

THE PAINS OF INCARCERATION: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF LIFERS IN A HIGH SECURITY PRISON

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ABSTRACT

Incarceration is a disheartening and frustrating experience for the men in prisons. The inmates suffer from the feelings of deprivation and frustration. It inflicts upon the inmates both physical as well as psychological punishment. Both have an enormous effect on the inmates and do not differ greatly in their cruelty. Imprisonment creates conditions that attack the inmate's personality and his feeling of self worth. It deprives the inmate from his liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationship, autonomy and security. The inmates have to live isolated from family and friends and submit to the coercive rules within the prison. The inmates are forced to live in a very meager environment where they feel deprived since none of their wants are satisfied. These adversities have tremendous impact on the psychology of the prisoner and his self is systematically mortified. The present paper intends to understand the pains of incarceration suffered by the life convicts in a high security prison.

Key Words: Incarceration, Life convicts, Life sentence, Mortification, Role dispossession, Personal defacement, High Security Prison, Sexual deprivation.

INTRODUCTION

Imprisonment is a terrifying and disheartening experience for the prisoner. He enters into an alien environment where his usual self is mortified. He has to give up his previous occupation which disrupts his career prospects. His relationship with family and friends suffers. The pattern of behavior shown by him in the outside world is brought to an end by incarceration. He needs to adjust to this hostile environment where his self is systematically mortified. He gets a new identity which is demeaning to his own conception of self. He adjusts himself to this new environment by adopting certain lines of adaptation. The prisoner in that process suffers pains, which is otherwise not comprehensible to a person living outside the prison. For most of the prison inmates, absence of home and family is a major source of pain in imprisonment. The deprivation seriously hurts the inmate's self image, weakens his ego and depletes his strength. It generates anxieties and adds to his frustrations. All his activities inside the prison are carried on according to a tight schedule and as ordered by the prison officials. Simply speaking, he not only becomes homeless, he also loses his freedom, personal choice and individual dignity. Not only must the inmate live isolated from family and friends, he must also submit to the rules within the prison. Furthermore, he sees his confinement as a deliberate, moral rejection of himself by society. His status as a prisoner separates him from free men that can be trusted and accepted as a functioning member of the society. Thus, he is constantly rejected and degraded.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The present work intends to understand the pains of incarceration suffered by the prisoners. For the purpose of understanding this, data were collected from the prisoners with an objective to assess the factors that cause pains to them. It attempts to understand the nature of prison rules incorporated in the jail manual in order to examine the coercive character of penal institution.

METHODOLOGY

The research design was framed by locating the prisoners in the form of life convicts, who were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. The author selected 37 life convicts on random basis who were kept in Guwahati Central Jail in the state of Assam. For collection of data, the author visited the prison where the convicts were formally interviewed. The author also gathered data from the prison record as well as involved in informal discussion with the convicts and the prison officials. The method of observation was also adopted. The behavioural traits of the convicts were observed while collecting data. The secondary source of data also included a detailed study of the jail manual that incorporates certain coercive provisions that adds to the pains of the prisoners.

PRISON AND THE PROCESS OF MORTIFICATION: INFLECTING PAINS ON THE CONVICTS

The prison inmates come to the prison with a behavioural trait derived from a home world — a way of life and a round of activities taken for granted until the point of admission to the penal institution. Thus, an inmate comes into the prison establishment with a conception of himself, which is determined by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. Then he goes through a process, where his self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. He begins some radical shifts in his moral career, a career composed of the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has been concerning himself and significant others.”¹

The process by which a person’s self is mortified is fairly standard in every penal institution. The barrier that the prison erects between the inmates and the outside world makes the first curtailment of self. Then the process of ‘role dispossession’ occurs.² Signs of role dispossession was highly evident among the subject of the present study, i.e. the lifers. It was observed by the present author that the lifers had to take a break from their past roles. The break was caused by the barrier, which stood between them and the outside world. It is understandable that some roles may be re-established once the lifers return to the outside world. However, most of the convicts opined that many of the losses are irrevocable. These losses were not possible to make up, at a later phase of life. The role dispossession caused lot of pain and its consequent frustrations among the lifers.

The process of entrance to prison typically brings other kinds of loss and mortification simultaneously. The entry of every convict into a prison involves a sort of admission procedure. It includes activities such as taking a life history, weighing, number assigning, searching, signing away personal possessions, bathing, disinfecting, hair cutting, issuing institutional clothing and instruction as to rules and regulation etc. Admission procedures might better be called “trimming” or “programming” because in thus being squared-away the convict allows himself to become shaped and coded in to the kind of object that can be fed in to the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations.³ Many of these procedures depend upon attributes such as weight, which the convict possesses merely because he is human being. Thus, the present basis of identifying the convict ignores most of his previous basis of self-identification.

