

**COLONIAL DETENTION DISCOURSE: GANDHI AS A SATYAGRAHI PRISONER AND HIS IMPACT UPON THE SOCIETY.****Dr. Tina Mazumdar**

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**Abstract:**

The study underscores the process of incarceration undertaken by the colonial officials that was centered on enforcing fear and anxiety in the mind of the colonized. However, the imprisonment barely dominated the spirit of the political prisoners. Besides the heart wrenching narratives of the political prisoners, the life writings of the political offenders written and published in different vernacular language also substantiates that prison offered a creative space to those who struggled to express their experiences of incarceration. The struggle towards independence has a synonymous presence with the nonviolent or violent movements, conflicts, sacrifices and the number/period of imprisonments has always been highlighted to portray national sentiments but the power which operates within the space of confinement is beyond approach.

The research paper underscores the idea of influential act of incarceration that left an indelible mark in the minds of the colonized. The concept of prison and punishment was structured and disciplined by the colonizers. The natives initially were terrified of the idea of detention or incarceration in India, however with the development of the techniques of resistance and rebellion against the colonizers, the colonized adopted the idea of 'jail going' and 'suffering' during the early twentieth century.

**Keywords:** incarceration, freedom, independence, prisoners, nonviolence

Incarceration and independence are terms which bring into mind numerous connotations that revolves around the freedom struggle which elicits a picture of the phase which was shrouded colonial politics and domination. The aforementioned terms have its individual existence however has a larger significance in the colonial history. Both the terms denote power and authority but historians have rarely established the connection between the them to denote the inherent dimensions in the context of Indian freedom struggle. The struggle towards independence has been eulogized, in different historical texts mostly nonfictional, in connection with the number of movements, conflicts, sacrifices and imprisonments that highlights the national sentiments but the power which operates within the space of confinement is beyond approach. Incarceration- a word widely known for its terrifying effects, inhuman tortures, or punitive measures has an undertone of relief and pilgrimage which unfurls a world beyond

its physiological understanding. It can be connected to libertinism, a state of freedom where a man attains his 'space' in isolation to vent the 'unspoken truth'. A state of confinement can also become a state of contentment when the prison space can be used to reject popular ideas of domination. Prison writing has gained a momentum in recent centuries where the personal or political narration is given much importance as a part of postcolonial literature. The narrative is vital and significant due to the context of its narration; the question of 'nation' and 'motherland' evolves and subsequently provides a glimpse of the experiences of incarceration of offenders. The concept of utilizing the prison space can be best understood on reading Foucault's narratives which deals elaborately on carceral themes and motifs, "we preferred the blows, but the cell suits us better." (Rainbow 234)

The word 'freedom' has an inherent connection with the term independence which retains a huge significance in the history of the Indian freedom movement, the history has been a part and parcel of the then colonized people, however the fact cannot be denied that in independent India the historiographers have drafted the meta history with the 'popular' information carefully eliminating the unpopular history of India. The excruciating pain the freedom fighters have experienced in the Indian colonial prison to drive the Empire away has barely been represented in the historical texts even with minimal reference. Moreover, it would be a sweeping generalization to say that historians have completely isolated the political prisoners from the freedom fighters, the meta historians have focused on those incidents or political prisoners which has already been popular amongst the masses. The irony is that the natives should be reminded about the independence struggle, however it is this struggle that has created the idea of nationalism amongst the Indians; it is extremely deep-rooted and hence eternally ineradicable. The historical texts that promulgated asymmetrical facts about the freedom struggle, underscores a feeling of 'unacknowledgement' of the contribution of the political prisoners who have sacrificed their life and suffered for their cause. The central idea of the research paper is to challenge the 'space' which was used by 'the empire' for punitive measures and imprisonment to dominate the masses which has subsequently transformed into a house of pilgrimage and knowledge for the political prisoners. Further, it also elicits that the concept of imprisonment which has been embraced by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru became popular amongst the masses, had an unprecedented impact the Indian population. Consequently, the colonized masses took to mass imprisonment and incarceration in the early twentieth century colonial India.

The sub-genre of prison writing is in a developing stage in India where the Indian freedom struggle is taken as the foundation of various postcolonial fictional or non-fictional narratives. The western culture took a pioneer stance in dealing with the prison writing in English literature where the experiences of the freedom fighters are documented and collected either in original or source. In India, prison writing in both English and vernacular language dealing with both the colonizers and colonized struggle for independence. The confined space was considered as a place of retaliation, suppression and domination. The interconnection between incarceration and independence is explicitly visible but seldom referred or deeply reflected in the historical narratives. The resistance which became the motto of the freedom struggle was hardly operating in the broad day light but silently functioning inside the prison. Resistance not only indicates the hegemonic impositions or resistance from the imperialistic domination but also resistance from 'fear' and from the thoughts of 'relinquishing'. Throughout the independence struggle, the idea of representation and resistance advanced concurrently where

incarceration becomes a symbol of both resistance and representation. The resistance was not attempted violently; it was operated contradictorily to the existing forces which chose to harass humanity by their inhumane techniques. The independence struggle in its entirety, though not completely, embraced pacifism; the conflicts, necessarily violent, were dealt with composure and expertise. The conflicts during independence struggle were brutal and the application of force was intense enough to arouse violent/provoke retaliation yet the Indian freedom struggle has still been regarded as the most peaceful struggle towards freedom.

