

Diet, Disease and Death: A Statistical Analysis of the Condition of Prison in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: Criminal activities increased during the late 18th and 19th centuries Bengal due to the changing political and socio-economic pattern. In Bengal, the 'British Bridgehead', colonial government facing the challenge of maintaining law and order and thus the smooth functioning of the government was disrupted badly. To curb it and enforced discipline, Prison was established by the British East India Company. While in England the new penal system was based on Bentham's line, transformed prison into a 'Reformatory' Character, in India the situation was different. 'Panopticon' was the guiding principle in England as well as in Europe. But in India the prisons were operated completely in a different way. The early prisons of Bengal had no basic infrastructure and amenities for the inmates. Lack of food, drinking water, medicine, proper ventilation caused high mortality within prison. Cholera, Malaria, Dysentery caused havoc behind the bar which finally forced the colonial government to initiate some reforms. But unfortunately those were bits and pieces and insufficient to handle the situation. From 1838 to 1919 various Prison Reforms Committees were formed. They recommended to start various reforms, specifically regarding the food quality and quantity for the inmates to cut down the death ratio caused by malnutrition. But little improvement achieved. Here Prison was ran by the Colonial Politico-economic imperatives. Power politics played an important role in India to reshape the existing penal system. Thus Prison became a perfect stage for the colonial masters to display their racial superiority by tormenting severe physical and mental pain over the convicts.

Keywords: Criminal, Prison, Hegemony, Panopticon, Diet, Mortality.

Introduction

" The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical

necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.”

Nathaniel Hawthorn (Scarlet Letter, 1878, p-51)

Colonial expansion and the foundation of prison was closely connected to each other. To establish unquestionable authority and discipline, it was essential for the colonial masters to introduce police and prison system. India was the ‘Gem’ of all colonies founded by the British East India Company. Thus in order to establish their ‘hegemony’ and run the colonial machinery effortlessly, came into existence the ‘institutionalized penal system’, i.e. the Prison, in all over India including Bengal the “British Bridgehead”. This paper seeks to find out the relation between the ‘Colonizer’ and the ‘Colonized’ through the prism of prison. How power politics reshaped the existing penal system of India as well as Bengal is also a matter of review. While in England the old penal system was revised and became more & more humanitarian, the condition of prison in Bengal needs to be study. When ‘Panopticon’ became a recognized practice in England to reduce the discomfort and agony of the convicts by providing them proper food, medicine, cloth and other amenities, how was the condition the prisoners of Bengal? So, ‘Retributive’ or ‘Reformatory’, what was the nature of Bengal’s prison in 19th century is a matter of examination of this article.

Methods and Materials

Writing on Colonial Prison and Prison management have been predominantly a sociological inquiries focusing mainly on punishment and the spirit of reformation. Published reports on Colonial Prison management is rare before 1830s. Reports produced by 1838 Prison Discipline Committee, 1864 Prison Inquiry Committee and 1919 Prison Inquiry Committee provided the most comprehensive information on Prison Reforms in Colonial India. Different Administrative Reports on Bengal Jails has also been used for better understanding. Official publications such as Medical Reports, particularly Report of James Hutchinson and Frederick J. Mouat will help us to shed light on the sanitary condition and official concerns that dominated the 19th century. The present study has also been influenced by historians’ writings on Crime, Criminality, punishment and reforms. Anand Yang and David Arnold’s work are essential for understanding prison life and management of colonial India. Satadru Sen’s studies also help us for better understanding of the matter.

Results and Discussion

Background

Bengal faced political as well socio-economic turmoil in the last decade of the Eighteenth century and the first half of the Nineteenth century. It was a transition period for Bengal’s

history. Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 in Bengal. It brought a change in the rural society, as many old zamindars lost their zamindari under this new act. The naibs, gomasthas, paiks who were totally depended on the zamindars also lost their livelihood. As a result social crimes like burglary, dacoity, murder and hooliganism amplified. The Sadar Nizamat Adalat sent a report to the Governor-General in Council which revealed the proliferation of atrocious crimes in Bengal Presidency. (Table-1)

Table-1

Year	Robberies With Murder	Robberies Without Murder	Total
1803	131	1252	1383
1804	119	1175	1294
1805	112	1076	1188
1806	80	1162	1242

Source: Basudeb Chattopadhyay, (2000)Kolkata, P-72.

