

Women in Prison: Civil Disobedience Movement in Malabar – 1930-34

Shumais. U

Doctoral Fellow
Department of History
University of Calicut, Kerala
shumais.u@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper examines women political prisoners in colonial Malabar during civil disobedience movement. As the colonial state used prison to punish criminals and to confine its political opponents including men and women, the present paper focuses on the entry of Kerala women to political life during 1930-34. The paper analyses the prison life of this women as the ABC classification resulted in multiple experiences to prisoners as some to some it was a blessing while to majority it was a curse. The paper concludes by locating their post prison life.

Keywords: Prison, Gandhi, Civil Disobedience, Political Prisoner, women.

Introduction

Modern prison system originated in Europe during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The emergence of modern prison in England was directly related with the changing role of the modern state as an aftermath of the industrial revolution. All new disciplinary institution emerged in this period like the Hospital, School, Lunatic Asylum and prison. All of these, more or less shared the structure and functions of the Factory (Ignatieff, 1977:214-215). In India, prison system as a form of punishment was a colonial innovation but prison existed as a place of confinement of those awaiting trial and various kinds of punishments from the time of Emperor Asoka (Arnold, 2007:147). Thus, in India, imprisonment as a form of punishment can be regarded as a colonial innovation. With the transfer of Malabar from Tipu Sultan by the treaty of Srirangapatanam in 1792, the British established their new judicial system and a new punitive mechanism. The British banned the traditional practice of mutilation of human body as a method of punishment. The major forms of punishment they practiced were death by hanging, transportation, fines, confiscation of property etc. Imprisonment as a form of punishment in Malabar, as in other parts of India, too

was a colonial innovation (Innes, 1997:392).

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* is considered to be a path breaking study on modern prisons. The work starts with the description of the public execution of Damien in festive mode at Paris in 1757. He was wearing nothing, the flesh was torn out from different parts of his body, including chest, arms, and thighs and so on, molten lead was poured along with boiling oil, burning resin and sulphur. These were melted together on his body. This body was drawn and quartered by horses and later the body was consumed by fire and was reduced to ashes (Foucault, 1977:3). Eighty years later in the 1830's the punishment was imprisonment, where prisoners led a disciplined life of solitary confinement, labour, chapel. Foucault states two main features in this new prison system. One was that the festive mode of punishment at public place was shifted to prison where punishment was carried in private without any torture or ceremony. Secondly, the medieval punishment had targeted the body but it was replaced by 'soul' in imprisonment (Foucault, 1977:3-11). The disciplining of the soul could turn the behaviour of a person and it creates a self-controlled body where no external force was required. This new prison system was directly related with the change in political power where the state understood that, 'it was more efficient and profitable in terms of economy of power to place people under surveillance rather than keeping them to some exemplary penalty'. (Foucault, 1980:38-39).

Jeremy Bentham's work *Panopticon* or 'inspection house' published in 1791, put forward the panopticon concept in prison. Panopticon was an architectural concept in which the wardens were located at the central tower of prison and from there it was possible to see all inmates of prison while the prisoner never knows whether he is watched at one moment or not but he is sure that he is watched which forced the prisoner to self discipline without exercising any external force (Foucault, 1977:201). Foucault considers panopticon as the perfect example of power knowledge operations on human body.

Foucault raises a question why prison still continues as a major form of punishment from the last quarter of eighteenth century. He states two major reasons – firstly, the disciplining and other mechanisms of prisons have become deeply rooted in the society in general and, secondly, it carried out 'certain very precise functions' (Foucault, 1977:271). That is, for the modern state prison was not only a punitive mechanism but also a tool of political domination over the society.

In the concluding section named 'the carceral', Foucault analyses the disciplinary roles played by other institutions in the society such as the army, school, hospital, factory and family. Thus most of the disciplinary mechanisms were used not only over prisoners but also on the non-offenders.

