

Imprisoned Resistance: Political Agency and Colonial Penology in Assam through Robin Kakati's Autobiography

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Abstract—The article explores the lived experiences of political prisoners in Assam during the late colonial period, foregrounding Robin Kakati's *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* (2011) as a seminal text in Assamese prison literature. The research examines the interplay of colonial administrative control, prison hierarchy, and nationalist resistance, highlighting how incarceration functioned both as a site of repression and a space for intellectual, moral, and ethical assertion. Kakati's autobiographical account, serialized across seven diaries and written during his confinement in Jorhat Jail, documents systemic violations of prison regulations, differential treatment based on caste and class, and the precarious conditions of health, sanitation, and communication. The narrative foregrounds solidarity among prisoners, cultural engagement, and non-violent protest, including hunger strikes, as strategic forms of resistance against colonial authority. By analyzing the structural and symbolic dimensions of incarceration, this study situates Assam's frontier jails within the broader historiography of anti-colonial struggle, illustrating how imprisonment facilitated political consciousness and ethical agency. Furthermore, it demonstrates the value of prison autobiographies as historical testimony, revealing how personal narratives of confinement contribute to collective memory, cultural resilience, and the documentation of marginalized experiences during India's freedom movement.

Index Terms— Colonial penology, Assam jails, political prisoners, Robin Kakati.

I. INTRODUCTION

The colonial prison system in India was more than a punitive mechanism; it was a site of political negotiation, moral assertion, and cultural contestation.

In Assam, particularly during the Japanese invasion anxieties and the Quit India Movement of 1942, jails became arenas where the tensions between colonial authority and nationalist agency were most visibly enacted. Robin Kakati's *Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha* (2011) emerges as a critical text that illuminates these dynamics, offering first-hand insight into the lived realities of political prisoners. Arrested in the aftermath of the Sarupathar derailment, Kakati's autobiographical account meticulously records the structural and ethical dimensions of incarceration, including hierarchical classifications of prisoners, discriminatory treatment based on caste and social background, and the administration of privileges and labor. These narratives underscore the duality of imprisonment: while the colonial state sought to suppress political dissent, prisoners exercised agency, forming solidarities, engaging in intellectual and spiritual practices, and employing non-violent methods of resistance such as hunger strikes.

The socio-legal framework of colonial penology, established through legislative enactments like the Prisons Act of 1894 and the Prisoners Act of 1900, was implemented inconsistently, particularly in frontier regions such as Assam. Kakati's diaries reveal that political prisoners were often lodged under conditions that violated statutory regulations, such as male prisoners being placed in female wards, demonstrating the discretionary power of local authorities. At the same time, hierarchical privileges, codified through mechanisms like the Bengali Diet Scale, were both exploited and subverted by inmates to foster solidarity and assert collective identity. Beyond material considerations, the colonial administration attempted

to control intellectual engagement and communication, restricting access to newspapers, books, and letters, yet prisoners employed ingenuity to navigate these limitations.

Kakati's autobiography also foregrounds the psychological and moral dimensions of incarceration. Fellow inmates, such as Kushal Konwar and Kamala Miri, exemplify the intertwining of ethical courage, spiritual reflection, and political defiance. Hunger strikes, disciplined conduct, and ritual observances in prison illustrate how prisoners transformed confinement into a site of ethical and political assertion. Furthermore, humorous and anecdotal episodes, including the misinterpretation of minor earthquakes or bombings near the jail, demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of inmates, reflecting the multifaceted strategies through which prisoners negotiated oppression.

By situating Assam's jails within the broader historiography of colonial incarceration and political resistance, this study highlights the significance of prison autobiographies as both historical documentation and literary expression. Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha provides a lens through which the complex interplay between colonial authority, cultural hierarchy, and nationalist agency can be understood. The narrative foregrounds personal experiences while connecting them to collective struggles, illustrating the enduring importance of memory, ethical reflection, and resistance in understanding India's freedom movement, particularly in the often-overlooked frontier regions.

