

The Will-Not-To-Know: Prison Sexology and the Archive of Sexology in Colonial India

Testifying before the Indian Jails Committee in 1919, the Irish prison medical officer John Mulvany stunned the colonial administration by accusing his superior, the Inspector-General of Bengal Prisons, Walter Buchanan, of coercing him to end his research on sodomy in Calcutta's jails. When he began his research on the topic in 1905, Buchanan had sternly warned him that "it was a subject about which the Government desired to know nothing." Since Mulvany's investigations had made him extremely unpopular and "his life had been attempted more than once," by his prisoners he seemingly desisted. But now, he sought to expose the scandal by exhibiting numerous prisoners' *love-letters* as evidence for jail sodomy's ubiquity.

Taking this scandal as a provocation, I examine the early-20th-century Indian prison as a colonial sexological laboratory and argue that it grounded a spatialized sexual science tied to the science of confinement. I will show, first, that Mulvany's experiments on subaltern sexual "deviants" helped reconstitute the architecture of the prisons he administered so that he isolated sodomites in cellular confinement instead of in standard association wards as a form of punishment and experimentation. Second, I will show how Mulvany's investigations shifted from foregrounding anatomical observation to documenting prisoners' voices. Yet instead of localizing sodomy as the truth of the individual prisoner's self, his experiments helped shift the imagination of sodomy from repeated criminality to a cultural notion of habitual excess. Finally, I will show how the state prevented the circulation of Mulvany's studies, fearing the proximity of such deviant subjects to the Indian revolutionary prisoner. While scholars have predominantly studied the circulation of sexology among imperial bourgeois publics through the Foucauldian framework of a sexological will to knowledge, I theorize how the colonial state's dominance over penology amplifies our understanding of subaltern sexual life and of a sexological will-to-ignorance.

Before discussing Mulvany's experiments, let me give you a brief overview of the colonial penal history they interrupted. The prison system in early-20th-century India comprised a patchwork of buildings drawn to different plans, most containing association wards for 20-50 prisoners, with cells for smaller numbers. Unlike Europeans, Indians were perceived as sociable and averse to solitude "by custom and habit" so cellular prisons were the exception rather than the rule and thought of as punishment rather than as remedial for prisoner's souls. Cellularity was periodically recommended only to prevent transmission of criminal "habits" between habitual and casual offenders. Sodomy became the borderline case in the definition of habit, and consequently, this figure became constitutive of the anxieties of colonial penology, as I will now show through Mulvany's experiments.

Mulvany began overseeing Calcutta's Presidency Jail in 1902 [SLIDE 2]. This jail was an 18th-century structure and it remained flawed even when retrofitted with iron-wired cages in the mid-19th-century because prisoners could not be adequately separated. So Mulvany noticed that prisoners commonly left their beds at night for visiting other prisoners. On medically examining them, he discovered that they "presented in a marked degree the distinctive anatomical signs characteristic of the passive agent in sodomy." From these examinations, he speculated that 30 percent of all prisoners were "active" sodomites and 50 percent, "passive." As the average Presidency-population was 1100, an astronomical 800 were then logically "sodomites or catamites or both." Given the sheer scale of prison sodomy, Mulvany theorized that new criminals were goaded into hardened crime *because of* incarceration. According to him, "in oriental countries the social disgrace" of imprisonment was "less than among western nations" and the prisoner's "acquaintance with jail blunted" this shame. In prison, they facilitated a thriving underground trade in opium and tobacco and the easiest way for convicts to obtain such goods was by entering an

exchange-economy involving sodomy. Mulvany consequently argued that the pleasure of prison sex made it the most potent factor for habitual crime.

