

**Mahuya Bandyopadhyay & Rimple Mehta (Eds.), *Women Incarcerated: Narratives from India*. Hyderabad. Orient BlackSwan Private Limited, 2022, ₹1,210, xi+ 356 pp. ISBN: 9789354421884 (Paperback).**

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‘Women, Incarcerated’ is an edited volume by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta that sheds light on the lives of women prisoners in India, an otherwise neglected domain or a category that is simply invisibilised while discussing criminals or prisoners. This volume tries to reflect on how continuity maintained by the prison system acts as an extension to the patriarchal structures and institutions in society while dealing with women deviants, in alliance with the State. The collection comprises 12 essays that examine the lived experiences of women in prisons organised under three themes: engaging with expressional accounts of women prisoners during different periods, personal accounts of women about negotiation strategies to confront space and time within prisons, and finally, look into the organisational setting of prison governance.

The volume is unique in varied aspects. First, it brings forth a new form of dialogue in the existing literature on women prisoners in India by foregrounding women’s voices to critically understand the practices within the prison and their lives before and after such experiences. Second, the volume is a collaborative effort that includes perspectives of various people engaged with prisons in different capacities ranging from researchers, social workers, administrators and activists. Such kind of collaboration has enhanced the discussion and revealed the issue from multiple standpoints. As such, this book marks a significant departure from traditional academic writing allowing itself to be widely accessible and understandable to readers outside academia too.

Uma Chakravarti’s essay narrates the stories of women political prisoners during three different periods—pre-independence, during the 1960s and Emergency. Separate time periods helped her reflect on individual stories and how the construction of the idea of the ‘woman political prisoner’ is shaped within confined spaces. Her account brought forth the various experiences of Indian women engaged in political work before independence and the hardships and struggles they lived with all along, thus reclaiming the political space for women.

Similarly, Sharmila Purkayastha digs into the narrative account of torture by Malaya Ghosh titled *64 Days in Lalbazar* (2011). The author looks at the torture narrative as a ‘post’ account that runs the risk of reconstruction because it is created at a much later time than the original event. But at the same time, Ghosh’s work holds the ‘potential of rehearsing the actual state repression against the Naxalite activists during the 1970s and highlights the need to revisit the same and learn from those’ (2011, p. 61). She looks at how torture by police personnel has been deeply gendered.

Women often are unable to speak of what they went through due to the stigma attached to female torture (Franco, 1999; Ghosh, 2013). Purkayastha tries to connect Latin American accounts of resistance to reflect on various techniques of survival adopted by Ghosh. These narratives also add to the historical understanding of times when her experiences pointed out the existence of a corrupt and lawless system wherein the law keepers acted as the lawbreakers.

Sadaf Modak looks into the everyday lives of women inmates in two women’s prisons in Maharashtra. She uses a feminist perspective to understand the prison structure, an institution of the State that aims to correct or reform its citizens by referring to several policy documents in place. She compares the documents governing prison practices that point out a bias towards male prisoners thus making the women in prison secondary class citizens even within the prison. Madhurima Dhanuka also exposes the poor structure of women’s prisons, such as overcrowding and lack of gender-specific basic amenities. Prevailing patriarchal practices can be seen vividly inside prisons where women are supposed to continue their gendered roles, such as covering their bodies, being subservient to male authorities, limited access to spaces, or being taught only the apparently feminine labour options to continue further livelihood opportunities after being released from prisons.

Rimple Mehta explores the everyday lives of forty young Bangladeshi women at correctional homes in Kolkata for illegally entering India. She points to the absence of ample discussions of how gender, space and time intersect in creating different relations of power. As such, she tries to examine her research work, her relationship with her participants and the shape the work takes in the context of space and time. She notes that these women who bear the triple burden, being women, prisoners and then foreigners affect the conceptualisation of their everyday space and time.

In their visits to Mumbai prisons, Mangala Honawar and Vijay Raghavan find interesting revelations about women recidivists, and how repeated women offenders in Mumbai perceive and are motivated to continue committing crimes. There is an increasing trend in female criminality in Mumbai. A reason behind this seems the use of prison by women recidivists for their own advantage. Prisons are the breeding ground and recruitment space for new offenders. Regulars are given privileges by staff and help in managing the prison. Many women find their lost agency in prison and they choose to remain criminals.

