

INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER

RUPKATHA JOURNAL

ON INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN HUMANITIES



ISSN 0975-2935

About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com
Indexed by	Scopus Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) DOAJ
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2021: 0.2 SJR 2021: 0.194 SNIP 2021: 0.642 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Themed issue	Volume 4, number 2, 2022 (March-June) Themed Issue on Literature of Northeast India
Guest Editor	Jyotirmoy Prodhani
Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n2.php

About the Article

Title	Penology in Colonial Times: A Reading of <i>Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha</i>
Author/s	Sib Sankar Majumder
Affiliation	Dept. of English, Assam University, Silchar, India.
Author IDs	0000-0003-1389-8289
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.
DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n2.ne22 Pages: 1-10
Full Text HTML	https://rupkatha.com/v14n2ne22
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n2/v14n2ne22.pdf
Article History	First Published: 24 June 2022
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0

This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor@rupkatha.com.

Penology in Colonial Times: A Reading of *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*

Sib Sankar Majumder

Dept. of English, Assam University, Silchar, India. Email: ssmaus1980@gmail.com

Abstract

Prison system in Assam owes its origin and structure to the British colonizers. Colonial administrator John M'Cosh mentions in *Topography of Assam* (1837) that by the year 1833 the East India Company had already established jails in prominent administrative sites like Guwahati and Goalpara. From the mid-twentieth century, one can witness an increasing concern in academic disciplines like psychiatry, psychology, sociology, criminology and philosophy with the notion and the praxis of incarceration in the colonies. This paper will attempt to foreground the unexplored dimensions of incarceration in colonial jails with a special focus on the frontier province of Assam through an analysis of *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* (2011), the autobiography of Robin Kakati, an eminent freedom fighter, Gandhian who courted multiple arrests as a *satyagrahi*. His autobiography unravels some of the most intricate details of prison life in colonial Assam, especially in Jorhat Central Prison where he was confined with some of the most prominent freedom fighters of the time like Nilamoni Phukan, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Kamala Miri, Gopinath Bardoloi and others. The primary objective of this paper is to study the evolution of the system of incarceration in Assam during the colonial period by highlighting critical perspectives on forms of punishment, humiliation, subjection, classification and reform within the gaol through testimonies of freedom fighters.

Keywords: incarceration, penology, resistance, autobiography, prison manual

In the wee hours of 10th of October 1942, a railway train carrying soldiers of the Allied Forces towards the Burmese frontier was derailed near Sarupathar Railway Station in Upper Assam. It resulted in the death of hundreds of British-American soldiers (Hazorika, 2014, p.233). The derailment was orchestrated by *Mrityu-Vahini* [suicide squad], an extremist outfit inspired by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Azad Hind Fauj, which had already executed a series of disruptive activities in Central and Upper Assam. Immediately after this incident, C.A. Humphrey, the District Magistrate of Jorhat, ordered a combined civilian-military operation to nab the perpetrators. He also ordered a simultaneous crackdown on the Congress volunteers and their sympathizers in the region. Robin Kakati, a Gandhian *satyagrahi* was arrested from the Congress Party office in Sibsagar on the same day. Months later, Kakati noted in his diary inside Ward no. 14 of Jorhat jail:

As security prisoners, we were lodged in a cell within a huge concrete building [i.e. ward no. 14]. In the meantime, a good number of leaders from Jorhat and Guwahati were placed in the female ward of the jail. Some others were kept among the non-political prisoners (Chutia, 2011, p.109; my translation).

'Security prisoner' was a popular nomenclature to identify those prisoners who were "confined under Regulation III of 1818 or corresponding rules under Preventive Detention Act" for involvement in "terrorist crime" whereas 'political prisoner/s' belonged to another distinct category of convicts penalized under Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code, 1862, who disobeyed colonial laws "on conscientious and political grounds" (Mohanty et al., 1990, p. 84). However, in colonial jurisprudence, particularly in matters of prison administration, in numerous instances, these nomenclatures overlapped with each other. Under the provisions of Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code, political prisoners could not be subjected to more restraint than was necessary for their safe custody (85). Ironically, from Kakati's account [serialized in seven neat diaries and later published as *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*, 2011, his autobiography], it is evident that the Jorhat jail administration was violating the law by putting male 'political' prisoners in female wards.