Most of the historians who have worked on colonial prison in India hold the view that Indian prison was far away from Foucault's concept of discipline and panopticon. Anand A Yang in his article 'Disciplining Naives: Prisons and prisoners in Nineteenth Century India', written by analysing the messing resistances in colonial Bihar, states that Indian prison does not suit to Foucault's concept of prison (Yang, 1987:29-45). David Arnold states that Indian prison was very different from Foucault's concept of prison discipline and panopticon concept of surveillance (Arnold, 2007). The resistances in prison can be traced from the very beginning of nineteenth century itself which was later widely followed in the nationalist period. Satadru Sen, who studied the Indian prisons, states that Foucault's concept of prison does not have any relevance in India. (Sen, 2012)

Indian national movement under Gandhi brought countless women to the political sphere. They belonged to different regions, castes and age groups and took part in various kinds of activities. They initially concentrated on Gandhian constructive programs especially spinning *charkha* and popularisation of khadi but later actively participated in various political activities and braved to court arrest. In Malabar also women's participation in the national movement was great. But Gandhian political activities in Kerala were limited to the Malabar district alone which was the part of Madras Presidency. The reason was that Gandhi was against launching political movements in the princely states. As a result, a lot of men and women from the princely states of Cochin and Travancore came to Malabar from 1920 onwards. During the non-co-operation movement of 1920-22 in Malabar, though women had participated, they did not court arrest.

It was the civil disobedience movement of 1930-34 which witnessed the active participation of women in Malabar. Women started entering the public space boldly during this period (Gopalankutty, 2007:50), courted arrest and faced prison life. The role of women in civil disobedience movement and their arrests in Malabar was studied by various scholars but the experiences of their prison life still remain unexplored. This paper focuses on the prison life of women political prisoners during 1930-1934 on the basis of primary as well as second-

ary sources, especially archival materials available in Nehru Memorial Museum Library (NMML), New Delhi, Tamilnadu state archives (TSA), Egmore, and Regional Archives Kozhikode (RAK). The paper concludes by analysing the post prison life of these women and examines how the society looked at the question of the entry of women in politics and prison.

Civil Disobedience Movement and Political Arrests

The Lahore session of the Congress decided to launch Civil disobedience movement. It was inaugurated by Gandhi on 6th April 1930 by picking up a handful of salt and breaking the salt law. The movement was soon spread throughout the country and became a mass movement. In Malabar, K. Kelappan took the leadership of salt Satyagraha. The program in Malabar was not limited to breaking the salt law but included conducting of various kinds of processions, picketing liquor shops and shops selling foreign clothes. The main venues of political activity in Malabar were at Kozhikode, Thalassery, Kannur, Vadakara and Palakkad. However Kozhikode remained as the major centre of protest. Women also decided to participate in the movement. The Mahila Sangh formed under the leadership of M Karthiyayini Amma organised women of Kozhikode who in large numbers joined the political movement. Samuel Aron states that the members of this organisation mainly belonged to upper and middle class families (Aron, 1974:161.) The initial activity of the organisation was to collect fund for national movement by house visit and other activities. The main women members were M. Karthiyayini Amma, A. V. Kuttymalu Amma, Gracy Aron, Kamalabai prabhu, V. Ammukutty Amma, and Ms. pavamani. Gracy Aron took the leadership to organise women at Kannur.

The first political arrest was related to a protest procession organised under Mahila Sangh. It was against the police atrocities towards women in Bombay and they distributed notice about the procession. The district officials, on 16th November 1930, imposed prohibition orders, as per section 144, on women including Mrs Madhavan Nair, Mrs Sundara Iyyer, A. V. Kuttimalu Amma, E. Narayani Kutty, Gracy Aron, G. T. Narayani Amma and P. G. Narayani Amma. Women were not ready to give up their spirit of nationalism and came in white khadi dress as if they were going to a temple. The procession was started near Thali temple on 16th November consisting of more than 30 volunteers including women and girls with national and black flags. A huge crowd assembled on the way to see the procession. Besides, a lot

