

The Prison as Stage: Performance, Power and the Experiences of Women Prisoners in Colonial Odisha

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Abstract: *The lived experiences of Odia women prisoners during British rule in Odisha are the main subject of this study, which examines the jail as a performative stage in the colonial encounter. At the beginning of the Gandhian phase of the Indian National Movement, women were encouraged to participate in the popular marches as volunteers, political leaders, Satyagrahins, or revolutionaries. Many of them were arrested or given prison sentences, either harsh or light, based on their actions. Not much historical research has been done on how women retell their prison experiences and what the conditions of women prisoners were within the walls of jails during the British Government. For their courage and dedication, women like Parbati Giri, Sarala Devi, Godavari Devi, Laxmi Devi, and Nirmala Bala Nayak are commended. This paper's primary goal is to examine Odia women's experiences in prison, their voices, protests and the negotiations within the colonial prison.*

Keywords: *Women Prisoners, Colonial Prison, National Movement, Power and Negotiation.*

Introduction

The history of Indian penology begins with the East India Company Act of 1793, which authorized the Governor General to detain individuals accused of crimes against the British administration. This was followed by Regulation III of 1818, enacted in Bengal to "suppress" revolutionary activities and later expanded to other regions of British India.¹ Initially, the British viewed Indians as naïve and in need of civilization through control, leading to patronizing policies in their approach to Indian penology. This perspective shifted after the Revolt of 1857, viewing Indians as 'deceitful' and resistant to reform, prompting

the colonial government to adopt a harsh stance to suppress sedition and disloyalty from the start.² Protests and resistance against colonial policies surged in the early 20th century, viewed as threats to order. The British introduced stringent laws like the Ingress into India Ordinance (1914), Défense of India Act (1915), and Rowlatt Act (1919) to suppress revolutionary activities and limit Indian freedoms. Led by Gandhi, mass mobilisation from the 1920s bolstered anti-colonial movements, with authorities labelling protesters as criminals, echoing Foucault's notion that revolutions are discredited by portraying rebels as criminals.³ He emphasises that those in power often label revolutionaries as criminals to undermine their legitimacy. This framing positions them as threats to law and order, leading authorities to pursue imprisonment as a means of addressing both the physical and psychological aspects of these individuals.⁴

The colonial prison served as a multifaceted tool of power, embodying a site of contestation and political awakening during India's anti-colonial movement. Women entering the prison engaged actively with the official machinery redefining their experiences and emerging transformed. The prison was a space of protest highlighting the clashes among gender, nationalism and colonial authority which yielded outcomes unforeseen by both colonial and nationalist leaders.⁵ This article examines the women's prison experience in colonial Odisha highlighting it as a complex struggle rather than merely a story of victimization or liberation. Drawing from various sources, it emphasizes how women navigated colonial, nationalist, and patriarchal constraints impacting their lives, the national movement, and the issue of women's political agency.⁶

Prison as a Stage

In Odisha, colonial prisons were performative spaces in which carceral power was enacted on the bodies of women. The Odia women inmates were mostly found guilty of infanticide, poisoning or going against the patriarchal rules and therefore, prison was a place of dual oppression: colonial discipline met with native gender oppression. The jail turned into a stage where colonial governors, prison officers and reformers would play out the scripts of civilising local women.⁷ However, in these surveilled spaces, women bargained agency by solidarity, resistance, and cultural practices and turned the prison into a battleground of identity and survival rather than a punitive site.

Reflections on women's Experiences in the colonial prison in India

Women's involvement in the national movement in India became prominent during the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922), intensified during Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and peaked in the Quit India Movement (1942). Geraldine Forbes illustrates that tens of thousands of women engaged in protests, faced arrests and endured imprisonment, marking an unprecedented chapter in Indian history.⁸ The prison population of women

prisoners was diverse, comprising upper-caste women from educated urban backgrounds involved in nationalism and the women's movement, women from trading and artisan communities engaged in boycott campaigns, widows and older women who found it easier to partake in political activity due to their social status and lower-caste women involved through Congress campaigns in rural areas. This diversity had political significance by mixing women across the strata while strictly maintaining social boundaries outside the prison.⁹ The All-India Women's Conference, established in 1927, played a vital role in mobilising women within the national movement and advocating for the recognition of women political prisoners. It sought to influence both the colonial government and Congress leadership to acknowledge women as political prisoners and grant them appropriate rights and privileges.¹⁰