During the last few decades, Anglophone academia has witnessed considerable interest in prison studies, especially complemented by critical concerns with prison life writings. The significance of Robin Kakati's autobiography *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* lies in its portrayal of British carceral and penological praxis during the late colonial period in Assam. It highlights abuses, tortures, and denial of rights to the 'security/political prisoners' by the colonial administration. The eminent freedom fighter, Robin Kakati was born on 3rd September 1910 in Boliaghat village of Sibsagar district. He joined the freedom movement during his early student life under the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi. The last few chapters of Robin Kakati's autobiography, *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*, abound in recollections of events, anecdotes and conditions from Jorhat jail. It foregrounds the hopes, fears and apprehensions of prisoners jailed in a remote but strategically significant frontier region of the British Empire – an area that had recently become a theatre of War because of the Japanese invasion. British authority in the region was further challenged by a political mobilization called the Quit India Movement (1942). Kakati recalls an atmosphere of utter confusion among his compatriots in jail perpetuated by speculations about the possible defeat of Allied forces. Whereas the news of Subhas Chandra Bose's appearance on the Burmese frontier with an audacious battle plan invigorated patriotic feelings of the prisoners, there were also genuine concerns about the future if the Britishers were to face defeat:

We were excitedly postulating the everyday events and we were convinced of the defeat of British Allied power. But what will happen to India after the defeat? Some opined that Japan and Germany will divide and share India. They will rule India more stringently with military power. We developed sympathy for the Britishers. Because we thought that irrespective of all its deficiencies, British were believers in democracy (Chutia, 2011, pp. 116-17; my translation).

Among the most notable compatriots of Robin Kakati inside Jorhat jail was Kushal Konwar, an alleged activist of *Mrityu-Vahini*, in his mid-thirties, who was arrested on the suspicion of involvement in Sarupathar train derailment. Konwar was among the most active members of the Golaghat District Congress Committee. Soon after his arrest, Konwar was brought to Jorhat jail along with forty-two other accused. He spent the next seven months of his life in prison, which included four months of solitary confinement as an under-trial (Hazorika 234). In his autobiography, Robin Kakati has provided a vivid account of the last few days in the life of Kushal Konwar:

The news of the death sentence awarded to Kushal Konwar cast a pallor of gloom among the political prisoners (in Jorhat jail). Konwar maintained stoic behavior throughout his final few days in prison. Most of his time was spent reading passages from the Gita. As the date of hanging approached, there was no visible difference in his behavior. One could rather witness an illuminated expression in his eyes. The day before his hanging, the political prisoners were allowed to meet him and bid farewell with tearful eyes to the fearless soul. His sons were brought inside the jail for a final meeting with their father. On the evening before the hanging of Konwar, all the political prisoners in Jorhat jail observed a fast which continued till the afternoon of the next day. This fast was a homage to a brave son of *Asomi Ai* (Mother Assam), not merely a political gesture of anti-colonial resistance (Chutia, 2011, pp. 109-10; my translation).

Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha, belongs to the genre of 'prison literature', 'prison autobiography' to be precise. This genre is characterized by writings which are primarily realist or confessional in nature since the author is either a convict in imprisonment or someone who has completed his term. As a literary genre, prison autobiography is neither new nor unique. It has been defined as "[P]ersonal accounts written while in prison or about one's time of imprisonment" (Winslow, 1995, p. 52). One may cite examples as widely different from each other as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* as literary specimens of this genre. It may be about prison, the experience of imprisonment, or prison life where a part of the narrative might have been written within confinement (52). Kakati's autobiography, parts of which were written during his imprisonment, provides a rare glimpse into the colonial carceral and phonological praxes during the late colonial. The struggles of Assamese political prisoners inside colonial jails of Assam have been recorded in various autobiographical writings like Prabhat Sarma's *Bilator Galpa Aru Jailor Jibon*, Srimanta Talukdar's *Agor Din Aru Mor Kotha*, Krishnanath Sarma's *Krishna Sarmar Diary*, Amiya Kumar Das' *Jivan Smriti* etc. Prashanta Kumar Chutia, the editor of *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* suggests that though the author finished his manuscript by late 1940's, it was published as late as in 2011 due to certain unspecified reasons (4).