of police were present to create fear among the women. (Amma, 1983) Police tried to take away the national flag from a girl named Jayalakshmi but she strongly protested against it. Six persons were arrested by the police, including Jayalakshmi. The other women arrested were Gracy Aron, M. Karthiyayini Amma, C. Kunhikavu Amma, T. Ammukutty Amma and E. Narayanikutty Amma. Jayalakshi was soon let off by the sub divisional magistrate and the remaining persons were remanded until 18th November 1930. They were confined at Kozhikode Jail. The trial was conducted at Kozhikode and the magistrate punished Karthiyayini Amma alone as she belonged to the princely state of Cochin. She was given two months' rigorous imprisonment and she completed her prison term at Kozhikode Jail.

The magistrate in his judgement stated that it was the first time women in Malabar took part in political movement and he also hoped they would not repeat it in future and it was on this ground he decided to reduce Karthiyayini Amma's imprisonment to a period of two months. (HFM volume 103B, TSA). But the magistrate's hope was in vain; so many women participated in various programs and courted arrest later. The main reasons for these arrests were breaking the salt law, participating in prohibited processions, picketing of foreign cloth shops and liquor shops, etc. Iswari Ammal was arrested from Kozhikode beach for breaking salt law on 2nd February 1931. She was the first women arrested for breaking salt law in Malabar.

Picketing the shops selling foreign cloths and liquors were another major mode of agitation. Women usually picketed shops selling foreign cloths in different parts of Malabar. K. Kunjilakshmi Amma and N. Sanjeevani Bai were arrested during picketing a foreign cloth selling shop on 1st February 1931 (*Mathrubhumi*, 01-03-1931). Kamaladevi Chatopadhyay, who visited Kannur on 19th march 1931, urged women to picket foreign cloth shops. As a result, on the very next day, women picketed foreign cloth shops. Kamala Bai Prabhu was arrested along with Mrs Govindan Nair and Sambhavi Amma on 27th January 1932 at Thalassery during picketing. Kamala Bai received six months' imprisonment with a fine of one thousand rupees. As she refused to pay the fine, the magistrate ordered the police to take her ornaments. She had given all her ornaments except her tali. She stated that she can't give it as her husband was alive. She was compelled to give her tali by the magistrate. The Tali incident created nationwide protests and serious debates occurred in the House of Commons, legislative council and central legislative assembly (Meera, 1999:503)

Women also picketed liquor shops. Mrs Hariswaran Tirumub with her four months' old baby, Kunjiruthy Amma, P. A. Swarnamma and A. V. Lakshmi amma, picketed the liquor shop of Kanji Sivaji Setu at Kannur (Mathrubhumi Daily, 1932 May 3). He closed his shop as women picketed it and a lot of people came to see it. They were soon arrested by police and taken in a police lorry. Suruchi Thapar argues that by courting arrest and imprisonment women not only proved their courage, determination and strong commitment against colonial rule but also dispelled the colonial notion of Indian women as subordinate, weak or docile (Thapar, 2006:165.)

Prison Life

The women political prisoners from Malabar belonged to various age groups, from young girls to aged women, of whom some were married, a few mothers, and even grandmothers. Kunjichirutha Amma, a 70 years old woman, was arrested from Thalassery for participating in national movement and confined at Thalassery jail in 1932 (*Mathrubhumi* daily, 07 Sept 1932). Women from Malabar were confined at various prisons of Malabar especially at Kannur central jail, Thalassery sub jail and Kozhikode jail. However, majority of women political prisoners from the Madras presidency, including Malabar, were confined at Presidency jail for women at Vellore, the only women jail in Madras presidency.

