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THE PLIGHT OF SUBALTERN INDIAN WOMEN PRISONERS- A STUDY OF MARY TYLER'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY "MY YEARS IN INDIAN PRISON"

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ABSTRACT

Subalterns are the most marginalized people in the society who are denied basic human dignity. Their saga becomes much worse when they are imprisoned. Especially subaltern women are more vulnerable to the atrocities of the authorities in the prison. The paper endeavors to throw light on the living conditions of subaltern Indian women in prison. In her autobiography "My Years in Indian Prison", Mary Tyler gives an account of life in prison for subaltern Indian women. Mary Tyler was a British woman who was wrongfully arrested during her visit to India. While serving her jail sentence in India, she witnessed the discrimination meted out on subaltern women both by the inmates and the jail authorities. Thus her work becomes the most honest account of the condition of subaltern Indian women prisoners.

Keywords: Jail, Women, Marginalized, Discrimination, Authorities.

Introduction

Prison literature comprises of works written by authors during their imprisonment or written about their experiences during the tenure of imprisonment. Prison literature in India mostly comes in form of memoirs, letters, diaries, autobiographies. Drafting one's experiences of prison life holds social, historical and philosophical importance. In Indian context prison literature flourished during pre-independence era and the tradition of recording prison experiences continued during Emergency and Maoist uprising. Imprisonment has always been a powerful instrument in suppressing dissent towards the government in rule. Despite all the atrocities by the ruling class, the spirit of those who are imprisoned did not hinder, moreover they have been more proactive from the time of their imprisonment.

Although prison narratives belong to certain times of the history they are still relevant to the present day jail scenario. The contribution of this genre to the wellbeing of the society is inexplicable, we will get a glimpse of the author's version rather than what is recorded in the official documents as an offence against the government.

In most of the cases, the persons imprisoned are actively involved in some revolutionary movement which adds a glory to their image in the public eye. The same cannot be applied to the common public who get arrested under criminal charges. Especially if the accused belongs to low social standing their condition becomes much worse within the walls of jail. Such people who are kept in jail or waiting for the trial under petty crimes or robbery and theft have to undergo harassment and humiliation. In some cases, the accused spend

years together in jail, awaiting his trial in the court even though they have not committed any crime. Jawaharlal Nehru, mentioned in his book, *The Discovery of India*, "Prison is not a pleasant place to live in even for a short period, much less for long years. "This arises a concern regarding condition of subaltern women prisoners who are considered of the lowest rank both in terms of social standing and gender. In India, the subaltern women are from various social categories i.e. Dalits or tribal or poor class. Lack of basic education and social awareness leaves the subaltern women with no medium to express the agony of jail life. Prominent women writers like Urmila Shastri, have written about life in prison during freedom struggle of India but very few have contributed to the cause of subaltern woman prisoners. We have Mary Tyler's autobiography 'My Years in Indian Prison' to address this disparity in the genre of prison literature. Mary Tyler was wrongfully arrested under the charges of spreading anti national propaganda. During her days in prison she witnessed gender discrimination and inhuman treatment meted out on women who from low social background. She is from British descent, yet, her work portrays the gruesome side of class discrimination prevalent in Indian prisons. Her work speaks at length about deep rooted tragedy in the life of subaltern Indian women living in jails.

Objective

Subaltern women are devoid of basic human rights in the socio-cultural hegemony of Indian society. The saga of those women is heart wrenching when they become victims of loopholes in our criminal justice system. The objective of the paper is to focus on the living conditions of women who are from the undermined classes, serving their sentence in prison.

Lack of Legal awareness

Due to the lack of awareness on the part of the accused/victim, most of the times subaltern women get arrested for offences which they have not committed. These women are common targets for custodial violence. In her autobiography, Mary Tyler mentions the case of Gulabi who spent years in jail as the result of a power tussle between two landlords: "Together with four other day-labourers,

she had been harvesting paddy on a landlord's fields, unaware that the ownership of that particular piece of land was disputed by his cousin who promptly had all the labourers arrested for stealing his paddy. Ironically the two landowners settled their quarrel while the labourers remained behind bars..." Another case is of Bulkani – old, skinny and asthmatic, a retired colliery worker in prison without trial for three years already, on a petty theft charge. "Birsi, a wrinkled and ancient-looking woman was very timid and unable to assert herself in the daily bickerings, so she invariably landed at the back of the queue... Her husband had died in jail after the two of them had been there four years waiting for a land dispute to be settled. The had been charged with harvesting paddy on a piece of land they claimed was theirs but which a rich peasant said was his." As reflected in Tyler's work, many of the women were landless labourers imprisoned for offences such as brewing illicit liquor, direct or indirect involvement in rebellion against oppressive landlords. It is thus evident that the degree of punishment given to these gullible women surpassed the impact of offence committed.