Dinajpur, Nadia, Burdwan, Jessore, Birbhum, Murshidabad reported to be the highest dacoity prone districts.¹ Even in Calcutta, the British administrative and commercial Centre, situation was not good. During the time of Lord Hastings and Francis, urban dacoity closer to the port area challenged the police.² In consequence, the regular administrative and particularly the commercial activities of the Company was disrupted. In order to maintain law and order and protect life and property of their subjects thus came into existence the penitentiary system, commonly known as Jail or Prison. But until 1790 there was no centralized prison system in Bengal. Prisons were the part of 'Fouzdari Adalat' under the supervision of 'Naib Nazim' and his subordinates.³ Finally, under the Regulation IX established 143 civil jails, 75 criminal jails, 68 mixed jails in Bengal, North West Province, Madras and Bombay.⁴

Early Prisons & their problems

But the prison network in Bengal in the first two decades had been in an embryonic form. Most of the prisons were temporary rented buildings in districts and thatched rooms used as jail in mofussil (village) areas. These type of jails made of straw and bamboo were fire prone and not strong enough to stop the convicts to fled. The Magistrate of Bakarganj Jail wrote to the Governor-General that 22 prisoners escaped from the temporary prison. The Magistrate of Suri and Dinajpore reported to the Governor-General that fire broke out in their jails.⁵ So, "...the spatial logic of early prisons deviated from the norms British Officials hoped would govern their institutional system."⁶ Besides, the overcrowding of convicts due to increased rural tension in Bengal created an unhealthy condition within the jails,

resulted in heavy mortality due to intermittent and continued fever, cholera, tuberculosis, dysentery, diarrhea and malnutrition.

Administrative Interventions

From 1830s debate started amongst the British Officials regarding the Penal System of India. While in England Prisons were reformed under Benthamite line and “Panopticon” became a well-accepted concept, the scenario in India was different. The deplorable condition of the prison inmates highlighted by James Hutchinson in his report on the Medical Management to the Governments of Fort William and Agra’. On 8th December 1833, he wrote to the Superintending Surgeons of Bengal divisions, “The Medical board have observed with extreme regret the great mortality which prevails among the convicts under confinement, in the various jails throughout the country, but more particularly in those situated in the province of Bengal.”⁷

First Prison Discipline Committee (1838) & its Recommendations

Lord Macaulay was the main protagonist who strongly demanded a prison reform in India in his memorable Minute dated 14th December 1835. Thus a Prison Discipline Committee of 14 member under the chairmanship of H. Shakespeare was formed. It submitted the report on 1838. The Committee emphasized more on disciplinary matter rather than on the health, hygiene and diet of the convicts. It recommended for the establishment of Central prison, classification of the prisoners. It disapproved the money allowances given to the prisoners and freedom to prepare their own food, instead they suggested a ration system. Malnutrition was a main problem in Indian prison but little attention was paid by the Committee because diminution of food was still considered as a tool of punishment. Rather they suggested- “it cannot be difficult to keep a prisoner in health without giving him a more dainty and generous diet, than nine out of ten of the population of the country can ever indulge in.”⁸ Thus a sense of ignorance reflected regarding the welfare of the prisoners. 1838 Prison Disciplinary Committee put thrust only on the segregation of prisoners to find out easily, the healthy convicts for labour and to conduct scientific experiment on them.

Condition of Prisoners in the First half on 19th Century: Diet & Mortality

The insalubrious condition and high mortality in different Jails in Bengal continued. Congested ill ventilated rooms, lack of proper clothing & medicine, scarcity of food and drinking water played havoc in prisons. Underfeeding the convicts became a new method of punishment in different Gaols of Bengal. This was actually a cost cutting method of the administration. They were apathetic about the physical and mental welfare of the ‘nasty natives’. In 17th September 1843 the Medical Board gave a directives regarding the

prerequisite food for labouring and non- labouring prisoners to the Prison administrators.(Table-2)

Table-2

Non-labouring Convicts									
Morning Meal									
	Ric e	Dal l	Vegetable s	Ghe e	Salt	Mussallah per Diem	Total of Each		
Same Daily ...	Ch. 5	Ch. 1	Ch. 0	Ch. 0	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Chittacks. 6½		
Evening Meal									
	Ric e	Dal l	Vegetable s	Fish or Fles h	Ghe e	Sal t	Mussalla per Diem	Total of Each	Grand Total daily Food
Same Daily ...	Ch. 6	Ch. 2	Ch. 1	Ch. 0	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Chittacks .9¾	Chittacks .16