II. THE SARUPATHAR DERAILMENT AND THE ARREST OF ROBIN KAKATI

In the early hours of 10 October 1942, a railway train transporting Allied Forces soldiers towards the Burmese frontier met with a catastrophic derailment near Sarupathar Railway Station in Upper Assam, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of British-American soldiers (Hazorika 233). This incident, orchestrated by Mrityu-Vahini, a suicide squad inspired by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his Azad Hind Fauj, followed a series of disruptive activities in Central and Upper Assam. The colonial administration responded swiftly: C.A. Humphrey, the District Magistrate of Jorhat, ordered a coordinated civilian-military operation to apprehend the

perpetrators, coupled with a simultaneous crackdown on Congress volunteers and their sympathisers in the region. Robin Kakati, a prominent Gandhian satyagrahi, was arrested from the Congress Party office in Sibsagar on the very day of the derailment. In his subsequent diary entries, written during his confinement in Ward no. 14 of Jorhat Jail, Kakati recalled the immediate conditions and the distinctions between different categories of prisoners: "As security prisoners, we were lodged in a cell within a huge concrete building [i.e., ward no. 14]. In the meantime, a good number of leaders from Jorhat and Guwahati were placed in the female ward of the jail. Some others were kept among the non-political prisoners" (Chutia 109; my translation).

The colonial administration had established a complex categorisation of prisoners: 'security prisoners' were confined under Regulation III of 1818 or corresponding rules under the Preventive Detention Act for involvement in "terrorist crime", whereas 'political prisoners' were convicted under Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code, 1862, for acts committed on "conscientious and political grounds" (Mohanty et al. 84). However, in practice, these distinctions often overlapped, particularly in the administration of jails. Legal provisions under Section 153-A stipulated that political prisoner should not be subjected to restraints beyond what was necessary for safe custody (85). Kakati's account, as serialized across seven diaries and later compiled into his autobiography Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha (2011), reveals the systematic violation of these provisions: male political prisoners were lodged in female wards, a clear breach of colonial prison regulations.

Kakati's autobiography occupies a significant place in the study of prison literature, particularly as it portrays the lived experiences of security and political prisoners in Assam during the late colonial period. Born on 3 September 1910 in Boliaghat village, Sibsagar district, Kakati joined the freedom movement as a student, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. His narrative encompasses the experiences of imprisonment, the brutal conditions within Jorhat Jail, and the psychological and emotional turmoil of detainees during the Japanese advance into Burma and the Quit India Movement of 1942. The diaries capture the uncertainty and fear among prisoners regarding the outcome of the war: "We were excitedly postulating the everyday events and we were convinced of the

defeat of British Allied power. But what will happen to India after the defeat? Some opined that Japan and Germany will divide and share India. They will rule India more stringently with military power. We developed sympathy for the Britishers. Because we thought that irrespective of all its deficiencies, British were believers in democracy” (Chutia 116–17; my translation).

Among Kakati’s fellow inmates was Kushal Konwar, suspected of involvement in the Sarupathar derailment and a prominent activist of the Golaghat District Congress Committee. Arrested alongside forty-two others, Konwar spent seven months in Jorhat Jail, including four months in solitary confinement as an under-trial (Hazorika 234). Kakati’s narrative provides a poignant portrayal of Konwar’s final days: “The news of the death sentence awarded to Kushal Konwar cast a pallor of gloom among the political prisoners (in Jorhat jail). Konwar maintained stoic behaviour throughout his final few days in prison. Most of his time was spent reading passages from the Gita. As the date of hanging approached, there was no visible difference in his behaviour. One could rather witness an illuminated expression in his eyes. The day before his hanging, the political prisoners were allowed to meet him and bid farewell with tearful eyes to the fearless soul. His sons were brought inside the jail for a final meeting with their father. On the evening before the hanging of Konwar, all the political prisoners in Jorhat jail observed a fast which continued till the afternoon of the next day. This fast was a homage to a brave son of Asomi Ai (Mother Assam), not merely a political gesture of anti-colonial resistance” (Chutia 109–10; my translation).

By foregrounding the experiences of political prisoners, Kakati’s work underscores the intersection of colonial authority, prison administration, and nationalist resistance. The autobiography also situates Assam within the broader context of anti-colonial incarceration, revealing how frontier jails became sites of both oppression and political consciousness. As a genre, prison autobiography is primarily realist or confessional, capturing personal accounts of confinement (Winslow 52). Kakati’s narrative, written partially during imprisonment, complements a wider corpus of Assamese political autobiographies, including Prabhat Sarma’s Bilator Galpa Aru Jailor Jibon, Srimanta Talukdar’s Agor Din Aru Mor Kotha, Krishnanath Sarma’s Krishna Sarmar Diary, and

Amiya Kumar Das’ Jivan Smriti. These works collectively illuminate the experiences of detainees, the carceral strategies of colonial authorities, and the philosophical reflections that imprisonment prompted among freedom fighters.