Once the convict is stripped of his possessions, some replacements are made by the jail authority. However, the replacements take the form of standard issue, uniform in character and uniformly allocated. These substitute possessions clearly belong to the prison authority, which may be recalled at regular intervals. Normal human psychology suggests that a person usually expects to hold some control over the guise in which he appears before others. Thus, the individual’s possessions have a special relation to self. In short, for the management of his personal self, the individual requires to possess an identity kit. On admission to the prison, however, the convict is stripped of his usual appearance and of the equipment and services by which he maintains it. Thus, he suffers from a syndrome called — personal defacement — which prevents the convict from presenting his usual image of himself to others.⁴

Moreover, the prisoner has to engage in activity whose symbolic implications are incompatible with his conception of self. A more diffuse example of this kind of mortification occurs when the convict is

required to undertake a daily round of life that he considers totally alien to him — to undertake a disidentifying role.⁵ Thus the convict's self is mortified as he finds himself thrown in to an alien environment — not compatible with his real self. It becomes more humiliating when the prisoner has to appear before his visitors not in his usual self, but in one, imposed in the process of incarceration.

There have been numerous occasions when there has been interaction with those life convicts who were undergoing the mortifying process in its various manifestations. In this context, example may be drawn of a lifer who served as a bank officer before conviction. Considering his social background and status, it was but obvious that he had to undertake a disidentifying role after entry into the prison. The convict carried melancholic look and was totally withdrawn from his surroundings. He constantly avoided eye contact with his interviewer. He was wearing the jail uniform — half pant and shirt in white — and was bare footed. He was also wearing a wooden label bearing a registration number to ascertain his identify. In fact, the signs of curtailment of his self were very much apparent. The degree of mortification was so high that he broke down in tears and left the place of interview much before its conclusion. On enquiry, the jail officials informed that the convict was otherwise very gentle and conformed to the prison rules. But, he was totally withdrawn from his surrounding and had no friends. In reality, he was a victim of the process of mortification and his self was absolutely mortified.

It was observed that the lifers had to encounter many unfriendly, often hostile situations after their entry in to the prisons. The prison authority justified them on the pretext of conforming to prison rules and maintenance of a sound system of administration. However, the reality revealed something else where the life convicts became the object of mortification for the sake of conforming to prison rules and regulations. The Assam Jail Manual contains a number of provisions, which put the prisoners in to the process of mortification.

Chapter XVI (Part III) of Assam Jail Manual deals with the admission procedure of the prisoners.⁶ some of the rules in this context are referred below:

228. Check of prisoner's property — the jailer shall furnish the officer who delivers a prisoner at the jail with a receipt noting therein the property received with the prisoner, which shall be carefully examined and shown to the prisoner at the time of his admission. The prisoner's acknowledgement that he has seen the property and that it is correct shall at the time be taken in the convict Register.

229. Prisoners to wash themselves and their clothing — On admission to jail every prisoner shall be required to wash his person and his clothing thoroughly. If epidemic disease exists in the neighbourhood from which he comes, his clothing shall also be disinfected by being steeped in a solution of corrosive sublimate or by being boiled. In such cases special care shall also be taken to cleanse the prisoner's person, especially his hair.

230. Search of prisoners on admission — Prisoners after having washed, shall be carefully searched by a jail official. Female prisoners shall be searched and washing conducted in the female yard. Searches of prisoners conducted under this and other rules of the Jail Manual shall be made with due regard to decency and with reasonable privacy.

231. Removal of articles from prisoners — At his search every article, whether clothing, bedding, jewelry, money, documents or otherwise, shall be taken away from prisoners sentenced to rigorous imprisonment, to whom an issue of jail clothing and bedding in accordance with the rules in Chapter XXII shall be made

254. Tickets to be worn by convict — Every 'C' Division prisoner, sentenced to rigorous imprisonment shall wear a wooden label on the left breast suspended from a button by means of leather or webbing button-hole. On this shall be stamped the register number of the prisoner, his class and, if he is a habitual, the number of previous conviction by the side of the letter H, the section under

which convicted, the term of sentence, the date of conviction and the date of termination of sentence, thus⁷: —

1913		H ₂
	457	
3y		6m
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	23-7-23	

The above account demonstrates unmistakably as to how the admission procedures tend to mortify a lifer's self, thereby demoralizing him. The ticket, which the lifer wore destroyed his identity and made him an object of case history. The procedures and rules, which were meant for administrative convenience mortify the lifer's self and also threatened to undermine the convict's image of himself as a self-sufficient, respectable human being.