Working Convicts									
Morning Meal									
	Ric e	Dal l	Vegetable s	Ghe e	Salt	Mussallah per Diem	Total of Each		
Monda y	Ch. 5	Ch. 2	Ch. 0	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Chittacks. 7¾		
Tuesda y	Ch. 5	Ch. 2	Ch. 0	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Ch. ¼	Chittacks. 7¾		
Evening Meal									
	Ric e	Dal l	Vegetable s	Fish or Fles h	Ghe e	Sal t	Mussalla per Diem	Total of Each	Grand Total daily Food

Monda y Tuesda y	Ch. 8 9	Ch. 0 3	Ch. 2 2	Ch. 4 0	Ch. ¼ ¼	Ch. ¼ ¼	Ch. ¼ ¼	Chittack s. 14 ³ /4 14 ³ /4	Chittack s. 22 ¹ /2 22 ¹ 2
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The above mentioned quantity of food would remain the same.
The diet chart would change every alternative day except Sunday.

Source: b James Hutchinson, (1845), Calcutta,p-58.

But the Situation remained the same.The following table show the ‘woeful crescendo of death’ in Alipore Jail. (Table-3)

Table-3

Year	January		Februar y		March		April		May		June		July	
	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths	No. of Prisoners	No. of Deaths
1836	...	..	...	..	...	..	...	..	...	..	...	..	1,204	4
1837	1,295	6	1,171	1	1,173	4	1,200	3	1,158	4	1,146	7	1,165	6
1838	1,266	5	1,284	6	1,271	4	1,299	5	1,295	4	1,309	5	1,337	6
1839	1,349	3	1,349	5	1,388	6	1,368	10	1,356	2	1,445	7	1,452	2
1840	1,496	13	1,451	13	1,453	10	1,437	6	1,486	6	1,507	4	1,546	4
1841	1,505	6	1,525	11	1,532	6	1,397	6	1,351	...	1,374	3	1,368	2
1842	1,478	15	1,494	10	1,509	8	1,526	6	1,499	7	1,485	2	1,445	9
1843	1,267	11	1,299	11	1,288	12	1,383	10	1,388	3	1,420	4	1,340	7

1844	1,312	10	1,308	10	1,389	6	1,303	4	1,307	4	1,379	10	1,297	4
1845	1,191	8	1,189	7	1,176	2	1,170	1	1,219	5	1,198	3	1,178	4
1846	1,158	6	1,170	3	1,172	3	1,286	4	1,151	6	1,208	2	1,152	4
1847	1,131	7	1,102	5	1,105	3	1,015	2	1,091	1	1,118	4	1,017	4
Total ...	14,448	90	14,342	82	14,406	64	14,384	57	14,301	43	14,584	51	15,537	56
Percent age, per annum ...	....	4.47	...	6.86	...	5.33	...	4.75	...	3.65	...	4.19	...	4.32

Source: 'Analysis of the Report of Surgeon F.P. Strong, of the Bengal Army, to the Bengal Government for 1847, of the Mortality in the Jails of the 24 Pergunnahs', Calcutta, W. H .Sykes, in Journal of the Statistical Society of London, Vol. 12, No.1 (Feb., 1849), OUP for Royal Statistical Society,p-50.

Prison as a Factory

But this alarming situation barely had any impact on the colonial administration. Instead of paying attention the colonial government was showing much interest on increasing the production to make the prison self-sufficient. Paper making, Brick laying, cloth weaving,leather work were in full swing in Bengal's jail. Alipore jail was on the top of the list. It earned 2, 70,000 rupees. Mouat proudly declare this incident as "unparalleled in prison management in the world."9The following table shows the Annual income of prisoners in different jails of Bengal. (Table-4)

Table-4

Hooghly	Earnings per Prisoner	Rs. 53
Alipore	Earnings per Prisoner	Rs. 27
Jessore	Earnings per Prisoner	Rs. 26
Nadia	Earnings per Prisoner	Rs. 22

Source: Order and Disorder in Early Colonial Bengal, 1800-1860, Ranjan Chakrabarti, Delhi, 2022, p-106.