III. COLONIAL PENOLOGY AND THE EVOLUTION OF INDIAN PRISON SYSTEMS

The modern penological system was first introduced in the Indian subcontinent by the British East India Company in the early eighteenth century, with initial practices established around 1773 and gradually expanding to cover the entire subcontinent by 1860 (Mohanty et al. 24). Prior to the 1857 revolt, India’s legal and penal systems were a patchwork of Mughal legal traditions combined with emerging British notions of law. The conceptualisation of jails in British India primarily regarded them as temporary “holding places” for accused individuals awaiting trial, or for those serving sentences. East India Company officials, including T.B. Macaulay, expressed concern regarding the lax discipline and inadequate administration prevailing in colonial prisons. In a letter, Macaulay observed: “Whatever I hear about the Indian prisons satisfies me that their discipline is very defective... We have not an unlimited command of European agency, and it is difficult to find good agents for such a purpose among our native subjects” (Waits 1). This reflection highlights the early recognition by the colonial state of the inherent difficulties in transplanting Western penological models onto Indian contexts, where systemic oversight and human resources were limited. In 1836, Macaulay appointed a Prison Discipline Committee to assess and reform colonial prison administration. The committee’s report, submitted in 1838, recommended punitive mechanisms to improve jail discipline, arguing that “the best criminal code can be of little use to a community unless there is good machinery for the infliction of punishments” (Waits 113). This was followed by additional committees in 1846, 1877, and 1888, each reinforcing the notion that incarceration and penology were inseparable instruments of colonial statecraft. Subsequent legislative enactments, such as the Prisons Act of 1894 and the Prisoners Act of 1900, paved the way for the establishment of the Indian Jails Committee (1919–20) under the chairmanship of Sir Alexander G. Cadrew. This committee laid down foundational

principles for penological policy in India, emphasising systematic treatment of prisoners, but historians suggest that practical implementation often faltered due to a failure “to regard the prisoner as an individual” (Mohanty 26).

The ambiguous categorisation of political prisoners further complicated prison administration. Middle-class nationalists entering colonial jails during the early twentieth century negotiated privileges and redefined prisoner hierarchies. Ujjwal Kumar Singh notes that this led to the emergence of a new class of convicts, termed ‘politicals’, distinguished from ordinary criminals yet subject to inconsistent application of regulations (81). The colonial government experimented with a variety of designations for political prisoners including ‘seditionist’, ‘conspiracy case prisoners’, ‘raj kaidi/bandi’, and ‘state prisoners’ before settling on more neutral terms such as ‘detenue’ and ‘security prisoner’ by the 1920s. Prisoners were categorised into A, B, and C classes according to offence, health, education, and social background, with higher classes enjoying better treatment, while C-class prisoners faced stricter confinement and fewer privileges (Das 126). These classifications reflected not only hierarchical control but also the colonial administration’s perception of political prisoners as potential threats, especially during periods of nationalist agitation and World War I.

In Assam, these colonial penological practices manifested in tangible disparities between prisoners’ experiences. Bengali Diet Scale, adopted across Assam jails, delineated dietary privileges according to labour and non-labour status, which typically distinguished political prisoners from the general population (Das 106). High-caste political prisoners were permitted to cook their own food, and utensils and bedding could be transported when transferred between jails, perpetuating caste hierarchies within confinement. During the Quit India Movement, notable political figures such as Gopinath Bardoloi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed were consigned to Jorhat Jail under A- and B-class designations, receiving food and minor privileges, while C-class political prisoners were deprived of such amenities. Accounts from Kakati and his contemporaries reveal how higher-class prisoners compensated for these inequities by sharing resources, thereby fostering a sense of solidarity among inmates (Chutia 110).

Beyond administrative and dietary concerns, colonial prisons exercised strict control over reading materials and communication. The Indian Press Act (1910) and Indian Press Emergency Powers Act (1931) mandated the creation of banned book lists, which jail authorities enforced within prison walls. Prison officials often prohibited books arbitrarily, citing security concerns, and religious texts, including the Bhagavad Gita, were sometimes deemed subversive due to their association with extremist movements (Kar 29). Political prisoners were typically limited to writing two personal letters per month, though bribery of warders occasionally allowed additional correspondence (Chutia 116; Das 126). Kakati’s diaries indicate that, by 1942, prisoners in Assam had greater access to newspapers and reading materials than in earlier decades, illustrating a dynamic interaction between colonial regulations and local practices: “During 1930/32 newspapers were not allowed in jails. At times Jail warders and compounders smuggled in a few newspapers and letters from which the latest occurrences in the country could be fathomed. By 1942 newspapers were available in jail and we had no problem in getting information” (Chutia 116).