Official records provide a fragmented view of women's prison experiences, including reports on admissions, releases, health and disciplinary issues. Intelligence files document the political affiliations of notable nationalist women, while correspondence between jail superintendents and provincial governments highlights administrative concerns regarding 'respectable' women in custody.¹¹ Official sources are crucial yet inadequate; they should be analyzed critically and complemented with memoirs, letters, and autobiographical works of women prisoners, which, although scarce, hold significant historical importance. Several aspects of women's prison life, particularly physical conditions, warrant special attention. Female political prisoners reported issues such as overcrowded cells, poor hygiene, food insecurity and lack of basic facilities.¹² The female political prisoners fought to ensure they were recognized as political detainees rather than ordinary criminals.¹³

The third dimension of solidarity and collective action among in-prison women is evident in their mutual support and resistance, chronicled in their memoirs. Women organized their cell space, shared resources and engaged in educational and devotional activities, demonstrating political savvy through coordinated actions such as hunger strikes and refusal of prison labor. Malati Choudhury's memoir about her experiences in the 1930s Cuttack Jail in India exemplifies the formation of a community of resistance within the physical confines of incarceration.¹⁴ The fourth dimension refers to the transformation in the political awareness of women through their experiences of imprisonment in India. In various memoirs and testimonies, these women describe imprisonment as a conversion experience that dismantled their fears, strengthened their resolve and fostered a lasting sense of shared identity post-release.¹⁵

The collective experience of colonial incarceration led to a politics of the body, where women used their physical presence and suffering to assert their identity against both the colonial state and the nationalist movement. This gendered politics highlighted the incarcerated feminine body as a potent symbol in a society concerned with female honour. Consequently, while the colonial state

aimed to dishearten and re-educate these women, it inadvertently empowered them to bear witness to their experiences.¹⁶

Experiences of Odia Women Prisoners during the colonial period

Odisha represents a unique intersection of gender, nationalism, and carceral politics, having gained separate provincial status in 1936 after a long period of Odia cultural nationalism linked to the language movement. The nationalist movement here functioned on two levels: as part of the broader all-India anti-colonial struggle driven by the Indian National Congress and as an Odia subnational movement seeking cultural and administrative recognition, with women's involvement reflecting this duality.¹⁷ The foundations of women's nationalism in Odisha were influenced by Gopabandhu Das, a reformer who prioritized women's welfare and education. His ideals of *seva* (service) and *Tyaga* (sacrifice) empowered women to participate in public life, breaking traditional isolation while remaining aligned with Hindu notions of female virtue through movements like Utkal sammilani¹⁸ and the Satyabadi school.¹⁹

The 1930 Civil Disobedience Movement was pivotal for women's mass participation in Odisha as it encouraged them to engage in activities like picketing foreign cloth shops, manufacturing salt and attending public meetings. District records from Cuttack, Puri and Balasore reveal that women from various social backgrounds participated, although leadership roles were mainly held by upper-caste and middle-class women.²⁰ The article focuses on the lesser-known community of Odia women imprisoned in Odisha during the 1930s and 1940s, emphasizing their political activism compared to more recognised figures from Bengal and Bombay. It aims to document and recover their experiences from the limited historical records available.²¹

The Odisha State Archives in Bhubaneswar contains significant records regarding women political prisoners including individual detainee files, reports on prison conditions and correspondence between local and national governments concerning their management. By 1932, the colonial administration acknowledged the rising number of women in prison, creating a separate category in annual statistics for 'women political' prisoners.²² Cuttack Central Jail served as the main facility for women political prisoners in Odisha, where the women's ward was inadequate due to overcrowding during the Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements. Reports indicated conflicts regarding sleeping space allocation and ongoing disputes between the administration and the prisoners concerning their political status.²³