THE LIFERS AND PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

Long term prisoners, particularly the lifers, ascribe greater importance to problems associated with incarceration per se than to deprivations associated with the prison environment. The real pressures of prison go beyond the surface discomforts created by a harsh environment. Immobility, poverty, abstinence, compliance, uncertainty — each is aspects of the prison experience that seem designed to irritate and annoy. But the brunt of these pains of imprisonment lies in the fact that the prisoner has lost control of his world and rendered powerless to alter his fate. The pressure of prison thus threaten to undermine the convicts image of himself as a self-sufficient, autonomous and respectable adult male.⁸ The long termers' male identity is also apt to become distorted or blurred in this all male world, where the moderating influence of women is conspicuously absent.⁹

As human beings, the ability to choose how we live our lives is very important to us. However, when someone comes into prison, this ability to choose is taken away. Most of the lifers under study shared their individual experiences where they expressed the fact of their inability even to choose when to do the most basic human functions, like washing, dressing, going to the toilet, going to sleep, or choosing when or what to eat. All these very ordinary, but very important behaviours were outside the lifer's control. This loss of control usually led to all kinds of reaction — anger, frustration, agitation, hopelessness or depression. It had been observed that many of the lifers found some practices of prison humiliating and frustrating. In this respect, example may be cited of one particular practice followed in the high security prisons in conformity to Rule 269 of Assam Jail Manual.¹⁰ The said rule is quoted below:

“Latrine and bathing parade — after the enumeration of the prisoners is completed, they shall be marched to the latrine, and when they have been given an opportunity of resorting to it, they shall be marched to the bathing platform and shall be required to wash their hands and faces.....”

Chapter XVII (Part III) of Assam Jail Manual contains rules and provisions, which fix the daily routine of the prisoners. Most of the rules, apart from being humiliating, invite monotony to the life of the lifers. The loose and unstructured lives led by many lifers on the outside were in sharp contrast to the regimentation of the penal institutions. Fixed schedules were imposed, and variation from the behaviour expected at a particular time was followed by loss of privileges, or even by punishments. Meals were served at a time convenient to the prison rather than to fit the hunger patterns of the inmates. Of course, the inmates

had some freedom of choice in such a thing: they could eat what was served when it was served, or they could go hungry.

The lifers under study expressed their dissatisfaction, as well as, frustration regarding the routine schedule of the jail life. Some of them considered their life nothing better than animals. In this context, they referred to a particular practice followed in every high security prison, which is also mentioned in one particular provision of Assam Jail Manual. The rule 276, which seems very offensive, though convenient from administrative point of view, is quoted below:

“Evening meals and lock-up----- the evening meal shall be then distributed. They (prisoners) shall then be marched to their barrack gates and sit-in file there until counted and locked-up under the personal supervision of the jailor”¹¹

No doubt, the life convicts were probably the most improbable group for which to engender concern and positive action. Their criminal acts had shocked the public conscience and their sentences reflected the magnitude of their misdeeds. Obviously, they were not attractive targets for reform. But do they deserve the kind of treatment mentioned above? The treatment meted out to them defeats the very purpose of correctional philosophy. The policy makers must pay attention to redesign the penal institutions in the light of correctional perspective.

SEPARATION FROM FAMILY: BASIC SOURCE OF LIFER’S PAIN

An important concern for the lifers was separation from their families and friends. Loss of contact with family and friends outside the prison is a source of stress for all prisoners, but for life convicts the fear that this relationship will be irrevocably lost creates unique concerns. While relationship with spouses, family members and others may withstand enforced estrangement for a few years, but the prospects for maintaining these relationships over a long period of time are dim. As lifers watch relationship between other prisoners and their families diminish, fears of their complete abandonment arise. Worries about their children’s schooling, the financial situations at home are ever present. Maintaining external relationship is vital to coping with life imprisonment, but the price is high, because it reminds the lifer that the world outside is changing.

