense is a change in the self: in a sense, where they cannot change the context, and the contextual subjectivity, the mind alters itself. The connection that a mad man's mind makes is not bound by the systemic moral or ethical codes. The narrative clearly implies how the complexities of self or subject operate in the whole institutionalisation of prison and imprisonment as a concept, as a symbolic paradigm, and as a regime of meanings, practices and control measures associated with that. That underlines the points that, in Foucault's words, "the carceral system does not simply punish individuals for their crimes, but also creates a culture of surveillance and control that permeates all aspects of society" (Foucault, 1977, 215).

The lack of social interaction also impacted the prisoner's perception of time. If one way the whole regime of imprisonment operates is by controlling one's spatial possibilities, another way would be to tamper with the sense of time. Time is a crucial factor in the experience of the varied aspects of one's existence. The relational meaning that one makes out of different 'episodes of social existence' is essentially tied to one's sense of time and temporality. Time is the experience of time (temporality), and that experience is necessarily socio-systemic. Imprisonment is by default a suspension of this temporality. Mary Gordon, the first female prison inspector, describes prison as "a place of suspended animation' in which you don't do penance, you do "time" (Gordon 145). In an instance, one person named Indubhushan who committed suicide by hanging used to say every now and then "it is impossible for me to pass ten years of my life in this hell" (84).

The prison suspends temporality in terms of its relevance as well. After a point, due to the monotonous way of life imposed in prison, the passage of time becomes insignificant. The days were undifferentiated and both the past and future remained remote to them while they lived in the extended present. Thus the prisoners are not only deprived of freedom and certainty but also of meaningful engagement with time. Hence, long-term separate confinement in cells impacted the psyche of the prisoners to a great extent. This is where the prison has a formative or a constitutive function not only in the case of the prisoners, but also in the larger socio-political system. Whereas the actual prison space with its material structures, practices, and meanings can reconfigure the individual prisoners, the symbolic of prison, and the concept of imprisonment, can constitute the socio-political system in terms of varying binaries such as free/imprisoned, outside/inside, normal/abnormal, legal/illegal, righted/non-righted etc. This is where it becomes a biopolitical regime of governance of life. As Foucault states, "the prison has become a sort of black hole of society, into which everything that is disturbing or unmanageable is jettisoned." (Foucault, 1977, 214)

There are instances in the narrative where people succumb to madness: "Jatish Chandra Pal became insane when he was locked up in separate confinement" (101); "Jagataram suffered from brain complaints due to long-term solitary confinement" (102). These instances are highlighting how this complex socio-political regime of governance of life operates. In another sense, a separate system of confinement was involved within the disciplinary environment—the mind. It is a penal apparatus within a penal apparatus. Call it moral or ethical systems, normative or legal systems, these systems work at multiple levels. Systems of discipline in the prison that completely seclude the prisoner all day and night and impact the internal social-subject relations is only one concrete expression of such virtual penal apparatuses. The narrative shows that the prisoners had to fight against both silence and time, both the self and the context, both existing meanings and their present meaningless situations. One way to counter this assault over one's sense of temporality would be to create markers of the movement of time in terms of events. On a different logic than usual, those collective and individual resistance occurred in the penal settlement can be looked at as such events. Chatra Singh, for example, after attacking the Superintendent of the jail, was thrashed by the warders and was shut in a cell for two years (101). Similarly, when a Punjabi Brahmin named Rama Raksha's sacred thread was taken away by the authorities, he refused to take food and water. This instigated a strike movement in the prison. These resistances whether individual or collective granted

them a sense of independence in the endless passage of time. Citing from Foucault's words, "the carceral system is not a natural or inevitable part of society, but rather a historical and contingent form of social control that can be dismantled and replaced." (Foucault, 1977, 216)

In conclusion, this analysis of the relationship between the self and carceral systems in the light of the text *The Tale of My Exile*, written by Barindra Ghose, reveals how the prison operates not only as a physical institution but also as a pervasive symbolic force that shapes and regulates individuals' subjectivity, especially in the way the individual connects to itself and the the context. The physical institution and associated practices and meanings are only expressions of a more pervasive socio-systemic regime of surveillance, control and governance of life. The society is structured on the outsider perspectives on prison whereby the social member infinitely imagines his/her better state of being vis a vis the unseen interiors of the prison. The insider perspectives on prison that we get through prison narratives fundamentally question these outsider perspectives by exposing how there is a prison within that one carries all around. *The Tale of My Exile*, written by Barindra Ghose exemplifies such an insightful insider perspective.

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