

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 2 Lecture 15
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous lectures, we have been exploring the transformation of various social and governmental institutions under the British Raj. In today's class, we are going to explore the transformation that another major institution in the colonial period underwent. This institution is none other than prison and the system of punishment.

The primary text that we will be using in this lecture is an essay titled "The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge, and Penology in Nineteenth-Century India" by David Arnold. This article examines the transformation and function of the prison system in India under British colonial rule. In the essay, Arnold argues that the prisons in colonial India were not just places for the confinement of culprits, but it also served as an instrument for exerting power, gathering knowledge, and attaining control over the indigenous population.

As opposed to the ancient methods of punishment, the modern systems of punishments like imprisonment were supposedly corrective mechanisms. That is to say, the modern modes of punishments aimed to correct the individuals who have functioned against the established order. This was not the case with the premodern modes of punishments. The pre-modern system of punishments were not designed to reform the individuals. They on the other hand tortured and inflicted pain upon the individuals as the retribution of the crimes they have committed. To highlight the change in the notion of punishment from physical torture to psychological discipline, Arnold gives an excellent example from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* opens with a brutal depiction of the public execution of Robert-François Damiens in 1757. Damiens who had attempted to assassinate King Louis XV was sentenced to death. But his punishment was designed not merely to end his life, but to demonstrate the absolute power of monarchy through the most excruciating suffering imaginable. In this particular event, the focus of the punishment was not correction, but retribution. In other words, through the process of punishment, the aggrieved party aims to take revenge on the culprit.

Over time, the idea of punishment underwent a radical change, shifting its focus away from punishment to correction. There was a change from the public spectacle of physical suffering to a subtler form of control, such as imprisonment, surveillance, and the correction of behaviour through institutional discipline. In modern systems of punishment, the focus is no longer on physically harming the body, but on curing the soul or reform the individual. As Foucault notes, the act of punishment should necessarily shape a person's emotions, thoughts and desires.

According to Foucault, the aim of punishment in the modern world is to discipline the individuals. For Foucault, the notion of modern prison discipline is best represented by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. The panopticon is the design of an institutional building which allows all the prisoners in the institution to be observed by a single corrections officer, without letting the inmates know that they are being watched. The architecture consists of a round building with an inspection house at its centre. From this inspection house at the

centre, the officers are able to watch the inmates. It is true that it is impossible for a single guard to observe all the prisoners in the jail. But the very structure of the building creates a sense of fear in the prisoners that they are being watched. Since the inmates cannot know when they are being watched, they are constantly under the fear of being watched anytime. This motivates them to act properly in the prison. The prisoners are effectively compelled to perform self-regulation all the time. Foucault calls panopticon a “marvellous machine” that instills in prisoners a constant awareness of being watched.

However, the conditions essential for the emergence of the modern prison, as conceptualized by Foucault, were conspicuously absent in colonial India. In colonial prisons, what we encounter are instances of resistance, as opposed to discipline emerging out of the fear of being constantly watched. This clearly indicates that prisoners in the colonial jails in India were far from the "docile bodies" described by Foucault. A closer examination of nineteenth century Indian prisons shows that such acts of resistance were frequent even before colonial jails witnessed protests associated with the nationalist movements. Anand Yang in his article “Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia” records one such movement of resistance in Bihar, where inmates in 1842 and 1845 vehemently opposed the introduction of a common messing system. Before the 1840s, the prisoners in the Bengal Presidency, who were supported by a small monetary allowance, were allowed to purchase condiments and cook their own food in designated areas of the prison yard. This arrangement enabled them to practice their caste-based dietary norms and helped them escape from the monotony of prison life. But, from a very strict administrative perspective, this system led to disorder and operational challenges and the prison authorities decided to introduce a common messing system in the prison. This innovation sparked a lot of resistance and eventually a riot in the jail. But, in spite of the resistance, the state ultimately succeeded in implementing the new messing system in the jail.

But the fact that the relatively easy implementation of the new messing system in the jail in Bihar did not mean that the same was the situation in other jails also. In the neighboring North-Western Provinces, resistance to the introduction of the common messing system was even more prolonged than in Bihar. There, the implementation of the messing system significantly got delayed by months. In many other jails, it was delayed by years. You would be surprised to note that as late as 1854, the common messing system could be implemented only in eight out of the forty prisons in the province. In five others, it was applied only to new inmates or those from lower castes. Finally, as a result of a riot at Allahabad Jail in May 1846, the government decided that enforcing the messing system by compulsion should not be forcefully implemented, since it risked provoking serious unrest or bloodshed.