The women political prisoners were also subjected to A-B-C classification system in jails. In 1929 the government of India decided to introduce A-B-C classification on prisoners. The background which forced the colonial state to introduce such a classification was the martyrdom of Jatin Das on 13th September 1929, the Lahore Conspiracy case prisoner, at Lahore Jail, after his 64 days' hunger strike. The public support extended to Bhagat Singh, Jatin Das and his associates created fear among the colonial servants. They introduced certain reforms, especially in the form of some privileges, to political prisoners. (Prasad, 2010:285). This was a class-wise division; though it contained some privileges, it was actually a colonial strategy of divide and rule. This classification was aimed at foiling the unity among political prisoners. The persons who worked together for the freedom of the country outside prison, and convicted for same offence, were started treating differently in prison on the basis of his wealth, family background, education, social status, caste etc.

A and B class prisoners were given privileges that were given

to special class prisoners while the C class prisoners were treated like ordinary criminals. The privileges of A&B class included separate cell accommodation, table furniture and reading facilities, lights, use of private bedding and cooking pots and suitable bathing and sanitary arrangements (G.O. No:1199; Law:1930). The diet was another important factor where we can see discrimination at its peaks, A&B class prisoners were given special diet cooked in separate kitchen under their supervision while C-class prisoners were given ordinary prison food which was notorious for its foul smell, stones and worms. 'A' class prisoners were permitted to wear their own clothes while 'B' class were given modified prison clothing both of which were far better than that of the 'C' class who had to wear ordinary prison clothing (GO No: 1199; Law:1930). The privilege was also extended in prison labour to A&B Class. Thus the political prisoners convicted for same offence were treated separately in prison on the lines of caste-based privileges in India. The privileges given to this A & B class were far away from Foucault's concept of prison discipline.

The A-B-C classification created a lot of problems to women prisoners than men. Prison was like home or hostel for A and B Class political prisoners while to the majority of political prisoners it was a hell. The reason was that only a few women were given A and B class privilege while the majority of women were denied them. M. Karthiyayini Amma was awarded with A class status in her first imprisonment. K. Kunji Lakshi Amma and Sanjivani Bai were awarded with B Class during the CDM (*Mathrubhumi* daily, 1931 March 1). Gracy Aron was also given A class status. Susheela considers her prison life as good moments in her life (Sreedharan, 2013:97). A and B class women political prisoners did not have any worries about prison life as they had good food and better labour environment and the attitude of prison staff was very positive but the condition of C class prisoners was entirely different.

The criteria for ABC classification and its practice were entirely different as majority of women political prisoners were awarded with C class status. The C class women political prisoners were also educated and from reputed families but were treated like ordinary criminals (*Mathrubhumi* Daily, 1932 November 30). Even women political prisoners had understood that ABC classification was a part of divide and rule policy of the colonial state. None were ready to go to the C class. Durgabai Deshmukh was against this classification and she requested to transfer her from A to C Class (Deshmukh, 1953:11). She was thus

transferred to C class during Civil disobedience movement and sent to Vellore women's jail. Even the attitude of prison staff towards C class and other two classes were different. ABC classification in theory and in practice was entirely different as majority of political prisoners who were eligible to A and B class were given C Class.

Separation from family was the major cause of tension for women prisoners. Some were mothers had to leave their children with family and relatives. However the jail rules permitted women to carry their Children below six years with them to prison. When the magistrate did not allow Kutty Malu Amma to carry her 58 days old child with her inside, the jail superintendent allowed her to do so. The jail Superintendant stated that the magistrate did not have any role in this and it was his right to decide it. The small baby named Lakshmi thus spent two years with Kutty Malu Amma at Vellore jail (Mathrubhumi, 16-04-1985).

A serious problem was the prison food. A and B class prisoners got special food; A class people even had the privilege to bring outside food at their own expense or by others. The women A class prisoners at Vellore jail prepared their food for themselves (Karthyayini Amma, 1983), as A and B class prisoners had their own kitchen. Besides they also got outside food from the family members and other politicians. During 1932-33 Srinivasa Iyyengar's daughter was at Vellore jail and Karthyayini Amma recollects that every week they used to get a lot of food items from Iyyengar's house (Karthyayini Amma, 1983).

