

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores alternative histories of the colonial prison in Bengal 1860-1945, especially focusing on colonial experiences as produced in the literary writings including fiction, drama, and life writings. The colonial government claimed that through the jail system they had introduced the modern concept of punishment into Indian colonial society by eradicating the previous religio-sacral punitive system and the East India Company's authoritarianism. Several studies have already challenged this reformatory history of colonial prison in India historically, ideologically as well as anthropologically. Notably, these studies which are based only on historical and archival sources do not discuss how colonial subjects' experiences with imprisonment in Bengal changed over time. This dissertation contends that the colonial prison is neither a homogeneous institution nor is the experience of colonial subjects unidimensional. Therefore, incorporating literary writings will be necessary to understand the perspective of the colonised subjects. It does not conceive literature and archives as the final source of knowledge. Instead, it undertakes them interlinked, more as the forum of dialogue that keeps exchanging and verifying each other's sources.

Officially it was posited that the colonial prison system in Bengal evolved from an arbitrary, religio-local framework under the East India Company to a structured, modern institution focused on maintaining law and order. Initially formalised by the 1838 Prison Discipline Committee, its regulatory framework was solidified by the 1857 Mutiny and the 1860 Indian Penal Code. Subsequent developments in administration and architecture established it as the principal punitive mechanism underpinning the colonial regime's 'rule of law' in nineteenth-century Bengal. Besides, the rise of militant activism prompted changes such as segregation methods, cellular divisions, specialised jail surgeons, and special provisions for political prisoners. The Prisons Act of 1894 aimed at system

centralization, while the 1919-20 Indian Jail Committee's report marked a shift towards rehabilitation over mere control and deterrence. Thus, according to the official penal records, the colonial prison implemented a liberal humane form of punishment that later acquired rehabilitative principals.

This dissertation thus offers alternative histories of the colonial prison in Bengal from 1860 to 1945, emphasising colonial governmentality concerned prison architecture, bureaucracy, and evolving colonial experiences. It analyses official penal records to understand how Bengali subjects perceived, responded to, and experienced the prison, as depicted in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, including fiction, drama, and life narratives. The study examines whether the colonial prison upheld the equal treatment principle of the 1860 Indian Penal Code or if experiences varied by class and caste. It also explores Bengali colonial subjects' interactions with prison mechanisms, such as strict routines, solitary confinement, and torture, particularly concerning revolutionary activism. Additionally, the dissertation addresses how these subjects negotiated, resisted, and subverted coercive measures and investigates the penal experiences of Bengali women, both ordinary and political prisoners, focusing on the impact of gender politics and their effects on women's bodies.

This dissertation, therefore, attempts to establish a comprehensive connection between the macro-historical analysis and the micro-historical perspective of the colonial prison in its five interconnected chapter. These chapters demonstrate the prison's role in shaping individual and collective identities, the intricate temporal and spatial regulations within the jail, and its impact on convict bodies. They also explore various techniques of corporeal and mental torture, resistance tactics employed by prisoners, and the gendered dynamics of imprisonment, including gender-specific modalities of resistance and subversion.