The word conflict, once again, brings into picture the notion of power; power operated by the colonial masters and power gained in confinement. The colonial masters executed power in a planned and designed format which can be best understood on reading Foucault's essay *The Subject and Power* which elaborates the idea of 'objectification' in power operation, "...the first is the mode of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of science." (321). It has been noted by historians such as Ranajit Guha in *The Small Voice of History*, that the British used the twin formula of 'soap' and 'medicine', the two gifts of science to project knowledge and power, "...in second part... I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call "dividing practices." (321)

The divide and rule policy of the British to demarcate the Indians in the name of religion to test the free flow of uninterrupted colonization turned out to be one the most successful experiments/attempts which left gruesome imprints in the history. The unexceptional display of power left a permanent scar on the nation, "...and finally it is the human beings which turns him-or herself into a subject." (321)

The aforesaid statement deals with the core issue of the concerned theme of incarceration where the object turns him-or herself into subject and the power structure is subverted. The enclosed space doesn't symbolize frailty or suggests a paralyzed existence but it denotes power in disguised form. The freedom fighters rejected the master-slave relation between the British and the Indians thereby denying any form of submission or embracement of the commandment, the suppression was exclusively renounced and punitive actions were preferred and accepted. Confinement is a "massive phenomenon" which the British imposed and executed with violence but the prisoners' peaceful protest of acceptance of pain and humiliation was conditioned on the principles of pacifism preached and practiced by Mahatma Gandhi. He believed that "non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering" (*Young India* 345)

Prison literature can be regarded as a bildungsroman where the growth of the individual is recorded and analyzed. The discourse from the prison is not limited to the narration of personal experience, it also deals with one's transformation of the self as a prisoner and underscores the importance of the 'space' where philosophies sprout from the soul and the indomitable spirit of the patriots in waking the masses up from the deep slumber of ignorance is also taken into account. The stance can either be political or apolitical yet the tone, mood and form of the narration are vital involving sentiments worth considering. The incarceration or the arrest undertaken to enforce fear proved to have contradictory consequence where the imprisonment failed to dominate the spirits of the rebels thereby conferring them the space to create noise with their pen. The maxim pen is mightier than the sword typifies the predicament in perfect rhythm.

Incarceration was a specific space for Gandhi to experiment his ideas and question the

same by seeking attestation from the masses. The confined space never terrified him and it was rightly observed that he regarded jail as “one of the sharpest tools” in his non-violent struggle to liberate India (345). In his unremitting attempts to inject the masses with nationalistic fervor, he created an “alternative reality” and sought to transform himself into a resilient being much more endurable than assumed by the empire. It has been often noted that the ‘social space’, which has purposely been manipulated to connote prison, provides Gandhi the expanse to constantly invent new ideas; the isolation is not a punitive action but a willful acceptance to transform oneself for the wellbeing. And prison has been the social space where this concept of passive resistance and peace was practiced by Gandhi and followed by millions both inside and outside the confined space. The idea of violence was completely disowned by Gandhi and simultaneously/ concurrently preached the idea of pacifism. An elaborate and rich definition of violence and nonviolence develops with its relation to a significant factor, which when described, opens up doors revealing history of the past with twists and turns, with blurred truths and exaggerated lies. The study of ‘peace theory’ or ‘passive resistance’ can scarcely be made sensible if not placed in opposition to colonization which acts as a driving force for the birth of diverse resistance techniques and propagandists conspiring for an alternate history by subverting the power structure of the colonizers. He had a particular school of thought which was well oriented and systematized to steer the masses to a new era of enlightenment. To consider Gandhi as a saint would be an exaggeration because he wasn’t trying to renounce the world for attaining salvation; it was his humble attempt to rise above the worldly temptations to concentrate on the immediate situation. Critics mostly assert an uncanny resemblance of Gandhi’s temperament to the ‘principle of curate’s egg’ which is noted for its explanation about an ambivalent fusion of part good and bad. It has been noted that “to accept Gandhi’s integrity doesn’t mean that there were no contradictions in his character and his thought.” Raghavan N. Iyer held a firm belief that Gandhi “as a saint was all too human and as a politician he possessed a charisma that seemed to be superhuman” (Erikson 8). His disposition as a political person was a guise to dupe the/gull the foreign power with a display of political colors with speeches and movements oriented towards not an abnormal hunger for position or power but concerned leadership for liberating the masses and enlightening them with the proposal of self-rule and soul force.

In a letter addressed to Harry Deutch from Yerawada central jail, Gandhi prioritizes the power of conviction:

When conviction goes deeper than the intellect, you will brave all dangers and live the true life, and you will at once find that it is its own reward. Dissatisfaction will give place to full satisfaction, because it will not depend upon external circumstances.

