

Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta, eds. 2022. *Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan. 356 pp. 1210 (paperback—ISBN: 9789354421884)

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Erving Goffman has called the prison a total institution, that is, a space where all functions of everyday life are governed in one institution, cut off from the wider community (Davies 1989). This conceptualisation underscores a lack of agency for individuals within the total institution. However, is it possible that total institutions are not as strictly defined and may allow for negotiations? Can the goals of security and reform in prisons be reconciled? These are a few questions that *Women, Incarcerated: Narratives from India*, an anthology edited by Mahuya Bandyopadhyay and Rimple Mehta, reflects on. It presents narratives of women prisoners to discuss, metaphorically, the accessories that bind them, from bangles to handcuffs; and the ways in which they challenge and negotiate through them. The editors, both of whom have extensively contributed to the subjects of everyday life and negotiations in prison, call the book a dialogue between academics and practitioners. Hence, it moves from the experiential to governance issues and brings to fore narratives of resistance, the way institutional spaces may be confronted, and the construction of humane prisons as a challenge of governance.

In the introduction, the editors challenge the binary between invisibilisation and memorialisation, inherent in the construction of the woman criminal; viewed as either merely weak accomplices or as demonic figures by the criminal justice system (CJS) and society alike. This is achieved through reflecting on the continuities in women's lives as they pass through intimate (families, marriage, communities) and carceral institutions (prisons, courts, police). Continuities are visible both in the experiences and positions of women within these institutions as well as the construction of institutions themselves. Mahuya Bandyopadhyay's chapter presents narratives of women's pre-prison lives, and identifies the continuous presence of oppression and betrayal. Shereen Sadiq reviews the ways in which ideas of honour, purity and pollution frame the lives of women in families and marriage and hence influence their criminal activities. Sadaf Modak stresses on the gendered construction of the prison itself, as its practices

control women's bodies and uphold expectations of appropriate feminine behaviour such as using a *dupatta* to cover one's head in front of a male prison official. While there are continuities, the prison presents unique challenges. Madhurima Dhanuka outlines the ways in which the prison impacts women's physical and mental health, economic situation, and social standing. This is necessary to note as imprisonment causes irreparable damage in women's lives, while leaving them with little support, also depending upon their relationships with their families.

Yet, women may not only be passive or conditioned objects that they are made out to be. Mangala Honawar and Vijay Raghavan trace the lives of women recidivists, exerting power and negotiating with prison officials. Kanupriya Sharma's chapter too highlights women's negotiations with love to not only construct a sense of domesticity, but also gain benefits from relationships, for instance with prison guards. Here, love and personal relationships are portrayed as ways of affirming femininity and navigating honour, which are continually challenged in carceral institutions, infamous for stripping women of their dignity.

Uma Chakravarti and Sharmila Purkayastha's historical accounts of torture by the post-Independence Indian state provide an arena to understand the state's role and approach towards dissent in contemporary times too, such as in arrests of students, protestors, and journalists as they question the state. Testimonies of violence faced by women political prisoners situate them at a crossroads of courage and fear—a duality of emotions felt by women inmates as they pass through carceral institutions and resist them. In my research on women's experiences of facing legal trials (Sikri 2021, unpublished), a woman who was acquitted of her crime, discussed her fear while stressing on the power of writing as resistance. She said, '*Mujhe darr lagta tha lekin main kalam se ladhti thi*' ('I was scared but I used to fight with a pen').

Such negotiations exist at the backdrop of an ordered carceral logic which organises women's everyday life through the management of time and space. Rimple Mehta discusses women's feelings of alienation from time as they metaphorically talk of the absence of wall clocks in their barracks. Here, the linearity of time is challenged, in so far as its imagination oscillates between the present, past and an imagined future.

The collaborative nature of the book brings to light multiple stakeholders within the CJS, while placing them in differential positions of power. Upneet Lalli's chapter discussed a protest by prisoners, after a woman inmate was

brutally murdered by the officials in Byculla prison in Mumbai, 2017. Penelope Tong's chapter points out that the prison officials and civil society organisations function at a distance from each other, yet there is a possibility of synergy among them, particularly in rehabilitation measure to go beyond existing band-aid solutions. This is evidenced in B.D. Sharma's chapter. His brave acceptance of being wrong about prisoners deserving an undignified life prior to his work in prisons, and finally introducing culture therapy for rehabilitation, brings hope to the reader. Yet, interventions also run the risk of putting dual pressure on the prisoners as the continuities of control in intimate and carceral institutions become more apparent.

Written at the backdrop of the pandemic, this work presents itself to a 'new normal' whereby the prison system has faced significant challenges. Yet, the pandemic has been instrumental in bringing to light the carceral institution's dismissal of women's needs and the way in which it normalises a state of exception as a governing paradigm.

This book is a germinal work that seeks to present culturally and historically grounded narratives on everyday life and governance in Indian prisons, written in an accessible manner. It provokes the reader with questions on women's criminality, realisations about the self and personal relationships, but most importantly a desperation for things to change. At the same time, readers would have benefitted to know more about the ways in which prison governance differs across states, depending upon their socio-political conditions and as a reflection of cultural values. This book will interest readers from varied fields of criminology, sociology, social work, women studies, law, and public policy. While spaces designed for 'hearings' do not, the book is intended for anyone who is interested in listening to women.

#### REFERENCES

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*Jawaharlal Nehru University*  
*New Delhi*  
*Email: smritiskr@gmail.com*

SMRITI SIKRI