In his essay Arnold cites a number of occasions where prisoners overpowered their guards, took over the jails, and temporarily dictated terms to the prison authorities. Many prison officers openly admitted that they had little control over the daily operations of the prisons, which were "almost entirely in the hands of the convicts themselves." There was no proper system in place to ensure that correctional practices were carried out effectively. With no trained supervisory staff and senior officers burdened with paperwork, the actual management of the prison was left to poorly paid and often corrupt subordinates. In many cases, even the warders were chosen from among the prisoners, further weakening any real effort at discipline or reform.

While the moral transformation and correction of the prisoner was the major goal of prisons in Europe, prisons served a different function altogether in the colonies. As far as the colonial masters were concerned, prisons often functioned as an excellent site to understand the Indian

society. The bodies of the prisoners were often used for medical experiments and studies. In colonial jails, the social hierarchies were often reproduced. Particularly, the caste norms were strictly observed. The inmates often bore visible markers of their caste identity in the form of their clothing and hairstyles. Dalit prisoners were expected to do tasks traditionally associated with their caste, such as sweeping. Thus, the spatial and disciplinary logic of modern penology, envisioned by British officials, was totally subverted. As opposed to experiencing confinement as an alienating as well as disciplinary force, prisoners reinforced familiar social structures and divisions. Above all, many early jails did not have distinctive architectural elements necessary for their function as spaces of incarceration. Unlike European prisons, which focused on discipline and surveillance, colonial prisons were closely linked to broader social and economic concerns. Authorities studied the prisoners in the jails to understand caste, disease, labor, and food habits. The treatment of prisoners reflected the larger power dynamics between the British rulers and the Indian population. In colonial India, prisons did not really intend to reform the prisoners morally, as in Europe.

The colonial prisons, more than just places for punishment and discipline, were also laboratories for medical research. British doctors appointed in the jails often used prisoners to collect health data, conduct in-depth study about diseases. They even performed medical experiments on the bodies of the inmates. Thus the native prisons in colonial prisons also became a key source of information about cholera, which was spreading like wild fire both in the colonies and Europe. But it is interesting to note that the colonial prison which used the native bodies to generate and advance knowledge in medical science consciously stayed away from issues of diet, health, and sanitation. The authorities in charge of the colonial prisons did not take any active responsibility to educate prisoners. Health alone was the mark of a sound prison system.

This clearly suggests that colonial prisons were solely interested in using prisoners as test subjects in the laboratory, as opposed to genuinely improving their well-being. While they conducted medical experiments and collected health data, they did not focus on educating prisoners about the best health practices and the importance of improving their diet, or following hygiene. This clearly highlights the exploitative nature of the colonial prison system. The colonial prison in India was less about reform and correction, and more about control and extracting knowledge for the benefit of colonial medical science. A major impediment in enhancing the knowledge about medical science was the difficulty of getting dead bodies for medical research. While many Indians strongly opposed autopsies due to religious and personal reasons, autopsies were mandatorily performed on the dead bodies of the prisoners. The post-mortems on dead prisoners was routine affair in colonial prisons. In fact, by the 1860s, every prisoner who died had to undergo an autopsy. The Bengal Jail Manual even suggested that this would prevent prisoners from faking their deaths to escape. Arnold points out that “these post-mortems facilitated the acquisition of medical knowledge about diseases like typhoid, where diagnosis on the basis of external signs and symptoms was unreliable.”

In addition, in all these activities, prisons also helped British doctors to conduct medical treatments that people outside often resisted. A case in point is the vaccination against smallpox. Smallpox vaccination was mandatory for prisoners. Arnold cites a very interesting example of a man from Punjab in this regard. A man was jailed in Punjab in 1911 for refusing to vaccinate his daughter. But he himself eventually ended up being vaccinated in the jail. Some of the earliest trials of vaccines for cholera, plague, and typhoid were also done on prisoners. In 1894, the Russian scientist Waldemar Haffkine tested his cholera vaccine on

prisoners at Gaya Jail in Bihar. Later, in 1897, half the prisoners at Bombay's House of Correction were given an experimental plague vaccine. The government feared that news of forced vaccinations in jails might cause protests, but they still pushed forward, using prisoners, plantation workers, and soldiers as test subjects.