In essence, the colonial administration’s approach to penology in India was an evolving mix of imported legal frameworks, locally-adapted practices, and ad hoc regulations. Reforms such as the Indian Jails Committee’s recommendations and the classification of prisoners were implemented inconsistently, leading to wide variations in treatment across jails and categories of inmates. Political prisoners, in particular, navigated a complex landscape of privilege and repression, negotiating rights, communication, and access to reading materials in the face of often arbitrary restrictions. Kakati’s autobiography, alongside other prison narratives, illuminates the lived realities of this penal system, offering insights into how colonial incarceration sought to control both the body and the psyche of dissenting subjects. These historical accounts demonstrate that imprisonment was not merely a punitive tool but a calculated instrument of statecraft aimed at containing political opposition, asserting authority, and perpetuating colonial hierarchies in Assam and beyond.

IV. EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IN ASSAM JAILS

The lived experiences of political prisoners in Assam jails during the colonial period were shaped by a combination of structural hierarchy, punitive measures, and arbitrary governance. While the colonial administration had formulated broad guidelines for prisoner treatment through legislative acts and committees, local jail authorities exercised considerable discretion in implementing these policies. Political prisoners were particularly vulnerable to such discretionary power, as authorities frequently differentiated them from ordinary convicts on the basis of perceived threat levels rather than standardized rules. Instructions issued to jail superintendents emphasized surveillance and control: political prisoners “were not to be allowed to work together or given clerical work” and were often compelled to perform hard or “gang labour” (Purandare 130). Their right to remission, which could reduce sentences for good conduct, was frequently withheld, reflecting the colonial perception of political prisoners as inherently “dangerous” and untrustworthy (Das 130).

The socio-cultural hierarchies within the jails further influenced daily routines and privileges. In Assam, the Bengali Diet Scale prescribed different rations for labouring and non-labouring prisoners, indirectly privileging political detainees by granting them higher nutritional allotments (Das 106). Additionally, high-caste political prisoners were allowed to cook their own food at designated spaces within the jail, and when transferred, they could carry their bedding and utensils. Such allowances reinforced existing caste distinctions while creating a buffer against the harsher treatment meted out to C-class political prisoners and ordinary convicts (Chutia 110). Kakati and his contemporaries demonstrated solidarity by sharing bread and butter supplied to A- and B-class prisoners with those in C-class confinement, highlighting the agency of political prisoners in resisting hierarchical restrictions and fostering a sense of collective identity (Chutia 110).

Medical neglect and health crises were recurring features of colonial incarceration. Prisoners faced inadequate medical facilities, poor sanitation, and vulnerability to contagious diseases. During the early 1930s, an outbreak of pneumonia in Tezpur Jail led to

twenty eight reported deaths, while other jails across Assam, including Guwahati, experienced similar outbreaks (Chutia 110). The provincial government occasionally intervened, instructing jail authorities to improve hygienic conditions, yet political prisoners remained particularly exposed to neglect. Swami Satyananda, for instance, was transported to Jorhat jail in critical condition in October 1942. The jail superintendent, Tarak Das, initially denied permission for treatment outside the prison premises, and only after a prolonged delay was Satyananda transferred to Tezpur jail, where he succumbed to his injuries within days (Das 113). Such incidents reveal how the colonial penal system simultaneously enforced strict regimentation and exercised arbitrary discretion, often with fatal consequences for political detainees.

Censorship and restriction of communication were equally significant in shaping the prisoners’ experiences. The Assam Jail Manual (1934) granted prison officials the authority to control books and other reading materials, which were often banned on arbitrary “security” grounds. Religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita, despite their spiritual and cultural significance, were deemed dangerous because of their potential to inspire political dissent (Kar 29). Political prisoners were limited to writing two personal letters per month, and access to newspapers was often obstructed. Kakati recalls that during the early 1930s, newspapers were banned entirely, though warders occasionally smuggled them in: “During 1930/32 newspapers were not allowed in jails. At times Jail warders and compounders smuggled in a few newspapers and letters from which the latest occurrences in the country could be fathomed” (Chutia 116). By 1942, however, newspapers became more accessible, reflecting both administrative adjustments and prisoners’ persistent efforts to stay informed (Chutia 116).