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay presents narratives of two women prisoners in an attempt to dig into the potential of such narratives in theorising and understanding prisons in India, both as an institution and as an experiential ground for those who inhabit it. Relying on Stauffer’s (2015) ideas, she tries to understand ‘ethical loneliness’—the experience of being left out, abandoned, and not heard by other people among the women prisoners. She feels that researchers need to dig into this space in order to uncover multiple narratives, perspectives and interpretations that are otherwise understood only in binaries.

Kanupriya Sharma shows how love is experienced by women in prisons and how romantic heterosexual alliances have a significant role in shaping their everyday lives. Formation of intimate relationships with different men within the constricted spaces is a tactic used by women to ‘resist, manipulate and negotiate penal and societal norms’ (p. 140). These relationships and the ways the

prison acts as the match-making institution for them hinted at a departure from the perception of prison as a total institution.

Inmates or not, everybody is entitled to a certain form of recreation for their own psychological and physical well-being and the book points that out in more ways than one. B.D Sharma talks about 'Culture Therapy in Prison' and its importance in creating a holistic environment and contributing to the overall well-being of the inmates at correctional facilities. The therapy ignited a sense of creative freedom amongst otherwise incarcerated individuals. The book not only points out the role that 'Culture Therapy' plays in the inmates' mental welfare but also discusses the dire discrimination faced by the women prisoners as a result of the perennial patriarchal structures embedded into the system as well as the women's lives. The discrimination against the equal participation of women in the tasks inside the confinement of the prison draws a similar image to what women outside the four walls of the prison face, signifying very well, that the topography does not change the social norms for a woman, no matter if she is a free individual or a prisoner.

Shereen Sadiq tries to contextualise the actions of female offenders in Aligarh jail. Many women due to their lack of awareness, and illiteracy along with missing societal and familial support reach a stage where they are made to commit crimes, at times unaware of what consequences it might lead to. The author argues the need for the criminal justice system to take into specification women's crimes and then apply fresh frameworks while dealing with women offenders in correctional institutions, such as prisons.

The book stresses that the issue that gender disparity is as prevalent inside prisons as outside. In such an attempt, Dhanuka highlights vulnerabilities faced by women prisoners compared to male prisoners with an emphasis on custodial detention. Similarly, Upneet Lalli's essay highlights the conditions of women prisoners' lives and the role of state agencies in maintaining their custody. The author emphasises improving infrastructural conditions along with gender sensitisation of prison staff.

Penelope Tong carries forward the discussion by questioning the larger context of the post-prison life of women. She looks at the existing system of prison reforms in India and the policy suggestions for the rehabilitation and reintegration of women prisoners. While the criminal justice system does not include within its jurisdiction about the post-prison lives of the deviants, Tong tries to examine the nature and effects of the correctional efforts offered to women while in prison. She suggests the system extend its purview that aims at overcoming histories of trauma, addressing psychological states, facilitating personal and professional development, enabling coping mechanisms with circumstances and preventing recidivism. She highlights the need to understand reformation and rehabilitation in a more functional manner to derive their nature and what they entail. Based on that, the prison department along with development sector organisations could start working complementarily in order to develop better programmes, and at times, consider the opinions and experiences of the prison staff.

The volume argues that homogenising practices to reform prisoners result in the erasure of personal histories. As a response to the same, collaborative resistive actions are part of the everyday prison routine. It is important thus to take into account a nuanced understanding of lived experiences in rethinking prisons as correctional institutions and adopting a more humane and gender-sensitive approach to designing them.

With the essays touching upon a wide range of aspects within the prison system and women's lives inside them, this volume will be a useful read for people interested in women's issues in India.

## ORCID iD

Shilpa Chaya Mazumdar  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5999-3425>

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Shilpa Chaya Mazumdar  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati  
Guwahati, Assam, India  
E-mails: [shilpabcm@gmail.com](mailto:shilpabcm@gmail.com); [schaya@iitg.ac.in](mailto:schaya@iitg.ac.in)