As the four regions of Andhra, Kerala, Tamilnadu and Karnataka were very different in culture and food habits, there arose some problems. Karthyayini Amma's duty was to prepare *Avial* and during lunch time a major portion of *avial* was found missing. Later she identified that Tamil and Andhra women political prisoners, who liked it very much, used to stole it. There were only around ten women prisoners from Malabar and they decided to start a special kitchen. The matron allowed starting new kitchen. M. Karthyayini Amma was the only woman from Malabar who did not join them. The *avial* issue resulted in separate kitchen for A and B class Malayali prisoners.

Like C Class men, the C class women political prisoners were also supplied with bad food having foul smell (Mathrubhumi, 30-11-1932). This created a lot of issues including diseases and boycott of food. Majority of women tried to skip this food but as there was no other option they were forced to have it. Moreover the insufficient quantity

of food always created a starvation effect. During civil disobedience movement the women political prisoners of A and B class decided to solve the food issue of C class prisoners. The task was headed by Karthiyayini Amma. As A class people were permitted to have food from outside they brought and served it to C class political prisoners keeping the matter secret from the jail superintendent. Even that was also insufficient to them. The superintendent came to know about the illegal activity later and scolded Karthiyayini Amma and the matron. Thus the food transfer program came to an end. However when the district medical officer Madhava Menon visited prisoners Karthiyani Amma complained about the food issue. He ordered the superintendent to allow it. Thus the food transfer program was resumed. However it was a temporary solution and the problem of bad food continued to persist. Serious stomach diseases ensued; there was a loud cry from C class women political prisoners for buttermilk to cure it (*Mathrubhumi*, 30-11-1932) though the authorities ignored it.

The jail hospital also was against them; for many it helped only to worsen their disease. The hospital authorities usually scolded the women political prisoners. Padmavathi Asher requested the authorities to be a bit merciful to women prisoners in the hospital (*Mathrubhumi*, 30-11-1932).

As argued by Anand A Yang, unlike Foucault's concept, the Indian prison targeted both human mind and body (Yang, 1987:29-45). The women political prisoners were subjected to physical and mental humiliation. The bodies of the inmates were searched by matron or other prisoners. The two problems women faced were searching by lower class prisoners and the shame of menstrual periods (Thapar, 2006:157).

Like the male political prisoners women also used prison as school for learning new languages and subjects. Women had used Vellore women jail as their school. The main leaders gave instructions on political matters including the history and strategy of the Congress. The women political prisoners, like their male counterparts, utilised prison to study various languages and become multi linguists. Karthiyayini Amma studied Tamil language from political prisoners of the Tamil country and in return she taught English to them as they only knew how to speak in English (Karthiyayini Amma, 1983). A. V. Kuttymalu Amma was a multi linguist. She had sound knowledge in Malayalam, English, Tamil and Telugu languages besides practical knowledge in Kannada (Vasanthi, 2009:52).

Post prison life

Another major problem for ordinary female prisoners was their post prison life. Generally, women political prisoners were welcomed as heroines. The society of Malabar found women political prisoners not as ordinary criminals as they got huge welcome during their release. M. Karthiyayini Amma after completing her two months' imprisonment was released from Kozhikode special sub jail on 17th January 1931. A large crowd including hundreds of women assembled outside the Kozhikode jail gate to welcome her in the very early morning. Armed police were also deployed there. She came out by 8 am and as soon as she was sighted shouts of 'jai' from people went the air (HFM V 103B). Susheela recalls that huge reception was given to A.V. Kuttimalu Amma after her release in 1933 or 1934 with her baby at the school in her hometown at Anakkara by the natives (Sreedharan,2013: 97).