Hunger strikes and other forms of protest were a defining feature of political resistance within Assam jails. Kamala Miri, a Congress volunteer and satyagrahi, participated in an indefinite hunger strike beginning in mid-October 1942, which progressively weakened his health. When admitted to the jail hospital, Miri was asked to sign a letter agreeing to desist from political agitation in exchange for treatment, which he refused. The colonial authorities’ intransigence ultimately resulted in his death on April 23, 1943, further galvanizing political prisoners to

continue acts of resistance (Chutia 110; Das 112). These acts of protest illustrate the dual function of hunger strikes: they were both a personal assertion of agency against oppressive conditions and a symbolic demonstration of collective political will. Such resistance also drew attention to the ethical contradictions within colonial incarceration, where legal and administrative frameworks coexisted uneasily with practices of violence, neglect, and coercion.

Finally, Kakati's autobiography reveals that despite oppressive conditions, prisoners maintained a sense of humour and resilience. For instance, during an apparent air raid at Roroia Military Airport, prisoners experienced panic at the sound of aircraft and collapsing concrete, only to later discover it was a minor earthquake (Chutia 111). Similarly, in 1944, a misadventure involving a British airplane dropping bombs near the jail created chaos, yet prisoners navigated the threat collectively (Das 119). These accounts suggest that political prisoners, while constrained by colonial surveillance and regulations, exercised agency through improvisation, solidarity, and psychological resilience, turning the jails into spaces of both repression and resistance.

In sum, the experiences of political prisoners in Assam's colonial jails were defined by a mixture of hierarchy, neglect, restriction, and creative adaptation. The system of classification, dietary and health privileges, censorship, and punitive work regimens reflected the colonial state's intent to manage and neutralize dissent, yet prisoners' solidarity, protest, and resourcefulness consistently challenged these objectives. Kakati's narrative, along with other autobiographical accounts, provides an invaluable lens to understand the complex interplay between incarceration, political identity, and resistance, demonstrating that even in conditions of extreme repression, prisoners were able to assert moral and cultural agency within the colonial penal framework.

V. COLONIAL PENOLOGY AND ADMINISTRATIVE ARBITRATIONS IN ASSAM

The administration of colonial prisons in Assam, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reflected a complex interplay of legislative frameworks, discretionary governance, and localized arbitrariness. While the British colonial state

introduced systematic penological practices across India, including the Prisons Act of 1894 and the Prisoners Act of 1900, implementation in frontier regions such as Assam remained inconsistent. These regions were often strategically significant due to their proximity to international borders and wartime theaters, including the Burmese frontier during World War II. Colonial authorities viewed incarceration as an instrument of statecraft, designed to suppress political dissent and manage populations that were considered potentially subversive. As Mohanty et al. note, despite reformative intentions, colonial prison systems "faltered in applying these recommendations because of its inability to regard the prisoner as an individual" (26). The prioritization of state security often superseded legal prescriptions, resulting in the harsh treatment of political prisoners and the inconsistent application of administrative protocols.

The differentiation between ordinary convicts and political prisoners was, in theory, guided by statutory definitions and judicial provisions. Political prisoners were typically detained under Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code, 1862, for disobedience on political or conscientious grounds, whereas security prisoners were confined under preventive detention rules or regulations such as Regulation III of 1818 (Mohanty et al. 84; Chutia 109). However, in practice, these classifications often overlapped, and prison authorities frequently treated political prisoners with the same severity as ordinary convicts. Kakati's autobiographical accounts illustrate this tension: male political prisoners were sometimes placed in female wards, a practice that flagrantly violated regulations governing the treatment of political detainees (Chutia 109). Such administrative inconsistencies underscored the discretionary powers exercised by jail superintendents, who were often guided by personal assessments of threat rather than codified rules.

Hierarchy, caste, and occupational status further complicated the organization of Assam jails. The Bengali Diet Scale differentiated between laboring and non-laboring prisoners, with political prisoners generally receiving superior provisions (Das 106). High-caste political prisoners were allowed to cook their own meals and retain utensils and bedding during transfers, whereas lower-class inmates faced stricter regulations and poorer nutritional access. Kakati and other inmates subverted these disparities through acts of solidarity, sharing rations with those in C-class

confinement and thereby creating a sense of communal identity among the prisoners (Chutia 110). This collective agency not only mitigated the arbitrariness of administrative decisions but also exemplified the capacity of political prisoners to resist hierarchical constraints imposed by the colonial penal system.