In the process of resisting power, the powerless gains power in their conviction to say to ‘no’. Resistance in its most raw form can be seen in the ‘basic expression’, “to refuse, to turn your back or to sit down.” (Uglevik 6) The Civil Disobedience movement launched by Gandhi was extensively based on this notorious rejection to abide by the imposed laws and rules. It was an upright rejection of the idea of consent amidst the political prisoners. “Whatever may be the forms of these struggles, their successes or failures, and the length of their development, they mark the beginning of a new era in the history”. (Cabral 49)

Cabral traces a lineage of constant transformation in the course of ‘colonial domination’ where power is in an oscillating state which tries to shift hands swiftly. Resistance to the emerging power has

been the central cause of his text *Return to the Source* where he deals with three stages of resistance, all quite different in its form and application. Though his expression is limited to African condition of imperialism and resistance yet the essence of resistance in Africa was not very different from India. The manifestation of passive resistance in the second stage is a reminder of the relentless struggle for independence undertaken by Gandhi which initiated the theory of pacifism. Mahatma Gandhi's views and practices performed during first half of twentieth century, expresses an opposition to colonialism and resistance which is one of the underlining tropes of post-colonial studies. He registers the cultural flow of India during the colonial era.

Gandhi foregrounds the idea of self-employment by implicitly propagating the concept of capital formation thus suggesting the utilization of the resources around us without threatening its balance. His approach towards the encouragement of the re-building of the handloom sector which has collapsed due to the introduction of the machine made goods from Manchester, indicates the resistance nature of Gandhi in an environment where the natives were totally engrossed in modernism and its dazzlement. The concept of nation building was held in amalgamation /unison with economic development which can be considered as a trait of post colonialism thereby bestowing priority to local entrepreneurship – discarding/disregarding export of foreign goods - and boosting employment opportunities. This kind of 'co-operative economics' is a foundational and pioneering stance in a country like India where hegemonic policies were functioning at an abnormal pace. He explores the idea of individual autonomy in *Hind Swaraj* and introduces post coloniality in an age of colonialism:

They can establish in thousands of households the ancient  
and scared handlooms, and they can buy out the  
cloth that may be thus woven (125).

Adhering to soul-force, he criticized all notions of violence in whatsoever form; this passive resistance finds its voice in *Hind Swaraj* written by Mohandas Karamchand Das, which exposes the inherent malice of violent disposition, rejects force and disdains those who aspires freedom through violent practice because violence as a form of retaliation would be an imitation of the foreign power. Passivity, according to Gandhi, is a legacy of Indian tradition and religious system; the sermons delivered deals with propagation of passivity in action and composure in thought:

Hinduism, Islamism, Zoroastrianism,  
Christianity and all other religions teach that we  
should remain passive about worldly pursuits and  
active about godly pursuits... (56)

Further, power is an element that forms part of any social group, and by thronging the political prisoners in one space, they were creating a social space for germination of the nationalistic fervor and thereby entrusting them with more power to create resolutions to counter the imperialistic domination, "The most intense point of a life, the point where its energy is concentrated, is where it comes up against power, struggles with it, attempts to use its forces and to avoid its traps." (Ugelvik 5)

The relation between power and freedom is undeniable. Gandhi sensed freedom in confinement; he doesn't discourage the idea of incarceration but rather practiced non-corporation and passive resistance in the prison. The idea of confinement was generally believed to limit bodily movement, to

punish the body by confining it. Ironically, the freedom is what the mind experiences, the body is just the tool of the mind. This idea of the freedom of mind has been greatly promoted and practiced by Gandhi in the form of passive resistance. A violent mind can never caress the idea of pacifism; a mind free from turbulences can think rationally and lead the nation to light. “And a person who is free is, in some sense, not really a prisoner at all”. (5)

Mahatma Gandhi’s conviction stands in upright rejection to Foucauldian concept of punitive measures on the body. In *Discipline and Punish* it has been noted by Foucault that to confine a body is to “deprive the individual of liberty”; he firmly believed that incarceration “suspends” the rights of individuals. On the contrary we could witness Gandhi rowing against the current by repudiating the popular belief thereby upholding his traditional knowledge acquired from various religious texts. Gandhi rejoiced his liberty in confinement and exhibited the power of mind and soul despite restrictions. It can also be understood/interpreted in Ugelvik’s terms that those, who stood the test of power and manipulated the situation to their advantage with different forms of resistance, achieved the taste of success. Thus, the rhetorical question can be/should be analyzed and reassessed to seek authentication that whether Gandhi was ever a prisoner of the empire. The inflictions imposed upon the body of the political prisoners cannot be denied, the floggings, assaults, execution; yet the restriction of the mind couldn’t diminish the passivity of the ‘social group’ created by the empire to wipe the fervor for freedom which ultimately exploded into a passive evolution sweeping the empire off the boundaries.

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