

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta (eds), *Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India*, Orient Blackswan: India, 2022; 342 pp.: 9780301066608, £30.30 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Karan Tripathi, *School of Law, University of Sheffield, UK*

According to the latest official statistics, there are 22,918 women prisoners in India (NCRB, 2022). In total, 78% are undertrials, of them, most belong to oppressed or backward caste or a tribal community. Although women constitute only 4.1% of the total prison population in India (NCRB, 2022), their rate of incarceration has consistently increased in recent years (2016–2021). However, little is known about the lived experience of women prisoners, both within and outside of prison. Women's incarceration has been severely neglected in policies, practices and academic work on prisons. Seen as 'correctional afterthoughts' (Ross and Fabiano, 1986), women's deviance and carceral trajectories have remained largely invisible, ignored or misrepresented (Pollack, 2012).

Particularly in India, there has been scant regard for understanding women's experiences of navigating and resisting the control of highly regimented carceral space. *Women, Incarcerated*, therefore, makes a timely and significant contribution to punishment scholarship in India. It shines the spotlight on the experiences of exclusion, marginalization and violence in the lives of women prisoners. Through the narratives of repression and marginality, the volume reveals how women's carceral experiences are not isolated but inextricably connected to their lives in institutions of family, marriage, caste and class.

The volume challenges the invisibilization/memorialization paradox that marks the dominant representation of a 'female prisoner' in academic literature, policy discourse, media and beyond. The paradox involves either invisibilizing the female prisoner as merely an accomplice to a man, or memorializing her as extraordinary and demonic who brought dishonour to the community by transgressing not just the law but also moral boundaries. The volume addresses this paradox by focusing on both the mundane and extraordinary aspects of the everyday life of women prisoners. In doing so, it reveals how women's marginal position in prison is often a continuation of exclusion, patriarchal violence and denial of agency and selfhood that mark their pre-prison experiences. Furthermore, the volume's collaborative effort is one of its most significant contributions to knowledge production on women's imprisonment. It brings together a cohort of researchers, social workers, prison administrators and legal activists, that draw on experiences from four states (Punjab, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh). This collaboration foregrounds diverse epistemologies, considerations and practical strategies by enabling a dialogue between multiple standpoints that deal with the prison system on an everyday basis. Such collaborative effort is particularly significant in the Indian context, as access to prisons is often impossible owing to their closed and securitized nature.

The volume critically reflects on the state's penal practices through 12 individual contributions broadly categorized under three parts. The first part presents narratives of resistance to the torture, control, harms and impunity of the state's gendered carceral logic. These narratives show how women prisoners resist custodial violence and, in doing so, challenge the conceptual distinctions between sexual and non-sexual violence. We see this in the stories of Khatija and Malaya Ghosh in Chapters 1 and 2—two 'political' prisoners whose resistance to torture reveals how personal and political justice gets intertwined. Ghosh's account of torture reveals how custodial violence against women is not just a combination of physical and mental pain, but it is deeply gendered and sexual in nature. The torturer draws from techniques historically used to shame and humiliate women—parading with shaved head, sexual mockery and threats of forced sex. The silence around sexualized torture in Ghosh's story also highlights the culture of impunity that continues to mark custodial violence against political prisoners. In bringing forth stories of exemplary courage in the face of violence, these chapters argue that resistance, just like loss and marginality, is central to the lives of women prisoners.

Surviving torture is not the only display of resistance by women prisoners. The volume's second part presents chapters that articulate the act of challenging or subversion of everyday prison life as another form of resistance. Women prisoners resist the totalitarian control and dehumanization of confinement by demanding better facilities, forming romantic relationships, expressing bodily desires and forming interactive social spaces.

The resistance lies in the strategies women adopt to survive the shame and isolation that marks imprisonment. In Chapter 5, Sharma shows how women prisoners resist, manipulate and negotiate both penal and societal norms by forming new intimate relationships with male guards or prisoners. Similarly, in Chapter 7, Mehta presents the self-expression of love, intimacy and rumours, by Bangladeshi women prisoners as resisting the prison's regimented space-time location. The 'love letters' and 'virtual spaces' in Sharma's and Mehta's chapters respectively articulate the significance of constructing a sense of self to find purpose within prison. The narratives of self-expression, then, become resistance not just to prison practices but also to hegemonic heterosexist norms of the state, family and wider community.

The narratives presented in the first two parts of the volume unearth a continuum of loss and marginality that women experience as they traverse different institutions. They reveal pathways from violent patriarchal families to state controlled prisons, articulating how patriarchal gender norms inform treatment of women both within and outside prison. In Chapters 3 and 4, Bandyopadhyay and Sadiq respectively question the understanding of women's experiences of prison as an aberration from their experiences within the intimate but hierarchical institutions of family and marriage. The women in these chapters are marginalized by structures of caste and class and experienced violence, humiliation and/or denial of agency, both in intimate and state institutions. The continuum of loss enables the viewing of prison as 'porous', with state acting as an 'extended arm' of the family and the wider community in dealing with women prisoners. Modak exposes this linkage in Chapter 6 by showing how prison policies prioritize the political, economic and social agency of male inmates over the female. As work and education are deemed more valuable for male prisoners, women prisoners are given 'dead-end jobs' or vocational training that reinforce gender stereotypes. Modak argues that by focusing on women's particular 'functional capacity', prison programmes construct women prisoners as subordinate citizens, reinforcing the gender bias prevailing outside the prison.

The final part of the volume shifts the focus to questions of everyday governance of prisons from the standpoint of activists, social workers and prison administrators. The chapters here highlight the challenges that existing practices of prison governance pose to envisaging 'human prisons' committed to the 'rehabilitative ideal'. The perspectives presented in this section reflect the powerlessness that confronts those seeking rights-based reforms in penal governance. They also, however, articulate hope, demands and recommendations for redesigning prison governance that respects human rights and is committed to social justice.

*Women, Incarcerated* is a valuable contribution to the epistemological discussion on penal governance in India. It centres the lived experience of women prisoners in both the understanding and the critique of the state's carceral logic. Its strength lies in its collation of diverse perspectives—spanning academia, activists, social workers and practitioners—making it accessible to a wide range of audiences. It is a foundational resource for nascent criminological scholarship in India to build upon by extending the lens to many groups not covered in this volume, for instance, to Adivasis, and gender and sexual minorities.

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## References

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