The objective of this paper is to concentrate on the experience of 'security/political prisoners' through an analysis of *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*, a remarkable specimen of the genre of 'prison autobiography'. While remaining conscious of the limitations of 'recovery' intent of the project, an attempt has been undertaken, nevertheless, to fill up the void of critical introspection into prison narratives pertaining to the freedom movement. The following segment of this article is devoted towards unearthing different forms of punishment, humiliation, subjugation exercised by colonial prison administration and its impact on political prisoners through the analysis of an autobiography.

The modern penological system was introduced in the Indian subcontinent by the British East India Company during early eighteenth century. It was first introduced in India in 1773 and by 1860 it was practiced all over the subcontinent (Mohanty et al., 1990, p. 24). Up to 1857 the colonial rule continued to rest upon a patchwork of legal jurisdiction – an admixture of Mughal legal system and British 'rule of law'. Till the third quarter of the eighteenth century, in British-India, jail was primarily conceived as a "holding place" where an accused could be confined before trial and subsequently, if s/he were sentenced with a jail term. That some of the East India

Company executives were deeply perturbed by the state of affairs that prevailed within most Indian jails could be realized from a letter of T.B. Macaulay:

Whatever I hear about the Indian prisons satisfies me that their discipline is very defective...I do not imagine that in this country we can possibly establish a system of prison discipline so good as that which exists...[in the West]. We have not an unlimited command of European agency, and it is difficult to find good agents for such a purpose among our native subjects (Waits, 2014, p.1).

The following year i.e., in 1836 Macaulay appointed a Prison Discipline Committee to assess the condition of colonial prisons in India. In its report (submitted in 1838) the committee recommended a series of punitive mechanisms to be installed inside jails with the underlying presumption that "the best criminal code can be of little use to a community unless there is good machinery for the infliction of punishments" (Waits, 2014, p.113). Macaulay's Prison Discipline Committee was followed by three more similar reformatory committees which were subsequently formed in 1846, 1877 and 1888. From the recommendations of these committees, it appeared that the colonial administration was viewing the process of penology and incarceration as inseparable instruments of statecraft which could not be ignored any longer. However, with a rapid transformation in the functioning of penological institutions in the West during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century there were visible changes in prison administration in the colonies as well. Further enactments like Prisons Act, 1894 and the Prisoners Act 1900 facilitated the way for the formation of the Indian Jails Committee, 1919-20 under the chairmanship of Sir Alexander G Cadrew. This committee effectively laid down the foundation for penological and carceral policies in the subcontinent through a series of recommendations on various aspects of prison administration. Certain prison historians, however, maintain that in spite of the best intention of Sir Cadrew and his committee, colonial prison system faltered in applying these recommendations because of its inability "to regard the prisoner as an individual" (Mohanty, 1990, p.26).

In the prison manuals the term 'political prisoner' remained ambiguous as a result of which it lacked uniformity in terms of application. Ujjwal Kumar Singh maintains that the entry of middle-class nationalists in colonial prisons accentuated a process of negotiation between the prisoners and prison governors which ultimately resulted in the construction of a new class of convicts called; 'political prisoners' [or simply 'politicals'] (81). The colonial government used different terms and nomenclatures to identify political prisoners. Having experimented with a plethora of terms like 'seditionist', 'conspiracy case prisoners', 'raj kaidi/bandi', 'state prisoner' and 'political prisoner' between late nineteenth to early twentieth century, apparently neutral terms like 'detenué' 'security prisoner', 'superior class' came into fashion towards the end of the colonial rule. Since the 1920s the popular practice was to classify prisoners into three grades – A, B and C. According to this classification 'C' class prisoners were to be treated like ordinary criminals, 'A' and 'B' class prisoners were to be given a little better treatment in terms of food, reading and writing facilities and a few other privileges. In Assam the usual practice was to classify prisoners into A, B and C category according to the state of their health, education and occupation before arrest but from the 1920s a new system was adopted whereby prisoners were categorized into these groups according to the nature of their offence (Das, 2016, p.126). According to Assam Restriction and Detention Ordinance, 1920 any convict who was deemed to be a 'political prisoner' could be

sentenced to a jail term or detention by the order of the central government or by any provincial government. These prisoners were subjected to a distinct routine from the non-political prisoners based on the nature of their 'offence' (Saraf, 1987, p.594). However, jail authorities applied dissimilar standards of treatment to prisoners for similar 'offence'.