The account of women's prison life in Odisha is notably captured by Malati Choudhury, a socialist activist imprisoned during the national movement. Her 1982 book, 'My Days in Prison,' offers a detailed analysis of her experiences in Cuttack Jail and is a significant addition to a collection of women's testimonies from the region.²⁴ Choudhury's account of her 1932 arrival at Cuttack Jail highlights the physical conditions, social dynamics and collective resistance

strategies among a diverse group of women, including college students and low-caste individuals, arrested during the Civil Disobedience movement. Initial anxiety gave way to solidarity, as shared experiences of loss of privacy, inadequate food and arbitrary authority from jail staff fostered connections that transcended social boundaries.²⁵

Food in prison served as a significant and charged issue, disregarding caste dietary restrictions. The experience of women from different caste backgrounds eating together was both a challenge to caste propriety and a liberating dissolution of social hierarchy. Choudhury notes that for many women, sharing food across caste lines was a more impactful confrontation with caste ideology than nationalist rhetoric had ever achieved.²⁶ Shailabala Das, a prominent Odia nationalist imprisoned in the 1930s, published her account in the Cuttack newspaper Prajatantra in 1948, complementing Choudhury's memoir. Her reflections focus on the interactions between female inmates and women wardens, highlighting a dynamic of mutual observation and occasional sympathy, leading to secret alliances. Das documents instances of warders who communicated with the outside world, passed messages to inmates' families and overlooked minor breaches of prison rules.²⁷

The British introduced modern penitentiary principles, notably inmate segregation by offences and organised prison design, with roots in Ireland. Saumya Dadoo highlights that this classification system was critical for establishing prisons and influenced British colonial governance through race and gender. Classificatory logics not only managed deviance and criminality but also served as tools for control over indigenous populations. The plight of Odia women prisoners, exemplified by Rama Devi's experience, illustrates this colonial approach. Arrested in 1930, Devi, a prominent figure in the Odisha nationalist movement, received somewhat better treatment due to her social status, yet still faced significant indignities typical of political prisoners. An oral history account reveals her initial fear in prison gradually transformed into unexpected resolve.²⁸

*"I was afraid of the jail door, but once inside, I was no longer afraid of anything. The jail had taken everything from me – my home, my comfort, my family – and I found that once everything was taken, I was left with only my will. And that will, I discovered, was much stronger than I had known."*²⁹

This statement explores the transformative potential of incarceration for nationalist women, highlighting how the loss of social identity supports – such as home and family – forced a deeper self-exploration. This struggle, rather than leading to despair, resulted in a clearer sense of purpose and a liberating decision-making process.³⁰

In 1947, Sarojini Jena, an Odia nationalist, contributed to Odia literature by describing her prison experience in the newspaper Saptahik Samaj. She portrayed the prison as a metaphorical hermit Ashram, a space for withdrawal and inner growth, free from worldly distractions, where the prisoner could

reflect on her convictions.³¹ In her memoir, Choudhury describes how the prison served as an educational institution for Odia women, where more educated inmates provided informal literacy classes and teachings on national history and civil disobedience. The jail staff accepted and sometimes encouraged these activities, recognizing their usefulness in reducing tension and maintaining order. These efforts were politically significant, enhancing nationalist education and contributing to the movement's human capital.

The colonial administration in Odisha recognized the propaganda implications of women's imprisonment. In 1933, the Odisha Legislative Council discussed the conditions of women political prisoners in Cuttack Jail, urging the government to differentiate between political and criminal prisoners and improve conditions for the former. This discussion marked a significant acknowledgement of the political ramifications concerning the treatment of women political prisoners. In 1942, during the Quit India Movement in Odisha, there was a significant increase in the arrest and imprisonment of women. The movement became more women-centred, with the involvement of younger women, students and women from lower caste and rural backgrounds. This diversification is reflected in prison records, which indicate a rise in collective protests, organized hunger strikes, work refusals and collective acts of disobedience, suggesting a more developed political approach to incarceration influenced by previous experiences.³²

