

JANGALMAHAL DEBATE

Medinipur Jail Diary

Nisha Biswas

[Hundreds of women (and men) from Jangalmahal are in various jails, most of them lodged in Medinipur Central Correctional Home. The writer of this piece spent 43 days in its female ward in June-July 2010. We publish below a shortened version of her experience.]

I was very tired—two and a half days in Jangalmahal followed by two days' arrest process had numbed my nerves and I slept tightly. Next morning, my eyes opened with shrill shouts and I found the inmates queuing up and someone called Phul-di was counting in a loud voice and making vigorous gesticulations. This, I understood was gunti—head-counting.

Thereafter, the heavy door of the ward was opened. Each of us came out, some started sweeping, some washing dishes, and a few moving around aimlessly or plainly gossiping. It took no time to guess that I was the morning's topic. I looked for tea.

Then Husanara, a sweet jovial woman, came to sit by my side and started talking. When she called me baji—elder sister, I began to cry, tears rolling down relentlessly. I know not what she understood, but I felt good. I had known that the State would never tolerate me, that I might be arrested; but I had never known that I would be so depressed when I was actually taken in. In the mental condition that I was in, someone introducing me to jail life, sharing puffed rice and biscuits, was a great relief. That first day with Husanara has stayed on in my memory.

Jails have been renamed 'Correctional Homes,' but are still run by old rules. In our ward, the gate used to open after gunti at six in the morning. Phul-di always did the counting—she was the 'Writer.' Work was distributed among convicts according to their abilities. Like, Phul was the 'Writer' and Sandhya 'Mate.' Writer does office work and Mate various chores in the ward. Phul's daily routine was counting and then informing those inmates who were to be produced in court on that day. Every alternate day, a doctor used to visit the ward and there, too, Phul made a list of those to be checked and gave out medicines as prescribed. One of her major job was to control the TV, whose remote was always in her custody. Everyone followed her dictates.

Her doctor husband was also lodged in the male ward. They had been convicted for the murder of a doctor friend. Her daughter was working in Kolkata with some reputed company. We all knew she belonged to an affluent family. Writer Phul and Mate Sandhya formed a caucus and both of them sought obedience from the rest of us.

Medinipur is a transit jail for under-trials, not meant for convicts. Since under-trials are not supposed to do any labour, some convicts are always retained to manage the show. Our morning activity consisted of having tea, washing, bathing and playing ludo. Phul had told

Satyarupa to teach sewing and take reading and writing classes in the evening, which just stopped with my entry.

Recounting used to be done at noon before we were locked up again—have lunch and stay locked. For three hours in the afternoon we were allowed out of the ward but from six in the evening we were locked again. From the female ward one had to cross six locked gates to reach the main gate of the jail. The ward was locked, the warden's office was locked from both inside and outside and the keys were kept in the office at jail gate. At daytime, a male convict was posted and the night warden was provided with a walkie-talkie for any eventuality. Inmates were locked and so were the wardens, both imprisoned.

SPIRITUAL SUCCOUR

Jail-language comes from some other world. I never knew that one could communicate in such a slang-filled lingo. I felt the inmates dreamt in that language. It probably enabled them to live such perfunctory life. The warden's tongue was hardly different. Both were imprisoned, the difference being that while one drew a salary for being confined, the other was compelled to live in the cage.

Jail always encourages pujas. It's another exercise to make one lose confidence —don't take responsibility, leave everything to God; leave whatever happens to this life but work for betterment in the next; don't worry, almighty God is there to solve all your problems.

Every Saturday—Shani-bar—there was quite a racket. Except five Muslim inmates, most of the women, including Satyarupa, fasted on account of Shani-puja. The puja was held in the evening in the open, near a small Shiva-linga. Inside the ward, there were a couple of tiny puja enclosures decorated with pictures of a variety of known and unknown Gods. Most inmates prayed there after bathing in the morning. The evenings were reserved for kirtan. Usually, kirtan was performed at one place but if there was discord, inmates split into two groups and competed with each other.