The authority of the colonial prison system, especially in remote frontier regions, operated on a complicated hierarchy, the nature of which was rather casually defined. Such a system could enforce a series of checks and obstructions at different levels of jail administration without having the onus to clearly define the rules for the convicts. From the first few decades of the twentieth century a palpable transformation could be discerned in the treatment of political prisoners. This transformation was partly affected by the rise of extremist activities in British-India around the time of World War I when political prisoners were increasingly deemed to be 'dangerous'. Jail superintendents were instructed to keep a vigilant eye on the activities of political prisoners who "were not to be allowed to work together or given clerical work" (Purandare, 2019, p.130). Another instruction was that these prisoners should be compelled to do hard or "gang labour" (130). Most importantly political prisoners lost the "right of remission", i.e. their sentences could no longer be "reduced on the grounds of good conduct in prison" (Das, 2016, p.130).

In the colonial jails of Assam Bengali Diet Scale was followed with two standards – one for the labouring prisoners and the other for non-labouring prisoners (which mostly included the political) (Das, 2020, p.106). The prisoners received jail diet as laid down under the provision of rule 369 of Assam Jail Manual Vol. I. Food given to the prisoners included sorghum (which had fewer amounts of protein than wheat), rice and lentils. High caste political prisoners were allowed to cook their own food at designated places within the jail compound. Rather surprisingly, on being transferred from one jail to another they could carry their feeding utensils and bedding with them to the receiving jail. Jail authorities supported such a system of separate cooking since it induced caste hierarchy among the prisoners. At the time of Quit India Movement most political detainees in Upper Assam belonging to 'A' and 'B' class, including Gopinath Bardoloi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, were consigned to Jorhat jail. Each of these prisoners was supplied with pieces of bread and butter but 'C' class politicals were deprived of this facility. Some of the 'A' class prisoners like Robin Kakati and others decided to compensate their 'C' class brethren by sharing the bread and butter supplied to them, thereby forging a sense of unity among the inmates (Chutia, 2011, p.110).

With the introduction of a series of prohibitory regulations like the Indian Press Act of 1910 and the Indian Press Emergency Powers Act of 1931, the British colonial administration supplied a substantially comprehensive list of banned books to the jail authorities which could not be allowed inside the jail premises. Through the *Assam Jail Manual* (1934) prison officials had the prerogative to decide the nature and content of reading materials to be allowed to the prisoners. Prison administrators often formulated their own rationale for restricting the entry of books on arbitrary 'security concerns' (Chutia, 2011, p.109). Ironically, Bhagwad Gita [usually found in the possession of extremists] was among books deemed to be 'dangerous' by prison administrators since it could "provoke unruly behavior" or encourage "disruption of law and order" (Kar, 2009, p.29). Detachment from public gaze and immunity from scrutiny of civil society enhance the opportunity for adoption of a stricter censorship policy inside jail than in the rest of the society. Political prisoners were provided loose papers for writing two personal letters a month (Chutia, 2011,

p.116; Das, 2016, p.126). However, one or two extra letters could be smuggled by bribing the warders (Chutia, 2011, p.116). From Kakati's autobiography it is evident that during the War years prisoners had better access to books and other reading materials than before in Assam as he observes

During 1930/32 newspapers were not allowed in jails. At times Jail warders and compounders smuggled in a few newspapers and letters from which the latest occurrences in the country could be fathomed. By 1942 newspapers were available in jail and we had no problem in getting information (Chutia 116).

