

# MY YEARS IN AN INDIAN PRISON

By Mary Tyler

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“The dependence of large sections of the rural population for their very survival on landlords and moneylenders seemed to me to make elections for the village councils or for the provincial and central governments nothing more than a formality in which the will of those who held a strangling economic power could not fail to prevail.”

Writing in 1973, Mary Tyler describes the people’s misery, their struggle and its brutal repression - how the jails were filled with the starving poor. Today the newspapers provide unwitting evidence of a situation which has since then steadily worsened – on the one hand, the power squabbles of politicians and on the other, drought, starvation, death stalking the countryside, and more and more people being driven to “crimes” like dacoity and robbery which are seen by those in power as a “law and order” problem requiring stern handling.

Her comment on the callous indifference of those in power to the misery of those whom they are supposed to represent, is as valid today: “In Delhi, the parliamentary debates continued as to whether death occurring in several states were from starvation or malnutrition. Every time famine struck, the same inane discussion was repeated as if there were any fundamental difference between the two, as if deaths from malnutrition were acceptable because starvation had been averted.”

Thrown into prison on a variety of cooked-up charges, Mary Tyler, wife of Amalendu Sen, a Naxalite revolutionary, writes of the five years she spent in Bihar prisons, awaiting trial, of the women she lived with, and of the life conditions outside jail, which made the struggle for survival itself a “criminal offence.”

## Behind the Bars of a “Democracy”

The book opens with Mary being interrogated by the police. They shoot questions and false statements at her :

“You are Chinese.”

“No, British.”

“I say you are Chinese. Where is your passport?”

“In Calcutta.”

“You are lying. I have your passport. Do you want to see it?”

They seized her passport from her home in Calcutta, and after this interrogation, issued wildly distorted reports to the press.



*Mary Tyler*

The brutal irrationality of the monster-like structure which regularly swallows and devours people, slowly envelops the reader as Tyler describes her incarceration, the torture of political prisoners she witnesses, the dreadful prison conditions, and the utter indifference of the police officers to the civil and legal rights of the prisoners. She does not dwell on the horrors of jail life in lurid language but as the narrative proceeds, the details emerge as a grim background to the daily life of the women.

The writer never forgets to place the discomfort of prison life in the context of the misery outside: “The rain seeped through the walls and ceiling into coal and firewood, blankets and sacks. Outside, large areas of Bihar were under water for weeks on end, crops were ruined. Our daily vegetable was blackened potatoes that left a nasty, stinging sensation in the mouth.” However she also points out that poverty outside is neither reason nor excuse for the subhuman conditions in which prisoners are kept. 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. And the Congress Government had won the elections

on the slogan "Away with poverty'!"

The horrible details do not hit the reader all at once – they creep up one by one in the course of the narrative, in the course of the narrative, in the routine description : "The daily vegetable was boiled in an iron drum till it was black and shiny. Worst of all, fat red worms were frequently found in it... As the winter approached, all the prisoners began to suffer from the lack of adequate clothing and blankets.... As the dry cold intensified, our feet split and bled. Most of our fellow prisoners had never owned any sandals but their toughened soles too cracked and became sore. As the stony ground hardened, the children often cried from cold and the throbbing pain of wounds that would not heal....our water supply dwindled to a yellowish trickle... our tap dried altogether and we had to manage with two buckets of water between four of us for bathing, washing our clothes, cooking and cleaning. The wardens had almost to be prayed to for a bucket of water."

On a diet of slimy rice, half-cooked chapatis and rotten vegetables; 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..."

To doctors and jail staff alike, the prisoners were not human beings at all, but just creatures from whom the most benefit was to be extracted : "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."

Again, women are exposed to extra sources of disease : "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.

### **Women the Criminals ?**

Who are the women locked in India's jails – the unthought of, invisible women declared guilty and thrown out of sight, out of mind ? What are the dreadful crimes they have committed to deserve such punishment ?

One after the other, they speak in the pages of this book – their lives and struggles are narrated and a certain common pattern begins to emerge : "Nearest to the bars slept Bulkani – old, skinny and asthmatic, a retired colliery worker in prison without trial for three years already, on a petty theft charge." Many of the women were landless labourers imprisoned for such offences as brewing illicit liquor, direct or indirect involvement in rebellion against oppressive landlords : "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."

Still more grotesque is 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..."