But the huge income from convict labour, (both outdoor & indoor labour) was not use for their benefit.In 1856 F. J Mouat, a British physician and jail administrator who inspected

the jails in Bengal, Bihar & Arracan expressed anguish over the condition of the prisoners in Bengal. He reported that, "It is difficult to imagine any fate more dreadful than that of the Indian life prisoner at present."¹⁰

Prison Diet after 1850s

After the inspection of Mouat some changes took place in the diet chart. But the increase of carboniferous food rather than nitrogenous food lead to the degeneration of prime organs like scrofula, scrobutus. Dr. Davidson reported that, "The food is deficient in formative or plastic matter, namely, that which goes to make blood, and muscle, called azotized nutriment, or the albuminous principle. There is great abundance of non-azotized nutriment, amylaceous food, that which goes to support the heat of the body, which is not very much required in this country, and fat; but animalized food will be shown to be deficient."¹¹ So, the Committee under Joseph Ewart provided a revised diet chart for the Non-labourers and labourers convicts. (Table-5)

Table-5

Dietaries and Classes		Carboniferous Nutriment	Nitrogenous Nutriment	Total Real Nutriment
Bengal Dietary		Oz.	Oz.	Oz.
	Non-Labourers	13.0300	4.2750	17.3050
	Labourers	17.3400	5.7348	23.0748

Source: The Sanitary Condition and Discipline of Indian Jails-Joseph Ewart, Calcutta, 1860, p-79.

Second Prison Inquiry Committee (1864) & its recommendations

But situation was no better. During 1860s when the Prison mortality rate in Britain was only 1%, it was 7% in India. During the tenure of Lord Lawrence the Second Prison Inquiry Committee was constituted in 1864. The Committee admitted that flaws remained in Indian prison management and recommended further reform. Some of their vital recommendations were-

- i. Improvement in prison diet. Animal food should be increased. Food should be well cooked and to be given twice daily. Reduction of food should not be an apparatus of punishment.
- ii. Infrastructural development, like-clothing, bedding, ventilation, etc.
- ii. Appointment of a full time Medical Officer.
- iii. Juvenile and women prisoners were to be kept separate.

Calcutta Prison Conference (1877)-Food & Mortality-European vs. Bengali Prisoners

In 1877 another prison conference was held in Calcutta. It mentioned a remarkable improvement in the Prisons of Bengal. The death rate of Bengal Prisons decreased from 10.05% to 5.89% in 1875. It was because of the improvement of the health condition of the European prisoners. Better diet and healthy accommodation was provided for the security of the 'finer races.' They were entitled to costly animal foods. They were given meal thrice a day in compare to the natives twice a day.¹² The Following table showing a clear picture of the difference between European and Indian prisoners' expenditure. (Table-6)

Table-6

Year	Central Jail	European Penitentiary
1873	Rs.48	Rs.305
1874	Rs.61	Rs.326
1875	Rs.64	Rs.371
1876	Rs.57	Rs.349
1877	Rs.71	Rs.466
1878	Rs.75	Rs.449
1879	Rs.77	Rs.379
1880	Rs.65	Rs.490

Source: Harold Fisher-Tine (2009),p-52.

Still Cholera was responsible for 1.05 per cent of the total mortality. In Hooghly jail there was a massive outbreak of Cholera in 1874 which increased the mortality rate. In Midnapore, Barrackpore & Russa Jail bowel complaint was a major problem due to unwholesome water.¹³In 1879 Prison Inspector A.S Leithbridge mentioned the same in his Administrative report (Table-7)

Table-7

Year	Alipore			Presidency			Russa		
	Daily average population	Admission from Dysentery & Diarrhoea	Death from Dysentery & Diarrhoea	Daily average population	Admission from Dysentery & Diarrhoea	Death from Dysentery & Diarrhoea	Daily average population	Admission from Dysentery & Diarrhoea	Death from Dysentery & Diarrhoea
1875	2,222	1,841	51	957	220	5	257	164	30
1876	2,111	1,588	26	940	258	5	197	157	10

1877	2,006	2,510	32	947	226	10	192	22	8
1878	2,045	1,429	42	1,020	194	8	226	182	20
Total	8,474	7,168	161	3,864	1,698	28	872	595	64
Average	2,118	1,792	40	966	428	7	218	149	17
Ratio per cent to average population	----	84.58	1.90	----	43.04	0.72	----	68.23	7.80

Source: Administration Report of the Jails of Bengal for the year 1878-A.S Leithbridge, Calcutta, 1879,p-50.