Health and sanitation conditions in Assam's colonial prisons were chronically inadequate. Outbreaks of infectious diseases, including pneumonia in the early 1930s, resulted in multiple deaths, while broader medical facilities remained insufficient (Chutia 110; Das 2020, 110). The administration's neglect of seriously ill political prisoners further illustrates the structural vulnerabilities embedded within colonial penology. For example, Swami Satyananda, critically injured in October 1942, was initially denied permission for treatment outside Jorhat jail. He was subsequently transferred to Tezpur jail only after his condition deteriorated further, where he ultimately succumbed to his injuries (Das 113). Such incidents highlight a systemic indifference toward prisoners' welfare and the discretionary authority exercised by jail administrators in determining access to essential healthcare.

Censorship and restricted access to reading and writing materials represented another dimension of administrative control. The Assam Jail Manual (1934) empowered prison authorities to regulate the entry of books and newspapers, often on the basis of arbitrary "security concerns" (Chutia 109). Religious texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, typically found among nationalist activists, were frequently considered subversive because they might incite resistance (Kar 29). Prisoners' communication was similarly constrained, limited to two personal letters per month, although bribery or subterfuge occasionally facilitated additional correspondence (Chutia 116). Despite these constraints, political prisoners actively sought to remain informed, improvising methods to access news and sustain intellectual engagement, reflecting both resilience and subtle forms of resistance within the prison environment (Chutia 116).

Forms of active protest, such as hunger strikes, further exposed the tension between colonial administrative authority and prisoners' agency. Kamala Miri's indefinite fast beginning in October 1942 exemplifies the precarious negotiation between coercion and conscience within the prison system. Denied medical

treatment unless he agreed to cease his political agitation, Miri persisted, ultimately dying on April 23, 1943 (Das 112; Chutia 110). The death of Miri galvanized political prisoners at Jorhat jail, reinforcing the potency of fasting as a method of resistance and underscoring the moral and political dimensions of incarceration under colonial rule. Such acts of defiance exemplify how prisoners challenged administrative authority while asserting the ethical and spiritual claims of political prisoners, transforming the jail into a contested site of moral and political struggle. Furthermore, anecdotal accounts of incidents like the misinterpretation of an earthquake as an air raid, or bombs dropped near the jail by a malfunctioning airplane, illustrate the precarious and unpredictable environment in which political prisoners were confined (Chutia 111; Das 119). These narratives reveal both the external pressures of wartime Assam and the prisoners' ability to respond with resilience, humour, and improvisation. Kakati's detailed recollections underscore the layered complexity of colonial incarceration: administrative rigor, punitive measures, systemic neglect, and environmental hazards combined to create a challenging, often life-threatening milieu, yet prisoners' collective and individual agency continually mediated these adversities.

In conclusion, the administration of colonial jails in Assam reflected an intricate combination of legal frameworks, discretionary governance, and localized improvisations. Political prisoners faced systemic inequalities, medical neglect, restricted communication, and punitive labor, yet maintained agency through solidarity, protest, and intellectual engagement. Kakati's autobiography, alongside contemporaneous accounts, provides invaluable insights into the operation of colonial penology in frontier regions. These narratives illuminate the interplay between incarceration, political identity, and resistance, offering a nuanced understanding of how political prisoners navigated both structural constraints and opportunities for asserting moral, cultural, and intellectual agency within the colonial carceral system.

VI. RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND THE LEGACY OF COLONIAL PRISON AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The prison narratives of Assam, particularly those of political prisoners during the late colonial period, reveal a profound intersection of oppression, resilience, and intellectual engagement. Robin Kakati's Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha exemplifies this genre, providing a detailed account of the lived experiences of political and security prisoners during the Quit India Movement, Japanese invasion anxieties, and wartime disruptions along the Burmese frontier. Unlike ordinary criminal inmates, political prisoners such as Kakati, Kushal Konwar, and Kamala Miri navigated a nuanced hierarchy within jails that reflected the colonial administration's broader anxieties about nationalist activism. In Kakati's words, political prisoners were aware of the broader implications of Allied defeat, speculating that "Japan and Germany will divide and share India. They will rule India more stringently with military power" (Chutia 116-17; my translation). Such reflections demonstrate how political prisoners were not only conscious of their immediate circumstances but also engaged with the broader geopolitical landscape, underscoring the ideological and intellectual dimensions of imprisonment.