One day, a rather obese Maharaj from Ramakrishna Math came to visit, as he does once a month, to fulfil our spiritual needs. He, his entourage and jail officers sat on chairs while all the women went to touch his feet and receive his blessings. Never bothering to ask how they were, he gave a short speech, citing Hiroshima and Nagasaki (why not Bhopal?), on the futility of life. He left in ten minutes after handing two pieces of sandesh to each inmate.

SUNDAY NIGHT FEVER

Sunday was a day of friendship. All the inmates gathered at one place and sang together. Apart from Mate Sandhya, there were two more women of the same name. One of them worked as Phul's personal attendant and was frequently mistreated. The third Sandhya, who used to work with the forest department, was convicted for murdering her daughter-in-law. She, her husband and their son were awarded life-imprisonments. On my first Sunday in jail, while I was sitting quietly in my file, Husanara called me to see the fun. Much singing and

clapping were going on there, and then I noticed something strange: the third Sandhya was hysterically banging her head and hands on the floor and asking them to sing louder and louder. Higher the pitch raised, more was the banging, with her hair flowing in all the directions. I remembered, once, when I was very young, I went to Chintpurni in Himachal to attend an aunt's son's (after six daughters) hair-giving ceremony. There, too, I saw women doing like this in front of the temple. Goddess Chintpurni's miraculous powers were said to have been transferred to those women in that manner; and with Her blessings, they were granted any wish they would make.

At some point, Bhabani, a trafficking accused, came and sat near her feet and asked her to vanquish her sins. Then, Mate Sandhya, too, came for atonement. The hysteric Sandhya held Bhabani by her arm and banged her head and free hand. At another end, Ma Manasa—the snake Goddess—landed on Kavita making her wriggle with cupped hands above the head like a hood. At this point, Husanara asked me to move away because Sandhya would now get up and stride around. It was enough for me; so, with a firm voice, I asked them to stop all that or else I would call the jailor. They stopped, but since then everyone went against me for my anti-god sensibility. They had seen many Maoists, they had seen women who had been so badly beaten that they couldn't go to the toilet, but they had never seen someone like me. It was fine if I didn't believe or participate in but I couldn't stop them from their obligations towards the Almighty. There was no separate cell here, but the ones in the discarded ward could be cleaned in a day, I might as well shift there without delay.

Next morning, the jail inspector came to the ward. After listening to the inmates, I was called. He tried to convince me that it was their belief and I should let them continue as long as they didn't disturb me. I tried to tell him that two women were sick and I couldn't see them suffering. He argued that the inmates were backward and we, the enlightened city folk, must respect their sentiments. I agreed but reminded him of our responsibility towards society. I asked him what the jail policy was; the jail being a government institution, does it encourage superstitions? Finally, he buckled and a doctor was sent for the treatment of Sandhya and Kavita. Both of them were given medicines and had no further attacks.

OUTLAWED IN-LAWS

More than half the inmates of Medinipur jail were accused of dowry-murder. Among them was eighty-years-old Champa-mashi—it was unthinkable that she could do something as dreadful as murder. She used to ask me lots of questions and look at me with amazement. But everyone was not Champa-mashi.

That bride-murder is so rampant in Bengali society was a revelation to me. I used to think that it was predominantly an urban phenomenon; that in rural society, because women are directly involved in economic activities, even the poor had more freedom than urban middle-class women. I was so wrong! In cities, money helps avert arrest or manage bail, but in villages, the poor has no means to do that and they usually land in jail. Whenever I asked inmates accused of dowry-murder why they did what they did, the reply inevitably was that

they had no role in the death. So, the discussion veered round to what drove a young, bubbling girl to take her own life. Her own family was responsible for her death—that was the usual answer.

A girl, if there's trouble in her in-laws' home, will normally share her pain with her parents, siblings, cousins or friends. But those confidantes, instead of helping her break free, force her to go back and face the misfortune. So long as we think daughters are liabilities and do not allow them to grow as an independent individual, many more will die. The absurd part of the story is that when a daughter dies, her own relations then show profound love for her and accuse the in-laws.