As the stories unfold themselves, the double oppression of women show everywhere. For instance, Panno was a Santhal woman whose daughter became pregnant by the village headman. Maddened by the taunts and abuse of the other villagers, Panno got into a fury and killed the girl, for which she was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment. "At night", writes Tyler, "She would jerk and mumble and whimper in her sleep, seeing nightmares of her daughter..." Another tribal girl was in jail for having killed a moneylender who tried to rape her. Thus, whether the woman lets herself be raped or resists, it is she who is punished. In case after case, the woman pays with her sanity, her peace, her life, while the real criminals not only escape scot free but sit in judgment over their victim and declare her guilty.

Not just caste and class barriers but the sheer helplessness of their misery divides women from each other. Too often we turn our anger and hate against another woman because the oppressive force seems too large and beyond our reach while the other woman is like us, hateful in her vulnerability which is our own. Thus one tribal girl Heera, taunted by a neighbour woman for her illicit pregnancy, killed the woman. Her lover married a rich woman and Heera was arrested. She was declared an outcast by the village elders so her family did not dare offer bail for her. She and her little son were both in jail : "She never laughed though occasionally a diffident and self-conscious smile would cross her lips."

The ultimate crime of all these women is poverty. In some cases this is starkly clear, as in that of Budhni, a 25-year-old woman and her old mother-in-law, who sold their land, household goods and jewellery to get bail in their case. They

had been accused of possessing unlicensed firearms. They kept themselves alive by doing menial labour but two years later when the case came up for hearing, they could not scrape together the six rupees for the bus fare from their home to the court. So they were promptly re-arrested for “jumping bail”!

### **Forced to Oppress Each Other**

While women in prison experience oppression in the most direct way through other women – matines (female prisoners promoted to a supervisory post) and wardresses, yet Tyler points out that as in the family, where the older woman may be in a position of authority but not of power, these women were themselves oppressed and exploited within the hierarchy. Tyler and her friend Kalpana did not report the petty thievings of the matines because they felt that prisoners should not be divided against each other : “Why pick quarrels with the small fish when the sharks are waiting to devour you all ?”

“The wardresses were themselves locked in with the prisoners in the female section, in a kind of jail within the jail and could not leave till a warder opened a gate from outside... They were all very poor and their conditions of service little better than slavery. They rarely had a day off... and had to obtain permission even to go shopping. We often saw them bullied not only by the jail officers but by their male counterparts of warders as well. They seemed to feel sad at keeping us locked up day and night, and sometimes one of the bolder one used to unlock our cells and allows us to talk for an hour or so.”

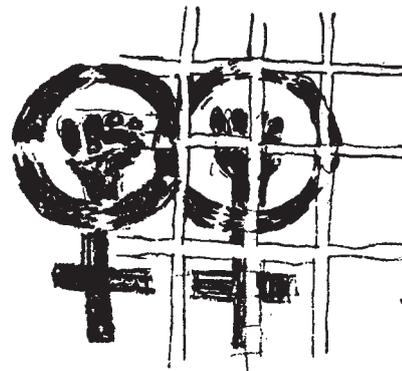
These women lived under the constant threat of arbitrary suspension. One woman was suspended because she allowed a prisoner’s child to give two flowers to Mary Tyler. Another, who became a friend of Mary’s was a tribal girl called Leoni from whom Mary came to know how the wardresses lived, and how they were hardly better off than the prisoners: “The conditions in their own living quarters were, if anything, even worse than inside the prison itself. Each family’s accommodation consisted of a small low room and a tiny verandah and courtyard. Upto eight or nine people might be living in this confined space. Leoni actually preferred being on duty in our ward to staying at home in her small dark quarters teeming with flies and mosquitoes and stinking from the open gutter that ran along the alley courtyard.”

And of course sexual harassment is an inevitable part of the oppression these women encounter : “Once Leoni fell asleep on night duty and the Chief Head Warder intervened to save her from possible suspensions. Afterwards, he demanded that she sleep with him as “payment” for this favour done to her. When she refused, he made her life miserable by constantly threatening her with dismissal.”

### **The Prison Hierarchy**

Tyler tells how she once jokingly congratulated the Chief Head Warder on his imminent transfer to the Patna Jail, saying that he would meet all the “top people” there. His reply was

unhesitating : “What do I want with the top people? It’s the poor I get my money from.” This statement sums up the functioning of the prison structure and the social system that makes it necessary. 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. Thus, the wardresses extracted portions of the rations from the prisoners in return for small favours, the hospital staff consumed the medicines and special diets meant for sick people, the jailer and head warder received regular payment from their subordinates in payment for turning a blind eye to all this thieving. From all this it was the Chief Head Warder who really profited : “He had managed to buy himself several taxies and 30 acres of land on a salary of 300 rupees – hardly sufficient to feed his family...” Those lower down in the hierarchy, after all



their corrupt activities, still barely managed to keep body and soul together.