Solidarity among prisoners emerged as a critical strategy for coping with administrative arbitrariness and systemic inequalities. The classification of prisoners into A, B, and C categories, and the corresponding disparities in diet, privileges, and living conditions, created hierarchies that could exacerbate tensions within the jail (Das 126). Kakati and other A-class inmates often shared their bread, butter, and other rations with C-class prisoners, fostering a sense of unity and collective identity. Such practices illustrate the prisoners' capacity for moral agency within an environment designed to suppress autonomy. By challenging caste-based food hierarchies and administrative rigidity, inmates asserted a form of social and ethical resistance, transforming the confines of the jail into a space for collaborative resilience and mutual support (Chutia 110).

Cultural and intellectual engagement also constituted an essential facet of prisoner agency. Restricted access to newspapers and books forced inmates to improvise, sometimes bribing warders or smuggling in materials to remain informed and intellectually active (Chutia

116). The colonial administration's attempts to censor potentially "dangerous" texts, including religious scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, inadvertently highlighted the power of literacy and moral instruction as forms of resistance (Kar 29). Prisoners like Konwar, who spent his final days reading the Gita, exemplify the intertwining of spiritual practice and political defiance, demonstrating that education, religion, and philosophical reflection became tools for maintaining dignity and agency under oppressive conditions (Chutia 109-10). These narratives illustrate the multidimensional strategies political prisoners employed to reclaim autonomy, intellectual freedom, and ethical selfhood within the constraints of colonial incarceration.

The autobiographical genre itself served as an extension of resistance, transforming individual suffering into collective memory and historical testimony. As Paul Gready observes, autobiographical prison writing is a medium through which prisoners "restore a sense of self and world" and reclaim their version of truth (489). Kakati's work, serialized over seven diaries before its posthumous publication in 2011, exemplifies this dynamic. It not only documents the lived experiences of prisoners but also critiques the structural and moral failings of colonial penology. By foregrounding personal narratives of fear, hope, humor, and resilience, Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha transforms the personal into the political, highlighting how incarceration functioned as both a site of repression and a space for the cultivation of nationalist consciousness (Chutia 4). Such autobiographies also bridge historical gaps, providing contemporary readers with insights into the localized dimensions of the freedom struggle, particularly in frontier regions like Assam, which have often been marginalized in mainstream historiography.

The material and symbolic conditions of colonial imprisonment further accentuated the agency of political prisoners. Hunger strikes, protests, and other forms of non-violent resistance emerged as powerful tools to contest administrative authority and assert ethical claims. Kamala Miri's prolonged hunger strike, culminating in his death, illustrates the moral stakes of political imprisonment. Kakati recounts how Miri's sacrifice "strengthened the resolve of political prisoners of Jorhat jail to continue their resistance through hunger strike" (Chutia 110). Even when legal recognition or privileges were denied, prisoners

utilized corporeal and symbolic forms of protest to challenge the legitimacy of colonial governance. These acts reveal that resistance within jails was both strategic and moral, reflecting an acute awareness of the performative dimensions of political defiance. Moreover, the humorous and anecdotal episodes recorded by Kakati, such as mistaking an earthquake for a military invasion or witnessing bombings near the jail by a malfunctioning plane, highlight the adaptability and resilience of political prisoners (Chutia 111; Das 119). Humor, improvisation, and narrative creativity became coping mechanisms, allowing prisoners to retain psychological stability and a sense of agency within the confines of an often arbitrary and dangerous penal environment. This interplay of suffering, resistance, and narrative skill underscores the complex human experience of colonial incarceration, revealing how prisoners simultaneously navigated structural constraints and asserted ethical, intellectual, and cultural autonomy. In conclusion, the prison autobiographies of Assam, epitomized by Kakati's Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha, serve as critical historical documents that illuminate the lived experiences, strategies of resistance, and moral agency of political prisoners under British colonial rule. They demonstrate that incarceration, while intended as an instrument of repression, could be transformed into a space for intellectual engagement, collective solidarity, ethical assertion, and political reflection. These narratives provide a window into the dynamics of colonial penology, offering contemporary scholarship insights into how personal suffering, spiritual reflection, and strategic action converged to shape forms of anti-colonial resistance. By foregrounding the voices of those imprisoned for conscience and activism, these autobiographies affirm the enduring significance of memory, testimony, and narrative as tools for resistance and historical recovery in the context of India's struggle for freedom.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study of colonial imprisonment in Assam through Robin Kakati's Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of incarceration, political agency, and resistance during the late colonial period. The Sarupathar derailment of 1942 and subsequent arrests,