Negotiation, Gender and Power

The transition of Odia women from domestic roles to public political protest involved complex negotiations with families, communities, and the nationalist movement, influenced by Hindu domesticity and nationalist ideals. Prison played a unique role as both a stark form of political engagement and a space linked to domestic life, characterised by seclusion, regulated routine and collective daily activities.³³ The dominant ideology for women in early twentieth-century Odisha was that of the Pativrata,³⁴ which defined them as faithful wives whose identities were entirely dependent on their husbands and homes. This ideology was both externally imposed and internally adopted through religion, literature and everyday women's lives. The nationalist movement did not openly challenge this ideology; rather, it coexisted with it, expanding the notion of women's service and sacrifice into the nationalist narrative.³⁵

This extension formed the foundation of Gandhi's nation-building movement, as he mobilized women by redefining nationalist activity as service (*seva*), sacrifice (*tyaga*) and nonviolent resistance (*ahimsa*). This reframing aligned with idealized femininity in Hindu tradition, allowing women participating in events like the Salt March to view their actions as an extension of their roles within the national family.³⁶ This Gandhian model in Odisha was shaped by Gopabandhu Das's legacy, emphasising social service as a religious duty, which empowered women to engage publicly. The Mahila Samitis, established by

Congress workers, created frameworks for women's participation in nationalist efforts while maintaining their community ties, mitigating social disapproval.³⁷

Courting arrest was a new form of voluntary confinement that differed from traditional activism like meetings or marches. It signifies a woman's bold assertion of political agency, challenging societal norms associated with masculinity and traditional gender roles, transcending conventional ideas of service and sacrifice.³⁸ The responses of families to women's decisions to court arrest varied significantly. Some families showed active support, framing imprisonment within a nationalist context as a source of honour. In contrast, others felt ambivalent, feeling pride in the women's political courage while fearing the negative social repercussions of imprisonment in reputation-sensitive communities. A minority of families outright opposed the decisions, exerting social and emotional pressure to dissuade women from facing jail.³⁹

Choudhury's memoir details a significant family negotiation before her arrest, marked by emotional conflict with her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law's concerns centred on social standing and the children's futures due to Choudhury's impending imprisonment. Choudhury reframed these concerns by asserting that true family honour involved serving the nation, contending that a mother who does not act against oppression is failing her duty. This perspective blended domestic values with nationalist sentiment, ultimately proving persuasive, though not fully embraced.⁴⁰

The prison served as a site of negotiation between women prisoners and the administration, particularly regarding their classification as 'political' rather than 'criminal'. This distinction affected various conditions of incarceration, including sleeping arrangements and food quality. The administration resisted this demand due to concerns that recognizing political status would validate nationalist activities. The confrontation strategies of women prisoners included hunger strikes, notable for their dramatic nature and documentation. An example from Cuttack Jail in 1932 involved a collective refusal of food, where women demanded the right to prepare their own meals, reflecting issues of food quality, caste purity, and autonomy. The administration's initial dismissiveness turned to anxiety and eventual concession, allowing prisoners to supplement rations with family-prepared food. The confrontation between nationalistic women prisoners and the colonial government involved representational elements. Key to this was the writing and sharing of accounts of prison experiences through various media, which contributed to carceral politics. Each memoir and testimonial published in the nationalist press served as a part of a counter-archive of resistance, aiming to redefine the meaning of women's incarceration.⁴¹

This representational politics was employed by the nationalist press in Odisha, covering the arrest of women activists in Odia-language newspapers like *Samaj*, *Prajatantra*⁴² and *Saptahik Samaj*. Their letters were published when possible, highlighting their confinement conditions. This coverage aimed to

foster public compassion, discourage abuse by exposing prison conditions, and increase the visibility of women as political subjects, making their actions meaningful. Caste played a significant and complex role in helping women transition from domestic roles to public spaces. Upper-caste women faced considerable resistance from family and community but possessed higher social capital, which could be enhanced through imprisonment. Conversely, lower-caste women and those from fringe communities experienced a less severe social impact from incarceration, with fewer opportunities for nationalist martyrdom, complicating the collective narrative of female sacrifice in nationalism.