As for the highest official, the Jail Superintendent, he used all the prisoners as his personal domestic servants and thrived from his very profitable business of ruling over the jail kingdom. However, “corruption did not stop with the jail superintendent. One superintendent told me that he hated the periodic visits made by Ministers or other high officials. Why I asked why, he replied, ‘They always ask for money and if I don’t give it to them, they will transfer me to some remote jail miles and miles away where I can never see my family and where there is no social life. If I want to stay here I have to pay up’.” Thus the links between the rampant corruption within the jail and the vast network of oppression outside, are exposed.

And when the exalted personage such as Ministers for Jail Welfare came to inspect, the prison received cosmetic treatment so that the miserable but cherished possessions of the prisoners would not offend the eyes of the visitors. They were usually too afraid to mention their grievances but if a bolder woman did speak up, she would be told, “All right, all right, I’ll see to it,” the superintendent would make witty remarks like : “Well we’d better get out, these women are dangerous types you know, murderesses, and all that, they might decide to

bump us of,” and they would depart, leaving worse devastation behind them – the women were not allowed to cook till inspection was over, and every flower they had grown with hard labour was plucked to make garlands for these dignitaries.

Different weapons are used to keep the prisoners submissive and divided from each other. One is granting them so-called favours so that the threat of withdrawal of these favours prevents them from voicing protest of any kind. On the other hand, the slightest hint of revolt or even minor disobedience leads to indiscriminate violence, against which the helpless prisoners have no redress, no one to report to, nowhere even to run : “On June 19, 1973, in Jamshedpur jail, the male political prisoners were beaten up as punishment for making tea when forbidden to do so... Already in fetters they were handcuffed and dragged to the central courtyard so that the sounds of the beating could be heard all over the jail presumably as a warning to other prisoners. One boy’s arm was fractured and another received as serious eye injuries...”

Apart from the frequent orgies of violence, manhandling and beating of prisoners by warders is an everyday affairs. Gulabi, an old woman, was hit by a warder, fell and dislocated her shoulder; another woman, Moti was so badly beaten that she was covered with bruises and could hardly walk for two days.

### **The Prison of Home**

One high caste woman of a landowning family who was arrested for taking part in the J.P. movement, waved her arms towards the expanse of garden around and said : “Do you call this prison? This is not a prison. For the first eight years of my married life I was confined to two rooms and a courtyard at the back of the house.”

The pressures of home, family and community follow the women into jail. The worries and tensions and responsibilities of the home torment them. Those who have children with them in the prison have to see them starve and waste away with sickness; those whose children are left out in the villages are consumed with anxiety. Tyler narrates how they would sit crying whenever they were given special food for festivals, unable to eat and thinking of their children starving or sold as slaves and prostitutes in the famine ravaged villages.

All the women were underweight and unhealthy. They took this as a normal stage of affairs because “they were so used to ill health from an early age...one reason for the predominance of under-nourishment in females was that in many families protein foods were reserved for consumption of males.” So also injustice and violence were woven into the fabric of women’s lives... Nearly all the women belonged to the poorer sections of the peasantry... they had almost without exception been married in early childhood to husbands whom they saw for the first time on the wedding day... they told alarming tales of girls who had run off with men of their choice and had been forced to drink ram’s blood, paraded on a donkey and had their heads shaved to atone for their crime... Many of my

companions had been regularly beaten by their husbands... one told me that her husband hit her for putting too much salt in his food, another because his rice was cold. None of them, however, hungry they might be, could eat until after the men of the house had eaten... The more prosperous among them had been confined almost entirely to the house and its surroundings, though the poorer who had to work for a living, had led slightly less restricted lives working in the fields or sometimes on building sites...” So an unjust hierarchy, arbitrary behaviour of “superiors” and violence everyday was no new thing to women.

All their desires and aspirations had been moulded by the family and its demands in the true tradition of good Hindu womanhood. They starved themselves so that they could cook small delicacies and present them to their male relatives on visiting day. Yet in the prison, new ambitions bloom even if they are not allowed to flourish: “Rohini, a young peasant woman told us of her secret wish to learn to read and write.” Deprived of all contact with the outside world, not given her letters for months together, refused writing material and allowed to see only a heavily censored newspaper, Tyler found that her fellow prisoners had always been kept caged in as circumscribed a mental world : “Most had never seen a newspaper before and crowded round each day to find out what was written in mine. Sometimes hearing that significant events were described there, one of them would ask if there was any news of her case or village. Though they knew the word ‘Government’ nobody had ever told them how the country was run. However they were eager to learn and also asked me many questions – where kerosene came from, how paper was made, how the newspaper was printed and so on.”