including that of Kakati himself, highlight the intersection of political activism and colonial anxieties, revealing how imprisonment served as both a punitive instrument and a site for political and ethical assertion. Kakati's narrative offers detailed documentation of the hierarchical classification of prisoners, ranging from A-class political prisoners to C-class detainees, and illuminates the ways in which caste, social status, and occupational background influenced treatment within Assam's jails. These classifications, initially designed to maintain administrative control and mitigate perceived threats, often reflected arbitrary application and inconsistencies, emphasizing the discretionary authority of jail superintendents. Kakati's experiences underscore how systemic inequalities could be subverted through solidarity, sharing of rations, and mutual support, thereby fostering a collective consciousness among political prisoners and challenging the hierarchical rigidity of colonial penology.

The administration of Assam's colonial prisons also reflects the complex evolution of penological practices in India. Legislative frameworks such as the Prisons Act of 1894, the Prisoners Act of 1900, and subsequent recommendations of the Indian Jails Committee (1919–20) laid the foundation for standardized treatment, yet local implementation was inconsistent, particularly in frontier regions facing wartime pressures. Kakati's account reveals that political prisoners were frequently subjected to conditions that violated statutory protections, including inappropriate lodging arrangements, restricted communication, and inconsistent access to medical care. The case of Swami Satyananda, whose treatment was delayed despite critical injuries, exemplifies the systemic neglect and discretionary governance inherent in the colonial penal system. Such conditions reflect the tension between the ostensible reformative objectives of colonial penology and the practical imperatives of state security and political containment.

Cultural and intellectual engagement emerged as a vital strategy through which prisoners asserted agency and maintained psychological and moral stability. Restricted access to newspapers, letters, and books, including the arbitrary banning of texts like the Bhagavad Gita, created an environment of enforced intellectual austerity. Yet prisoners employed subversive strategies, such as bribery of warders and

smuggling of reading materials, to sustain informed engagement and moral reflection. Kakati's diary entries highlight the intertwining of political consciousness, spiritual practice, and literary engagement, illustrating the multidimensional nature of resistance within confinement. The ability to maintain intellectual and spiritual life under restrictive conditions demonstrates the prisoners' capacity to assert autonomy and ethical selfhood in the face of systemic oppression.

Resistance within Assam jails also took corporeal and performative forms, including hunger strikes, disciplined protest, and ritual observances. Kamala Miri's indefinite fast, which ultimately led to his death, underscores the ethical and political dimensions of such acts, demonstrating that resistance in prison extended beyond personal suffering to encompass collective moral and political assertion. Similarly, the behavior of Kushal Konwar, who maintained stoic composure and engaged in spiritual reading during his final days, exemplifies the transformative potential of confinement as a space for ethical cultivation and political expression. These practices reflect a sophisticated understanding of the performative and symbolic dimensions of resistance, illustrating how imprisonment, rather than merely subjugating the body, provided opportunities for political and moral assertion.

Humor, narrative improvisation, and anecdotal episodes also feature prominently in Kakati's account, emphasizing the psychological resilience and adaptability of prisoners. Misinterpretations of minor earthquakes or airplane mishaps, as recorded in the diaries, reveal the prisoners' capacity to navigate fear, uncertainty, and environmental hazards with ingenuity and collective support. Such narratives highlight the human dimensions of incarceration, illustrating how prisoners exercised agency even in conditions designed to suppress autonomy and morale.

In synthesizing the structural, cultural, and ethical dimensions of colonial incarceration, Kakati's Sangrami Jibonor Atmakatha exemplifies the significance of prison autobiographies as historical and literary artifacts. They provide firsthand testimony of the lived experiences of political prisoners, document systemic failures of colonial administration, and foreground the strategies of resilience, solidarity, and intellectual engagement employed by detainees. Furthermore, these narratives bridge localized

histories of Assam with the broader historiography of India's freedom struggle, emphasizing the ethical, political, and cultural stakes of imprisonment in frontier regions. In conclusion, the study of Kakati's autobiography affirms that colonial jails, while designed as instruments of repression, also became sites of moral, cultural, and political assertion, revealing the enduring capacity of prisoners to transform adversity into resistance and collective memory.

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