For political prisoners, however, there were certain distinct arrangements in most colonial jails. There were certain "special instructions" for the treatment of political prisoners in the *Assam Jail Manual*, 1934 whereby they were allowed to communicate freely with each other (Saraf, 1987, p.7). They were entitled to get medical treatment in case of serious illness but only under specific instruction of the jail superintendent. At times jail authorities compromised on the health condition of the prisoners on grounds of security. In October 1942 Swami Satyananda was transported to Jorhat jail in critically injured condition but Tarak Das, the jail superintendent, denied permission for the treatment of the prisoner outside the jail premises. When Satyanand's condition further deteriorated, he was shifted to Tezpur jail. Unfortunately, he succumbed to his injuries within a few days (Das, 2020, p.113). According to David Arnold,

Mortality tended to be highest among the newly-arrived prisoners who entered jail in a debilitated and demoralized state...from unfamiliarity with a confined and sedentary life, from abrupt changes of climate and diet, from neglect at the hands of their jailors, or from the 'nostalgia' and 'peculiar despondency' that overcame them (1994, pp.167-8).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the prison population in Assam was in a deplorable state, and prisoners were regularly infected by infectious diseases (Das, 2020, p.110). Health facilities and medical facilities were woefully inadequate (Chutia, 2011, p.110). During the early 1930s, there was an outbreak of pneumonia in Tezpur jail as a result of which twenty-eight deaths were reported by the jail authorities (Chutia, p.110). Similar outbreaks of contagious diseases were reported from other jails of the province including Guwahati. There were times when the provincial government had to intervene and instruct "the jail authorities to improve the sanitary and hygienic conditions" in the prison wards (Das, 2016, p.129). The colonial government's Home Department, Provincial Governors, and Chief Commissioners issued periodical assessment reports about security threats in jail and about the sympathizers of revolutionary activities among prison inmates. The response of the British Empire to such perceived 'threats' can be witnessed in a secret report dispatched to the jail superintendents in 1933:

Regarding security, prisoners who hunger strike [sic], every effort should be made to prevent the incidents being reported [in newspapers], no concessions to be given to the prisoners who must be kept alive. Manual methods of restraint are best, then the mechanical when the patient resists (Kar, 2009, p.67).

In *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha*, Robin Kakati provides a vivid description of the inhuman treatment accorded by the colonial administration to Kamala Miri, a Congress volunteer and *satyagrahi* who was brought to Jorhat jail on 13th October 1942. From mid-December 1942

Miri's health started declining steadily because of his participation in an indefinite hunger strike. When he was admitted to the jail hospital for treatment the jail superintendent Tarak Das asked him to sign a letter that stated that he had agreed to refrain from political fasting and agitation in exchange for his treatment. Miri declined to sign the letter and consequently he was not allowed permission for treatment outside the jail. Gopinath Bardoloi and a few others tried to intervene on behalf of Miri. Bardoloi wrote a long letter to the provincial authority trying to draw its attention to the deplorable state of affairs in Jorhat jail (Das, 2020, p.112). He also reiterated the demand of political prisoners in detention for unconditional release of Miri from jail on grounds of poor health but the provincial government ignored the request. Finally, on the morning of April 23, 1943 Kamala Miri breathed his last in the jail hospital. Miri's sacrifice strengthened the resolve of political prisoners of Jorhat jail to continue their resistance through hunger strike. Even those prisoners who were favouring a moderate approach gave up all efforts of negotiation with the jail administration after the tragic death of Kamala Miri (Chutia, p.110).

In spite of such bleak episodes, there is an unmistakable sense of humour that characterizes Kakati's autobiography. One may consider the following example which is rather typical of his narrative skill:

The Roroia Military Airport, strategically very important for the Allied Forces, was situated only a few kilometers away from the [Jorhat] jail. It maintained a very busy schedule during the War. The sound of constant descent and ascent of military aircraft was a source of annoyance for the prisoners. The news of Japanese advancement on the Burmese front convinced the prisoners about an imminent attack on Roroia Military Airport and the adjacent areas including the jail. On a certain evening, there was a huge sound, accompanied by news of the collapse of concrete structure which unleashed an atmosphere of panic in the prison wards. After ten minutes of great anxiety and fear, the warden finally informed that it was not an invasion but an earthquake (Chutia, 2011, p.111; my translation).