Fourth Prison Commission (1888) & Calcutta Prison Conference (1892) -Their recommendations

In 1888-89, the Fourth Prison Commission was appointed by the Government of India during the Governor-Generalship of Lord Dufferin to observe the present situation of jail administration. On the basis of the recommendation of the Jail Committee of 1888, a consolidated Prison Bill was prepared. The committee's recommendations were examined by another conference of experts on Jail Management from all provinces which was held at Calcutta in 1892. The Draft Prison Bill was circulated to all the local governments on March 25, 1893 and to the Governor General's Council. The outcome of the Conference was the Prison Act of 1894.

Problems of Jails by the beginning of the 20th century

By the dawn of the 20th century little improvement was achieved. The total mortality of all class of prisoners fall to 18.6 per mile. But dysentery, Malaria, Cholera, Pneumonia prevailed as major diseases. Tuberculosis became a major threat to the prison inmates due to overcrowding of prisoners and insufficient nutrition. The Administrative Report of the Jails of 1910 showing the death rate due to different diseases. (Table-8)

Table-8

	1909		1910	
	Admissions	Deaths	Admissions	Deaths
Cholera	4	4	13	5
Dysentery	2,422	97	1,367	53
Malaria fever	4,370	29	3,873	17
Tubercle of lungs, etc.	224	63	150	45
Anemia and debility	182	10	166	8
Pneumonia	161	41	115	28
Other infective diseases	1,655	40	916	34
Other respiratory diseases except Pneumonia	586	14	464	7
Diarrhea	1,396	13	1,501	8
Boils and ulcers of all kinds	1,033	2	883	2
All other diseases	2,444	58	2,562	40
Out of Hospital	...	3	....	4
Total	14,427	374	12,010	251

Source: Administrative Report on the Jails of Bengal for the year 1910-W.J Buchanan, Calcutta, 1911, p-17.

Prison Commission (1919) & its recommendations

Finally a Prison Committee Was formed under the Chairmanship of Sir Alexander. G. Cardew. It submitted a comprehensive report on Indian Prison Management by studying all the earlier Reports. The most highlighted recommendations of the Committee was-

- i. Classification of the Prisoners and separation of juvenile criminals from the adults.
- ii. To stop overcrowding in jails, it fixed the number of prisoners to be kept in prison not more than 1500.
- iii. Whole time expert Superintendent and Civil Surgeon to be placed in all prisons.
- iv. Differentiate between 'Hard Labour' and 'Exploitation' in Prison. But Hard Labour considered as a means of reformation of the prisoners.
- v .The Committee was satisfied with the present dietary system but suggested variety in jail diet and increase of vegetable diets.¹⁴

The Report of the Prison Committee of 1919 was a mile stone in Indian Prison Management. It was a logical conclusion of a long drawn process which was started in 1838. It was as important as the Gladstone Report of 1895 on British prison Reform.

Conclusion:

While the 19th century Bengal was ravaged by different epidemics like Cholera, Malaria, Small pox, Dysentery, and Diarrhea, the condition inside prison was no better. The colonial masters always blamed the 'Bengali Culture' for these kind of public health disorder. For them the prison was the epitome of a slack morality of the East, a habitation of illiterate, indecent, uncivilized 'criminal race'. So, the Colonizers introduced the theory of 'Civilizing Mission' to teach a lesson to the 'effeminate' Bengali. They never follow the 'Panopticon' theory given by Bentham. They were much more concerned with the economic prospect of prison than the physical and moral wellbeing of the prisoners. In their mother country, the British started prison reforms based on liberalism. Thus the reformative spirit change the nature of their prison and it became a 'correctional' home. But in India as well as in Bengal the spirit of reform was absent. There was a huge gulf between the new penological ideologies implemented in England and the gloomy condition of the prisons of Bengal. The spirit of the new penology was to reach beyond the body and touch the soul of the convicts and transformed the person. But in Bengal Prison became a perfect theatre to perform horrific terror on the convicts. Deprived from food, forced labour, torture became the prescribed technique to discipline the unruly prisoners. Food became a symbol of colonial authority. A primary means of exercising supremacy over the convicts was to deny the choice of sufficient food. So, starvation, different diseases and high mortality became a common picture of Bengal prisons. Thus, Punishment assuggested by Mably, '...should strike the soul rather than the body'¹⁵ was a utopian concept for the prisons of colonial Bengal.

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