Female Hygiene

It is a basic requirement that all prisoners should be given a medical examination as soon as they have been admitted to a prison or place of detention. Any necessary medical treatment should then be provided free of charge. Most of the jails were built in the nineteenth century or at the turn of this century. They are in a state of disrepair and are overcrowded. The Shah Commission reports that on the even during the days of the Emergency, in as many as 15 of the 30 States and Union Territories, the actual population of the prisoners far exceeded the authorized accommodation. Sometimes food served to the prisoners is unfit for consumption.

In her book, "My Years in Indian prison," Mary Tyler empathized for subaltern women that, in conditions that did not permit even elementary hygiene; plagued by mosquitoes, bugs and dozens of rats, sickness and chronic disease become almost a way of life for the women : "There were usually at least one or two prisoners ill and most of the women were in indifferent health all the time. Many

had symptoms of liver and kidney trouble and nearly all suffered from body pains of one type or another. Anaemia was almost universal. Intestinal parasites caused lassitude and nausea. Boils, sores and other symptoms of malnutrition or vitamin deficiency were so commonplace that one almost ceased to notice them..."

She further explained how these women are treated by doctors as mere samples for lab experiments.: "The jail doctors like the rest of the staff were merely doing a job and trying to get what they could out of it. Some had become totally unresponsive to the misery around them, others tried to relieve it by indiscriminately prescribing worm medicine or painkillers. Often I had the impression that the jail was a testing ground for new drug lines because it was rare for the same tablets to be prescribed twice for the same complaint."

The most basic female hygienic facilities are not taken care, instead they are deliberately pushed to survive in filthy conditions which in turn takes a serious toll on their health: "In Hazaribagh a bundle of dirty, lice-ridden, cast-off clothing stinking of sweat was sometimes tossed over the gate for the women to sort out, wash and use as sanitary cloths. In Jamshedpur, there was no provision whatsoever. The women tore pieces from their saris of used strips of blanket..." Tyler describes the sufferings of low caste women bleeding to death in miscarriage and childbirth, whom the male doctor, a Brahmin, refused to touch.

Social Discrimination

From the highest to the lowest rank, the system is based on fear of those above, the tyranny over those below. This ultimately benefits those at the top of the hierarchy because it keeps those below engaged in petty squabbles with each other and prevents them from turning their united energy against their oppressors. Jail authorities use human misery as an excuse for their cruel perpetuation of it and their corruption. When more well-to-do prisoners were given decent clothing and the poor women kept in rags, Tyler protested. "He explained that my companions were poor even before they came to jail; outside too they often had to wear rags, and could not expect to "get rich" in jail

custody. The fact that many people outside had to get through the harsh winter months barefoot and without sufficient clothing seemed to him justification enough for depriving prisoners of the minimal necessities they should have received according to the jail rules.

Conclusion

Women prisoners thus present specific challenges for criminal justice system because they constitute the very small portion of the prison. The profile and background of subaltern women in prison and the reason for which they are imprisoned are different from general prisoners. Existing prison facilities and programmes for women inmates have all been developed initially for men who have historically accounted for the larger proportion of the prison population. It is therefore asserted that a gender perspective must be considered while catering to the needs of women in criminal justice system in general and prison in particular. It is clear from Mary Tyler's account that the needs of subaltern women prisoners are often overlooked by penal institutions, by governmental policy makers, and by the international community. One must consider every aspect of women's prison regime as well as the reasons for the increasing female prison population and ensure that their rights are met. There is need for reform as there are no laws that cover many aspects of imprisonment of poor and illiterate subaltern Indian women.

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