Prabhat Chandra Sarma, a political prisoner, narrates another similar incident. In 1944 a British airplane, flying from Roroia Airbase to China, faced trouble with its engine. Almost immediately the pilot started dropping bombs from the plane carelessly in order to save it from an accident. Incidentally, one of the bombs was dropped very close to the jail campus. The jail authorities instantly decided to run away putting the lives of all the prisoners at risk. A few prisoners were severely injured in the ensuing commotion (Das, 2020, p.119). Such incidents, although very rare, expose the indiscipline in colonial prison administration. Unlike the jails situated in centrally located regions, prison administration in far-off and frontier regions was very harsh. In such locations political captives could be flogged or subjected to other forms of punishments (if they did not complete their quota of work) or denied the facilities to which they were entitled.

During India's more than a half-a-century long struggle for freedom against British rule, thousands of freedom fighters were imprisoned by the British colonial authorities; many also voluntarily courted imprisonments. Some of these freedom fighters recorded their impression of British carceral system through letters, memories, and diaries, however, only a few of them were fortunate enough to see these memoirs and autobiographies in published form. One common thread which characterizes these writings is the representation of colonial jails as an archetypal symbol of

repression. According to historian Clare Anderson 'jails' and 'penal colonies' became central tropes of the political struggle for independence (2007, pp.19-20). It became customary among the nationalists to refer to India under colonial rule as "one vast prison" (Arnold, 2004, p.39). Since the jail chains symbolized colonial subjection, imprisonment itself became a metaphor for resistance. Voluntary imprisonment and peaceful fasting became the most favoured techniques of anti-colonial resistance (Arnold, 1994, pp.178-9). These techniques assumed immense significance because of the physical and emotional tortures sustained by political prisoners during protest fasts. Jail spaces became a kind of "*mukti-tirth*", a site for pilgrimage for freedom fighters where the sons of *Bharat Mata* [Mother India] sacrificed their lives in the service of the nation. It is in this context that prison narratives, letters, memories, and autobiographies written within colonial jails occupy a significant space in the nationalist historiography of freedom struggle. It became as much a "nationalist convention" argues David Arnold, for political prisoners "to write their prison memories as it was a patriotic duty for newspaper editors and book publishers to put them in to print" (2004, p.30). While the autobiographical narratives of political prisoners may be viewed as a legitimate opportunity to register an intellectual response to torture in incarceration, it also provides a window to posterity to assess the nature of their anti-colonial resistance. Some of these writings like Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*, Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Savarkar's *My Transportation for Life*, Bhai Paramanand's *The Story of My Life* attained cult status with the passage of time. While, the desire to record experiences of suffering in writing might have been triggered by an effort to "seek empowerment" against the "official text of imprisonment" what distinguishes these autobiographies from numerous other specimens of this genre, is the transformation of individual experiences of suffering and resistance into accounts of broad social, historical and philosophical significance as Paul Gready suggests that "autobiographical prison writing" could be "the most comprehensive articulation" of the "oppositional" power of writing (1993, p.489). Gready also adds that prisoners wrote inside prison spaces to "restore a sense of self and world", in order to "reclaim the 'truth'" – a fact which has also been corroborated by Nehru in *Glimpses of World History*.

Long and lonely terms of exile and prison are hard to bear, and the mind of many brave person has given way and the body broken down under strain...one must have strength of mind, and inner depths which are calm and steady, and the courage to endure (2004, p.139).

However, we need to be on our guard about the nature of autobiographical prison writings as these texts can be ambiguous, subject to approximation, manipulation and appropriation because of their 'oppositional' character. Political prisoners of the colonial period were certainly not the kind of "docile bodies" which Foucault imagined in *Discipline and Punish* (1995). David Arnold cites "abundant evidence" of "resistance and evasion" in the Indian prison system and insists that political prisoners in colonial jails actively resisted and defied warders and orders. (1994, p.150)

While there has been a tendency in the past to see prison protests as essentially a mark of the period of nationalist incarceration, particularly from 1920 onwards, the more one explores the history of nineteenth-century prison in India the more frequent such episodes of resistance appear and the more significant they seem in the evolution of colonial penology (1994, p.150).