Colonial prisons were also used to test quinine, which was a medicine for malaria. The colonial prisons were often thought to be the most ideal places for testing medicines, since prisoners could be given controlled doses and closely monitored. While many people outside resisted quinine because of its pungent taste and side effects, the authorities imposed the medicine on the prisoners. In short the jails became the ideal testing ground for colonial authorities to prove the effectiveness and authenticity of medicines and vaccines without much opposition. This shows how colonial prisons were not just about controlling people—they were also tools for medical experiments, often ignoring the prisoners' rights and cultural beliefs. While prisons in Europe were focused on discipline and reform, in India, they played a much larger role in shaping colonial medical policies and controlling the population

Prisons were also used to study Indian diets. In jails, the prison officials closely observed what prisoners ate to compare their diet with the food habits of laborers. The officials measured the nutritional value of Indian and European diets in order to see the differences. Although it may sound very harmless, this research had a bigger purpose. During famines, the government conveniently used the prison diet studies in order to decide how much food or money should be given to starving people. The results of these studies were used to figure out the bare minimum food needed to keep people alive. Prison diet studies also fuelled colonial ideas about race. British officials used this data to make so-called "scientific" claims about physical differences between Indians and Europeans—and even between different Indian communities. This shows how colonial prisons were not just about control and punishment but also about producing knowledge that justified British rule.

The prisoners in the colonial jails were also used in the form of productive labour. This further shows that the colonial prison system in India never ever focused on reforming prisoners or changing their mindset. The use of the inmates in the jails as the productive labour was not to reduce overcrowding in jails. Conversely, it was a way to use human labour for essential construction work free of cost. Arnold points out that in the 1830s, approximately 13,000 convicts in Bengal worked in road construction. Prisoners were also forced to do many other odd jobs like clearing riverbeds, digging irrigation canals, and even building their own prisons. Indian prisoners were even sent to Singapore to build lighthouses, a cathedral, and the Government House. The transportation of the prisoners was also a common scene. Many Indian convicts were sent to places like Penang, Singapore, and the Andaman Islands. These prisoners became a cheap, controlled labour force in areas where local workers were hard to find. The Andaman penal settlement, for example, wasn't just a prison—it was a forced colony. It was created because there weren't enough laborers willing to settle there. By the late 1830s, the British started to discourage the employment of prisoners for outdoor labor. The primary reason for this was that the work outside the jail often made discipline harder to enforce. It gave the prisoners ample opportunities to talk to the public and execute their escape. This did not mean the abandonment of the idea of using prison labourers for work. The prisoners were then employed for the work inside, especially for the industrial work. Arnold's observation merits attention here. According to him, "The main attraction for the state was that by turning jails into "schools of industry," prisoners contributed substantially toward the cost of their own incarceration and produced, often for the state itself, high-quality goods and services" (164). In short, beyond controlling behavior,

prisons played a key role in managing labor under colonial rule.

The colonial prison in India was a deeply contested and contradictory space. While British administrators sought to impose a regime of discipline, uniformity, and institutional surveillance inspired by emerging European models of penal reform, the actual functioning of Indian jails revealed a far more complex and uneven reality. The Foucauldian ideal of the prison as a site for producing "docile bodies" through surveillance and normalization largely failed to materialize in the colonial context. Instead, prisons in India often reproduced the very social hierarchies—particularly those of caste and religion—that the colonial regime nominally sought to neutralize within the disciplinary framework.

Caste distinctions shaped daily life in prison, influencing food, labor, dress, and spatial arrangements. The introduction of reforms like the common messing system, which aimed to break caste-based divisions and assert administrative control, met with widespread resistance, sometimes erupting into riots. Such episodes of defiance—far from isolated—point to a persistent and significant opposition to colonial penal authority, even in the supposedly totalizing space of the prison. Rather than sites of internalized discipline, colonial prisons were arenas of negotiation, resistance, and compromise. Moreover, infrastructural and administrative limitations—such as inadequate staffing, poor surveillance capabilities, and repurposed architectural spaces—further undermined the possibility of implementing a truly modern carceral regime. The colonial state's investment in the prison was shaped less by ideals of reform and more by concerns of control, racialized governance, and deterrence. In short, jails in colonial India did not reflect the coherent, disciplinary institution envisioned by European theorists. Instead, they emerged as fractured and contested spaces, where the logics of empire, resistance from below, and the persistence of indigenous social structures fundamentally reshaped the experience and meaning of incarceration.