Prison as a Place for liberation

Sarala Devi, incarcerated in the Presidency Jail for Women in Vellore, wrote a letter to her husband Bhagirathi Mohapatra on June 23, 1930, where she shared her experiences. Uniquely addressing him as "Dear Bhagu Babu," she reflected on her self-improvement efforts and disciplined lifestyle aimed at bolstering her contribution to the national freedom movement.

"You may be under the impression that I am wasting a considerable amount of my time." I am engaged in the study of English. The others are equally occupied with the study of Hindi and English. Some engage in spinning while others practice music. Regular classes are being held in both English and Hindi, with the former taught by my friend Mrs. Lakshmiapati, B.A., and the latter by my esteemed friend Durgabai, a clever, attractive, and dynamic young woman from Andhra, who was the leader of the Satyagraha campaign in Madras.⁴³ Sarala Devi completed her education until the seventh grade and composed the letter in English. While securing national freedom was a revered endeavor, Sarala Devi also vigorously advocated for women's rights, including autonomy over their own bodies, as a fundamental necessity for the emerging national identity.

In her seminal essay "Narira Dabi," she cites Justice Meccard's ruling:

"Where she asserts that a husband does not own his wife's body, emphasizing her autonomy and rights. She has the freedom to choose her profession, political affiliations, and reproductive decisions without male control. She champions women's independence and their ability to act on their desires, arguing that the essence of marriage should be based on mutual compassion, understanding, forgiveness and shared morals rather than strict rules. Marriage should focus on partnership rather than ownership."

Conclusion

The colonial prison was a site of contestation, confrontation, and negotiation for nationalist women in Odisha. It was the space where the conflicting aspects of the national project in providing a hymn to the valour of women and, at the same time, continuing to perpetuate patriarchal institutions were worked out with specific intensity and where the consequences of women engaging in politics were more than the nationalist leadership had foreseen or intended.

This has particular importance to how the Odia women in prison illuminate how the wider processes of women's nationalism were mediated by a particular geographical setup, one characterised by a local culture of nationalism, a particular tradition of social reform and a particular social structure of caste, classes and gender that conditioned the possibilities and limitations of female political action. Their life inside the prison told many stories and developed narratives on women understanding the notions of self, autonomy of decision making, national development and more importantly, confronting and negotiating with the colonial authority.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

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3. Foucault, Michel. 'The Dangerous Individual', in Lawrence D. Kritzraan (ed.), Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, (trans. Alan Sheridan and others.). New York. Routledge (1990): 142.
4. Ibid.
5. Kumari, Jayawardena. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 4-8. Jayawardena's foundational study situates South Asian women's political participation within a broader anti-colonial framework, arguing that nationalist movements both mobilised and constrained women simultaneously.
6. Radha Kumar. "The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990." New Delhi: Kali for Women, (1993): 75-80
7. Women in Prisons (2009), a report by the State Resource Centre for Women, Odisha.
8. Forbes, Geraldine. "Women in Modern India." *The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. IV, no.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 122-128. Forbes provides a meticulous narrative of women's participation across Civil Disobedience, Salt March, and Quit India campaigns, with attention to regional variation.
9. Bala, Usha and Sharma, Anshu. "Indian Women Freedom Fighters." 1857-1947 (New Delhi: Manohar, 1986), 35-38. The authors compiled biographical profiles of over 150 women freedom fighters, many from provincial backgrounds, whose contributions had been systematically overlooked in nationalist historiography.
10. Basu, Aparna and Ray, Bharati. "Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference, 1927-1990", New Delhi: Manohar (1990): 55-60. The AIWC provided an organizational structure through which provincial women, including Odiyas, could articulate their grievances and coordinate action with the national movement.
11. Home Department (Political), Government of Orissa, *Proceedings of Political Prisoners, 1930-1942*, Odisha State Archives, Bhubaneswar (hereafter OSA). These proceedings document the admission, treatment, and release of political prisoners, and contain specific references to women prisoners that have been underutilized in

existing scholarship.