The demand for 'recognition' as "special class of prisoners" by Kakati and his compatriots was rejected by jail authorities as per the recommendation of the Indian Jails Committee, 1920 (Chutia, 2011, p.110). However, they continued to claim immunity from jail rules and demanded privileges in terms of food and other facilities (2011, p.110). Unlike most prison autobiographies which originated in colonial jails and earned notoriety for inflicting torture and hardship on political prisoners, life in Jorhat jail, as narrated by Kakati, seemed to have been relatively easier. When Kakati was brought to that jail during the winter of 1942 [eventually it turned out to be his longest tenure in British prison] he witnessed certain systemic transformations in its administration compared to the previous decade (between 1930 and 1932 he spent more than two years in that jail). Unlike the autobiographies of political prisoners, who were jailed in the Andaman Islands, Robin Kakati's *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* provides few surprises. Nevertheless, it is a rich testimony to the turbulent times of freedom struggle in Assam. By placing the history of incarnation and torture to which the Assamese political prisoners were subjected at the heart of his narrative, Kakati's autobiography showcases the distinctiveness of the freedom movement in the region. By conflating the case of Assam, a frontier region, with the activities of Congress throughout the subcontinent he engenders a nationalist spirit. *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* challenges "the colonial assumption" that Indians were "unwarlike" and a people without the capability of writing history in a rational manner (Durba Ghosh 61). As an eminent Gandhian Kakati's autobiography is a metaphor for non-violent resistance to the colonial rule.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

No funding has been received for the publication of this article. It is published free of any charge.

References:

- Anderson, C. (2007). *The Indian Uprising of 1857-58: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion*. Anthem Press.
- Arnold, D. (1994). "The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge and Penology in Nineteenth-Century India". David Arnold and David Hardiman (Eds.), *Subaltern Studies (Vol. VIII): Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha* (pp.148-87). OUP.
- _____. (2004). "The Self and the Cell – Indian Prison Narratives as Life Histories". David Arnold & S. Blackburn (Eds.), *Telling Lives in India – Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (pp. 29-53) Permanent Black.
- Chutia, Prashanta Kumar Ed. (2011). *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha by Robin Kakati*. Muktijoddha Robin Kakati Janma Shatabarsha Udjapan Samiti.
- Das, Dimpy. (2016). "Political Prisoners of Assam with Special Reference to Civil Disobedience Movement". *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Science Society and Culture* 2(1), 124-31. <http://ijirssc.in/pdf/1464788846.pdf>

- _____. (2020). *Prisons in Colonial Assam (1826-1947)*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Gauhati] Shodh Ganga (INFLIBNET). <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/325456>
- Foucault, Michel. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- Ghosh, D. (2017). *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947*. CUP.
- Gready, P. (1993). "Autobiography and the 'Power of Writing': Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era". *Journal of South African Studies* 19(3), 489-523. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2636913>
- Hazorika, R. D. (2014). "Train Derailment Activities of Assam in 1942". *Pratidhwani: The Echo: A Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2(3), 230-39. https://www.academia.edu/6742233/Train_Derailment_Activities_of_Assam_In_1942
- Kar, Sisir. 2009. *British Shashane Bajeyapta Bangla Boi*. Ananda Publishers.
- Mohanty, A., & Hazary, N. (1990). *Indian Prison System*. Ashish Publishing House.
- Nehru, J. (2004). *The Glimpses of World History*. Penguin.
- Norman, D. (1965). *Nehru, The First Sixty Years*. John Day Company.
- Purandare, V. (2019). *Savarkar: The True Story of the Father of Hindutva*. Juggernaut Books.
- Saraf. B.P. & Saraf, A. K. (1987). *Assam Jail Manual: Complete Law Relating to Jail Administration in Assam*. GLR Publishing House.
- Singh, U. K. (1996). *Political Prisoners in India 1920-77*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of London]. ProQuest Dissertations. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29435/1/10731591.pdf>
- Waits, Mira Rai. (2014). *The Spatial Economy of British Colonial Penology in India, 1858-1911*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of California]. ProQuest Dissertations. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1615847577>
- Winslow, D. J. (1995). *A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography and Related Forms* (2nd Ed.). University of Hawaii Press.

Dr. Sib Sankar Majumder is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Assam University, Silchar. He did his PhD from Gauhati University in 2016 on *Political Theatre in Kolkata: Bertolt Brecht in Context*. He has edited *Anthology of American Poetry* (2009) published by Eastern Book House, Guwahati.