MONEY CAN BUY LIFE

Take the case of Shibani Pal. She, her husband and son were accused of murdering the daughter-in-law. She got bail in six weeks after an out-of-court settlement for two lakh rupees. Kavita's case was opposite but no different. Her son and a neighbourhood girl used to take tuitions from a private tutor in her home. A relationship developed between the tutor and the girl and she became pregnant. The girl committed suicide because the tutor went back on her promise to marry. The girl's family accused Kavita as an accomplice in the crime. Meanwhile, the tutor got a job in a government school. The girl's father withdrew the case after receiving a lakh of rupees plus the expenses incurred so far. This bothered me a lot. Is the value of a girl's life just a lakh of rupees? How do you evaluate the price of life?

Around this time, came Sanchita alias Fantush. She was in jail because she had chopped her rapist's penis. The man, she said, was quite old and used to sneak into her room in the form of a cat. All day long she used to walk amongst us and groan. When her groaning became unbearable, Mate Sandhya made her Sonu's daughter. Sonu, a sweet young mother of three, suffered from mental problem. Her husband, instead of providing her medical care, dumped her with her mother and remarried. One day in a fit of rage, she sacrificed her mother to Goddess Kali. She was much better after medication and care by other inmates. Sonu made a place in our hearts. She literally became Fantush's mother. But, her joy was short-lived as her 'beti' left after four days.

Life is like that! Sonu was the adopted daughter of a Nepali army man who lived in Sejua with his wife. Later, he remarried and started living somewhere in Nepal. According to Sonu, he was a nice man and looked after them well. He passed away three years ago and now Sonu had no one. Every week she sent letters to her husband, kids, friends, cousins and others but no one ever bothered to respond. She pleaded to see her children, and so, her husband was summoned by the court. Instead of appearing, he sent a letter saying that, for all practical purposes, for him Sonu was dead.

PASTIME PROBLEMS

Passing time is the biggest problem in jail. Medinipur jail is quite green and has lots of mango, jackfruit and blackberry trees.

Jail too has its date with the consumer economy. Whether it was a family meeting with husband or son or an interview with family or friends from outside or an appearance in court, the female inmates women used to do makeup or dress to kill. They rubbed face-cream, daubed powder, wore lipstick, nail polish, khol and what not. Those who were to be produced in Jhargram or Kanthi courts started putting makeup before dawn. The rampant use of *Fair and Lovely* was a shocking finding.

Most books in the library were religious. There were shelves after shelves of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and other spiritual gurus. There were, of course, many good old books on history as well as novels and government reports. I managed to read quite a few novels and reports by British administrators. Just before my arrest, I was reading Vara Vara Rao's *Captive Imagination*, a collection of his writings from jail. His imagination and thoughtfulness is amazing.

Jail is a haven for corruption. If one has money, one can get anything: two rupees for a boiled egg or a piece of fish; two bananas or a lime or an apple for a rupee. One can get things from outside, too. It's also easy to smuggle in money. Champa-Mashi had fifty rupees deposited in the office for her needs. Her family lived far away and couldn't visit her, so they made this arrangement. She asked the office to get her soap and a packet of puffed rice. For things that didn't cost more than twenty rupees, she had to sign on a bill for fifty rupees. Even mortgaging was carried out unchecked in the jail. Sonali mortgaged her gold nose-ring to buy a new dress.

All the work of the sweeper was done by inmates for small favors like a few onions, a handful of green chilies, piece of soap, so on. Sujan and Amina used to do such work and, after they were transferred to Purulia jail, Manju and Sonali took over.

Again, it was in jail that I saw how dried rotis could be used as fuel for making tea, how 8-by-8-by-10-foot pit got half-filled in just four days with wasted food.

GENDER-PIECE

The jail took special care in guarding its female inmates from the male inmates. Male inmates had to come to the female ward for electrical or civil maintenance jobs, plucking fruits from trees, so on. Female inmates were always shooed away with the intimation of any such visit. I could never figure out what great misfortune would befall on us if we came within the range of male sight. During Ratha Yatra, male inmates took out the Ratha while females had to view it through a slit. There's no denying jail looks down upon women. □□□