The unbroken spirit of women living in such dehumanizing conditions, their constant concern for each other and willingness to share the little they have are what continue to astonish as one reads page after page of the book. From the half-mad woman Moti who would stand at the gate and bawl: “How long do you expect me to stay here ? I am going back to my own country. Come, let me out”, to Kalpana who left her middle class existence to join the Naxalbari movement to the simple women who would cover each other with their blankets and share their food, to Tyler herself who unselfconsciously cleans and nurses back to health a miserably diseased old woman nobody else would touch – everywhere the book exudes hope.

### **The Continuing Struggle**

While this book has the universal quality of literature grounded in experience, it also had specific relevance in today’s context. It is dedicated to “those in India and elsewhere who are behind bars for a just cause” and the ominous last line added in April 1978, reminds us that repression has by no means ended : “An unknown number of political prisoners are still in detention.”

Questions that Tyler does not articulate arise in one’s mind

as one reads the book. On the one hand, the author sees hope in the simmering discontent of the country : “The Indian people are not suffering in silence. The country was like a bubbling cauldron, the government like a sorcerer stirring to prevent it from boiling over but unable to quench the fire beneath. There was a food crisis, a fuel crisis. There were food riots... strikes and sabotage... attacks on landlords’ stocks of hoarded grain and on the police who came to defend them... the market was closed down... increasing trouble from... within the ranks of the police... the country was teeming with riots for food and coal, strikes and demonstrations, student unrest, clashes between police and public, industrial stoppages and government splits and resignations.”

She also sees the Naxalites as some sort of hopeful sign because they are concerned at this state of affairs and want a radical change : “Amalendu’s crime, Kalpana’s crime, is the crime of all those who cannot remain untouched and inactive in an India where a child crawls in the dust with a begging bowl...”

However, the experience of reading the book leaves one with a different hope – not hope in those who, though not themselves the worst sufferers, are concerned at suffering, but hope in the solidarity of those who suffer together and will one day refuse to suffer any longer. The sisterhood that Tyler describes is at the level of familial tenderness – within prison walls these women reconstruct something of a family or community atmosphere with all the implied security and

tensions. The strength, not the helplessness of these women is what overwhelms. One is brought face to face with the strength of India’s women who, in various kinds of prisons, continue to struggle. The question that one is left with is: how will this solidarity of common suffering be transformed into the militant solidarity of common struggle – not just caring for each other but standing together as a wall of defiance against the oppressors ?

The myriad obstacles to the building of that solidarity are evident in the book too – and here one feels lies its great value. It faithfully presents a picture of our predicament as Indian women today - imprisoned, suffering the brunt of an exploitative system yet most far removed from control of it; sharing an instinctive sisterhood yet not being able to articulate it; still seeing ourselves as owing our first loyalty to male-dominated, oppressive structures whether they be family, community or caste.

And in circumstances so heavily weighted against us, still reaching out to each other. What could be greater testimony to the power of sisterhood than this experience of Mary Tyler herself – transcending barriers of language, nationality, race, class, culture - speaking not only to the women she lived with in prison, but also to women everywhere. □

This is a picture of nurses in Patna demonstrating against police inaction and failure to apprehend the murderers of Mary Cheria, a 23-year-old student nurse who was undergoing her training at the Nalanda Medical College Hospital. Her mutilated body was found on a rail track near Agamkuan on December 1, 1979.

There is a widespread feeling that this murder is being deliberately hushed up by the police and the government because it is the work of some members of a gang of goondas (ostensibly medical students) who happen to be the sons of rich, politically influential persons. They openly move around with pistols and other lethal weapons.

Mary’s brother, P.C. Matthew, had demanded a high level probe into the murder. The government appointed a one-man commission headed by A.P. Mishra, Director General-cum-Inspector General Vigilance. The commission submitted its report to the government in early May, 1980. its profound conclusion : “The police failed to interrogate suspected persons involved in the murder.”

This murder, like the gang rape of nurses at Basti by political hoodlums, had created a sense of fear and panic among nurses in Bihar. Since the government and police have proved beyond doubt that they exist only to shield goondas, to encourage atrocities on the poor and the vulnerable, women will have to find other ways of dealing with such violence. We hope that progressive women’s organizations in Bihar will not let this murder and other such atrocities be forgotten. □

**WILL PATNA  
WOMEN  
ALLOW MARY’S  
MURDER-CASE  
TO BE ANOTHER  
“CLOSE FILE”?**



**Mary Cheria**