Like his contemporaries, Mulvany understood sodomy through the narrow rhetorical register of “unnatural” crimes circulated through Section 377 of the 1860 Penal Code. His examinations generated incomplete evidence, which, in turn, led him to conjecture sodomy’s monumental scale and authorized the further repression of prisoners. Thus, it allowed Mulvany to recommend that sodomites be considered a special class of habituals and cloistered in cells as punishment. Consequently, when he took charge of New Central Jail in Alipore in 1913 [SLIDE 3], he isolated sex-offenders in experimental forms of cellular confinement unavailable at Presidency. He had designed the jail himself on a radial plan, ensuring that it could accommodate more prisoners in cells. Following his growing familiarity with Havelock Ellis’ identitarian psychiatric vocabularies of “sexual inversion” for homosexuality, he began a second “experiment” on Alipore prisoners by cloistering them and intercepting their love-letters. At this time, convicts were often denied writing materials because they could pass escape plans. Unlike regular correspondence, the missives Mulvany expropriated were probably penned on secreted paper with bribed overseers delivering them.

By way of illustration, consider the letter below [SLIDE 4]:

HIRA LAL,

You may take food from anyone you like. But if you don’t take food from me, I will stop speaking to you. I take you as my brother, I fed you for three months and I shall be able to feed you for 3 months more. Hira Lal, don’t fear anybody. No one will dare to touch you as long as I am there.

[16699 B-4, Nagendra Nath Das, 22 years, 380-75 I.P.C.]

Such letters convey little about the sender or the receiver. We can only tell that Das was a young habitual prisoner re-convicted of house-burgling. It is also evident that he provided Hira Lal food and protection in prison, considering him his beloved “brother.” When separated, Das feared that his beloved was being violently coerced to accept another’s protection.

The following letter is barely more communicative [SLIDE 5]. It begins with a slur which I won’t repeat here

You SALA MUSALA,

Had your father ever any chokra? You are a beggar. You, Sala fed Pancha and made a friendship with him. Everyone should keep one man only. Pancha doesn’t want anything from you . . .

[16025 B-13, Shaikh Yasin, 13 years, December 1917]

The Hindustani word *chokra* denoted a boy/youngster “employed about the household, or a regiment,” and it appears to have entered prisoners’ vocabularies to indicate a material and sexual dependent. For Mulvany, *chokras* lacked sexual agency and were invariably corrupted by older men. But clearly, the writer of the letter above, a thirteen-year-old, felt comfortable in abusively threatening a fellow Muslim inmate over the right to support his own *chokra*.

No doubt, prison erotic relations were embedded in hierarchies of caste, religion, and age, but they were more determined by those between experienced prisoners and newcomers. And as frequently as the letters contain evidence of hierarchies, they evince tokens of tenderness/passion. Several are solely composed as poetry [SLIDE 6]:

Why does he not get the person whom he loves?

If there be happiness in union, then when

separation comes, why does love not leave?

As the flies fall into the fire so the mind always
Runs to the object of love . . .

[1926-B, to an adolescent convict, November 1915]

Such poetry recalls the Perso-Hindustani ghazal tradition of *amrad-parasti* or boy-play, in which a lover expresses desire for a formulaically indifferent adolescent male. Alternatively, it invokes the Bengali bhakti tradition in which a feminized devotee expresses adoration for a capricious male deity. But the stilted translation of the letters makes it impossible to tell which one is being referenced. What we can tell is that these letters replicate the epistolary culture of Bengali “gentlemanly terrorists.” Unlike these middle-class revolutionaries’ prison writing—which often espoused a renewed commitment to the nationalist cause through their isolation and suffering in prison and was meant to be smuggled out and circulated—prison “sodomites” missives seem stubbornly parochial both in their concerns and circulation. But while their writing may not aspire to a transcendental love for the nation, the exchange of such personal notes between them may have temporally extended and “spiritualized” their experience of courtship. For example [SLIDE 7]:

My heart has become quite sick and sore of the world to-day. I made up my mind to speak to nobody. I always think of things such as one in a frenzy thinks of. O snowy love, which made me think of many sweet things some time before, but at last I am brittled (?) You would have no occasion to commit sodomy with me again, so try to secure someone else instead. If another such occasion did occur I would not yield to your tricks. . . . When I see you I repent my follies. My doom awaits me in the cell.