12. Surendra Nath Bhattacharya, Utkal Amani Gopabandhu Das (Cuttack: Orissa Sahitya Academy, 1969), 90–98. Gopabandhu Das's philosophy of seva and sacrifice provided a spiritual legitimization for women's public engagement, navigating the tension between domesticity and nationalism within Odisha's specific cultural context.
13. Mahapatra, Manorama. "Women in the Nationalist Movement of Orissa." *Odisha Historical Research Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1984): 44–56. This pioneering article remains the most detailed account of Oriya women's organised participation, drawing on district-level records and oral testimonies.
14. Choudhury, Malati. 'My Days in Prison,' in *Sree Swatantra Sangrama (Women's Freedom Struggle)*, ed. Saraswati Devi (Cuttack: Dharitri, 1982): 12–30. Choudhury's memoir is one of the few first-person accounts of prison experience by an Oriya nationalist woman; it details conditions at Cuttack Central Jail and the gendered nature of official harassment.
15. Mukherjee, Prabhat. *History of the Oriya People* (Cuttack: Utkal Sahitya Press, 1960): 210–220. Though the account privileges male leaders, scattered references to women's committees (mahila samitis) and their coordination with district Congress organizations are historically valuable.
16. Das, Shailabala. 'Kara Jibana' (Prison Life), *Prajatantra* (Cuttack), 12 August 1948. This autobiographical sketch published in the Odia-language newspaper, details the daily routine, humiliations, and acts of solidarity that characterized women's prison experience.
17. Sinha, Mrinalini. 'The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern: Rhetoric, Agency, and the Sarda Act in Late Colonial India,' in *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton (London: Routledge, 1999): 207–221.
18. The Utkal Sammilani (Utkal Union Conference) was founded in December 1903 by Madhusudan Das to unite Odia-speaking regions into a single province.
19. Haksar, Nandita. *Framing Geelani, Hanging Afzal: Patriotism in the Time of Terror* (New Delhi: Promilla, 2010): 45–52. Though Haksar's focus is the postcolonial period, her analysis of women's prison testimony as a contested genre illuminates the methodological challenges of reading colonial carceral archives.
20. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 130–135. Forbes draws on reports filed by the All India Women's Conference to document systematic differences in the treatment of women political prisoners across provinces, including Bengal, Madras, and Orissa.
21. *Proceedings of the Orissa Legislative Council, 1933, Vol. III, OSA*. Debates over prison conditions for women politicians reveal the colonial administration's anxiety about the spectacle of respectable women in jail and its attempts to manage public perception.
22. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, 55–62. Sarkar's discussion of 'patriarchal bargain' — the strategic use of domestic virtue to claim public authority — is directly applicable to Oriya nationalist women who deployed the idiom of the devoted wife and mother to legitimise their political activities.
23. Choudhury, Malati. 'My Days in Prison,' 18–22. Choudhury recounts that women prisoners collectively refused to perform labour designated as 'criminal' work, insisting on their status as 'political' rather than 'ordinary' prisoners — a distinction

the jail administration was reluctant to concede.