The Vadakara during the political conference conducted on 4,5, 6 May 1931 a separate session for women titled 'Keraliya Mahila Sammelanam' was held. The conference was presided by Padmavathi Asher. Prominent women activists including M. Karthyayani Amma, Mrs Pavamani, Iswari Ammal, Kunjikavu Amma, A. V. Kuttimalu Amma, Mrs K. Madhava Menon, K. Madhavikutty Amma attended the conference (Velayudhan, 1999:501-02). The conference congratulated the women political prisoners. The women conference pointed out that only a few women participated in political activities while majority of them were either unaware of it or do not get educated. The conference also stated that the society still did not respect women as they think the only duty of women was house hold work. This notion was however broken during the civil disobedience movement. The meeting congratulated M. Karthiyayini Amma, Narayanikutty Amma and Gracy Aron stating that, by undergoing imprisonment, they became role models for Kerala women (*Mathrubhumi* daily, 05-05-1931).

Conclusion

The colonial prison and prison experience in Malabar were far away from Foucault's concept of prison discipline. Right from the beginning colonial authorities used prison as a tool of political oppression rather than a disciplinary institution. Women were also arrested and sent to prison to create fear in society. But it attracted a lot of men and women to the national movement.

The A,B and C classification of political prisoners were also far

removed from Foucault's concept of discipline. A and B class people considered prison life as hostel life with no time table and no uniform and with good food and privileges including provision for reading books and conducting study classes. Instead, C class prisoners from Malabar were treated like ordinary criminals with uniform, hard labour, bad food and so on. Thus the prison life was not the same for all as to some it was a blessing while to the large many it was a traumatic experience. The women also utilised prison in a positive manner and tried to master various subjects and languages.

The post prison life of women were also not disappointing as the society considered them as heroines and the press and literature of the period played a major role in moulding them as celebrities. They continued their political activism and braved to face imprisonment again. M. Karthiyayini Amma and Gracy Aron were imprisoned twice during the civil disobedience movement. While several women participated in political activities later some of them spent their post prison life indulging in Gandhian constructive programs.

References

Archival

History of Freedom Movement Files, Tamil Nadu Archives (TNA).

Native Newspaper Reports (NNPR), Tamil Nadu Archives.

Mathrubhumi Daily.

Government orders, Law Department, Regional Archives, Kozhikode.

Autobiography

Amma, M. Karthiyayani. 1983. "Niram Teliyunna Nalukal". Autobiography published in *Mathrubhumi* weekly.

Aron, C. Samuel. 1971. *Jeevithasmaranakal*. Kannur: Deshamitram.

Deshmukh, Durgabai. 1953. *Chintaman and I*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. *An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Prasad, Rajendra. 2010. *Autobiography*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Secondary Works

Arnold, David. 2007. *India: The Contested Prison*.

Brown, Ian & Frank Dikotter (Eds.). 2007. *Cultures of Confinement: History of the Prison in Africa Asia and Latin America*. London: Cornell University Press.

Foucault, Michel, 1980. *Power/ Knowledge*, New York: Vintage.

Foucault, Michel. 1991. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.

Gopalankutty, K. 2007. *Malabar Padanangal*. Thiruvananthapuram: The

State Institute of Languages.

- Ignatieff, Michael. 1978. *A Just Measure of Pain*. London: Pantheon.
- Innes, C. A. 1997. *Malabar Gazetteer*. Thiruvananthapuram: State gazatteers Department, Government of Kerala.
- Pillai, A. K. 1986. *Congressum Keralavum*. Thiruvananthapuram: Prabath Books.
- Sreedharan, Swamini. 2013. *Swatantratile penperumma*. Kozhikode: Math-rubhumi.
- Thapar, Suruchi. 2006. *Women in the Indian National Movement*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Vasanthi, V. 2009. "Women in Public Life in Malabar". University of Calicut: PhD Dissertation.
- Velayudhan, Meera. 1999. "Growth of political consciousness among women in modern Kerala". In P.J. Cherian (Ed), *Perspectives in Kerala History* (pp.4 86-510) Thiruvananthapuram Kerala Gazetteers Department.
- Yang, A Anand. 1987. "Disciplining Natives: prisons and Prisoners in Early Nineteenth Century India". *South Asia*, Vol X(2).