Your antagonist and adorer,

(Sd.) ISMILE

Composed in a highly lyrical affective register, this letter too contains a meticulous sense of the prison's spatial architecture. Indeed, the author shares with other writers a collective sense of mental and physical separation. In consequence, even when they write letters highlighting tropes of poetic separation, such tropes may be read as conveying not just an individual's sense of his beloved's apathy but the tenuous psychological "subject effects" of the carceral architecture classifying and dividing them as prisoners. After all, such missives would hardly be required if they were still housed in association.

Yet my aim here is not to romanticize these letters as embodying a unitary "subaltern" subjectivity. Anjali Arondekar has warned us against seeking sexuality's "truth" in the archive as if continuing colonial hunts for deviant "sexuality." For instance, Ellis had solicited evidence of Indian homosexuality from Mulvany's superior, Buchanan but he categorically refused, fearing that the colonial prison would be read as a sign of the flourishing of vice under colonial supervision. Consequently, Ellis complained that "the real homosexual among non-Europeans, generally "passes unperceived." But the point is less to lament the stonewalling of a prospecting imperial sexologist than to analyze how colonial sexological *techné* were geared toward preserving the colonial order through a will-to-ignorance as much as a will-to-knowledge.

Consequently, it is significant that while he earlier foregrounded anatomical symptoms of sodomy to statistically extrapolate its scope, the new evidence of the letters produced in a transformed experimental setting did not quite lead him to a different vocabulary for sodomy. Though foregrounding letters may point to his concern with prisoners' voices and selves, he himself deployed them to claim that they were "only selections from an immense number," and so he used them for a similar politics of surmise about the massive scale of prison sodomy. Even while ostensibly seeking to individualize the treatment of prisoners' psyches, he too sought to

primarily understand sodomy from the standpoint of disorder rather than identity. Thus, if we are to believe Mulvany's claim of assaults on his life by his prisoners because of his bodily examinations, we should perhaps read it as the prisoner's resistance to a particular form of colonial sexual violence and to a violent science that would inevitably separate him from his beloved.

[SLIDE 8] In conclusion, what do we make of this scandal involving a would-be prison sexologist? Is it just a minor note from the historical archive? When Mulvany built the cells of the Alipore jail they were not meant to only house the minor protagonist of the prison sodomite but the major protagonist of Indian nationalist history: the gentlemanly revolutionary terrorist. In his own words, Mulvany "had more to do with the imprisonment of political prisoners than any jail officer in India." For example, he was ordered to inflict six-months isolated confinement on members of Bengal's revolutionary terrorist movement in the 1910s. Complaining to his superior, Buchanan, he argued that such confinement would "drive a sensitive man insane" but was forced to withdraw his protest because it would rouse the state's "Olympian wrath." When exposing the story of the prison sodomites, he also threatened to reveal this political story, juxtaposing the fates of the prison sodomite and the political prisoner, and even insinuating that the latter, like the former, were young boys who had been misled by older men, thereby implying a transmission of sexual and political habits. It is this explosive connection that the colonial government selectively willed "not to know," prohibiting Mulvany from publishing his evidence. While one need not take Mulvany's insinuation at face value, one may ask if it was a coincidence that both political prisoners and habitual sodomites began producing personal narratives of moral isolation and transformation in prison, when exposed to the spatial governance of cellular confinement. If in Bengal, the experimental *technē* for surveilling, disciplining, and confining the sodomite and the political prisoner were informed by each other, then it is not far-fetched to argue that their lives

and life histories informed each other even when they were not always in intimate contact. Arguably, the prison autobiographies of nationalist revolutionaries in this period remain haunted by the secreted figure of the prison sodomite even though they themselves often narrate an ascetic or celibate revolutionary subjectivity that obfuscates the very existence of this figure. The planned short-circuiting of prison science's circulation as a currency within sexology then should be investigated as much as its subterranean successes in engendering new forms of sexual and political life.