24. Arnold, 'The Colonial Prison,' 160–165. Arnold notes that hunger strikes were a form of 'body politics' that exploited the colonial state's dual anxiety: the spectacle of respectable persons starving in government custody, and the medical consequences of forced feeding.
25. Inspector General of Prisons to Chief Secretary, Government of Orissa, 14 March 1932, Home (Political) Dept., File No. 227/32, OSA. The letter reports on a protest by women prisoners at Cuttack Jail who refused to eat prison food, demanding to cook their own meals.
26. Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 95–102. Jayawardena identifies the tension between feminism and nationalism as constitutive of women's political subjectivity in colonial Asia, arguing that nationalist movements frequently absorbed women's aspirations without fundamentally altering patriarchal structures.
27. Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 72–80. Banerjee's analysis of militant nationalism's gendered subtext is valuable for understanding why women's carceral protest posed a distinctive challenge to colonial authority.
28. Das, 'Kara Jibana.' Das describes informal education sessions organized by women prisoners, through which younger and less educated women were taught literacy, nationalist songs, and the principles of swaraj — practices that transformed incarceration into a form of political apprenticeship.
29. Rama Devi Chaudhuri, interview by Manorama Mahapatra, Cuttack, 1978, cited in Mahapatra, 'Women in the Nationalist Movement of Orissa,' 52. Rama Devi, one of Odisha's most celebrated nationalist women, described her first arrest as a moment of liberation: 'I was afraid of the jail door, but once inside, I was no longer afraid of anything.'
30. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 130–137. Chatterjee's concept of the 'spiritual domain' helps explain why women's education in prison was itself a political act: it expanded the inner domain of the nation while remaining legible within the framework of cultural reproduction.
31. Jena, Sarojini. 'Andharara Aloka' (Light in the Darkness), *Saptahik Samaj* (Cuttack), 5 January 1947. Jena's article, written in Odia, reflects on prison as a space of spiritual purification and national regeneration, drawing on the metaphor of the hermit's ashram.
32. Mahapatra, 'Women in the Nationalist Movement of Orissa,' 50–54. Mahapatra identifies several Oriya women — including Sarojini Jena, Rama Devi Chaudhuri, and Kokila Bala Das — who emerged as significant public figures following their imprisonment, using their carceral experience as a form of symbolic capital.
33. Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 82–88. Kumar argues that imprisonment created a new form of feminist solidarity that cut across caste and class lines, as women from different backgrounds shared cells, meals, and the daily humiliations of carceral life.
34. Pativrata, one who has taken a vow of loyalty to her husband.
35. Pati, Biswamoy. *Identity, Hegemony, Resistance*, 28–35. The Oriya case is significant because of the strong presence of upper-caste Hindu women in the nationalist

- movement, whose class and caste backgrounds shaped their relationship to domestic ideology and to lower-caste women, prisoners.
36. Sarkar, Lotika. 'Women and the Law,' Seminar 264 (August 1981): 18–26. Lotika Sarkar's review of the legal status of women prisoners highlights the absence of any formal provision distinguishing political from criminal prisoners, which meant that women's demands for political status were always contested through practice rather than law.
 37. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 195–200. The prison's function of 'normalising judgment' – comparing, differentiating, and ranking individual subjects – was complicated by the presence of women political prisoners who refused the identity of 'criminal' and insisted on a counter-identity as patriots.
 38. Agarwal, Bina. "A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994): 22–30. Agarwal's concept of 'bargaining power' – the capacity of women to negotiate within and against patriarchal institutions – provides a useful framework for analysing how women prisoners navigated carceral space.
 39. Pandey, Gyanendra. 'In Défense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today,' Representations 37 (Winter 1992): 27–55. Pandey's methodological reflection on fragments of evidence in subaltern history informs this chapter's use of prison memoirs, letters, and official correspondence as imperfect but indispensable sources.
 40. Choudhury, Malati. 'My Days in Prison,' 25–30. Choudhury recounts the practice of singing nationalist songs in the prison yard as a form of collective defiance that demoralized jail authorities and raised the morale of prisoners. The songs drew on the devotional idiom of Odia Bhakti poetry, sacralizing the act of resistance.
 41. Sinha, "Colonial Masculinity", 28–35. The colonial feminization of Indian men paradoxically elevated women who demonstrated 'manly' virtues – courage, sacrifice, public speech – as embodiments of national regeneration, creating space for their political authority even within patriarchal nationalism.
 42. Prajatantra, means "democracy", referring to a political system where power is vested in the people. It is composed of Praja (subjects/ people) and Tantra (system/ rule).
 43. See The Lost World of Sarala Devi, Ed. Mohanty, Sachidananda (2016), New Delhi, Oxford University Press, pages 35–43; Basanti: Writing the New Woman: Nine Authors, One Novel, translated from Odia, Mohapatra Himanshu S. and St. Pierre, Paul (2019), New Delhi: OUP; Also see Mohanty, Sachidananda (1994), "Rebati's Sisters: Search for Identity through Education", India International Centre Quarterly, Volume 21, No. 4, Winter.