It is true to say that the wife; children and the parents of a prisoner serve the sentence along with him. It was observed that with the imprisonment of the convict, the bread earner was removed and the family had to depend either on the extended family or to some other sources for support. It was found that mostly the wives of the married lifers had to find some means of supplementing the family income in order to survive. They were either working as maid servant or engaged as labourer in agricultural field or construction sites to earn their family’s livelihood. The loss incurred by the lifer’s family because of his conviction could be measured not only in financial terms. Absence of a husband, who was in jail as lifer obviously caused psychological problem to the wife. She also bears the brunt of social stigma. Because of financial constraints, the child’s education suffered. Old parents suffered because of their son’s life imprisonment — a void was created in their life, which became difficult to fill up. These were not isolated problem faced by one or few lifer’s family, but common to the families of all lifers. The incarcerated status of the life convicts prevents them from extending any support to lessen the family’s problem. This adds more to the lifer’s pain.

SEXUAL DEPRIVATION DURING INCARCERATION: ADDING PAIN TO LIFER’S PHYSICAL EXISTENCE

Life lived solely in the company of man is likely to raise questions regarding one’s status as a man. Separation from family may stimulate serious self-doubt about sexual adequacy, harming the lifer’s self-image. Some become severely frustrated from being deprived of normal heterosexual relationships. They

may turn to obscene mannerism, self-gratification, or homosexual relationship in an effort to satisfy their natural urges.¹²

There is no denying the fact that to be deprived completely of every kind of contact with the other sex for extended periods of captivity can be very painful emotional experience; and the prisoners make various kinds of adjustments to this deprivation depending on several personal and milieu factors. One of this adjustment leads to the homosexuality in the prison population.

There are two kinds of reactions to a prisoner's sexual deprivations. Karpman suggests that continued sexual deprivation for a long time could leave some permanent scars on a prisoner's personality and impair his post release adjustment.¹³ Gagnon, Senior Sociologist for the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University, contends that prisoners "enter prisons with differing commitment to sexuality."¹⁴ He continues, "The prison is not a seething volcano of sexual passions, and that as a matter of fact most males survive the deprivation of sexual outlet and usually even survive transitory homosexual commitments to return to relatively conventional heterosexual lives on release."¹⁵

While interacting with the lifers, it had been observed that they were not very keen to divulge information regarding their sexual priorities or interests. However, they were not hesitant to talk about sexual deprivation experienced during incarceration. They did not consider it as a major cause of pain in prison. The observation on the issue of homosexuality or any other alternative mode of sexual gratification in prison involving the lifers remained inconclusive. One can only assume that the problem of homosexuality is not very acute in our prisons. This could be due to the cultural influences of the larger society. The prison officials also expressed their ignorance regarding its practice in their prison.¹⁶

PAINS OF INCARCERATION: THE LIFER'S RESPONSE

The 37 life convicts in the high security prisons of Guwahati were asked to identify their pain with any one of the following experiences:

- a) Absence of home and family.
- b) Restriction on free movement.
- c) Absence of social life.
- d) Sexual deprivation.
- e) Prison rules and regulation
- f) Other.

The findings directed towards the purpose of this study shows that 83.78% of the total respondents identified absence of Home and family life as the major cause of pain during incarceration; 8.1% identified absence of social life; 5.4% identified prison rules and regulation; whereas, 2.7% identified restriction on free movement as the major source of pain in prison life. The experience of sexual deprivation was not a major cause of pain for any lifer.

Kassebaum, Ward and Wilner in their empirical study¹⁷ had found the following aspect of prison life to be the most painful:

Absence of home and family	:	37%
Absence of Social Life	:	17%
Lack of sex with women	:	10%
Other inmates	:	9%
Custodial officials	:	4%
Lack of privacy	:	4%
Rules and Regulation	:	3%
Other or more than one answer	:	16%
		100

The findings from the high security prison of Guwahati as mentioned above differ from the findings of Kassebaum, Ward and Wilner. The difference may be due to the influence of different social and cultural factors. The difference was the result of prevailing social and cultural influences of the larger society on the psychological and behavioural traits of the prison inmates.

The pain due to the absence of home and family was intensely acute among the lifers. It was observed that most of the lifers became emotional; sometimes ventilating their emotions through tears, while talking about their families. Some of them were not in touch with their families for a long time. When they left home for prison, they left behind newborn babies. Many years had elapsed since then. Now these babies had become grown up children. But the fathers were languishing in jails, not to be recognized by the children.¹⁸

LIFER'S APPREHENSION ABOUT AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The paramount concern of all lifers was "when will I get out?" The nature of life imprisonment is such that it does not specify any fix date/year for the convict's release. It was observed that the lack of a firm release date constitutes the most difficult adjustment to confinements for all the life convicts. This uncertainty also contributes to the debilitating effects of incarceration. The dilemma on the date of release is further supplemented by other concern like "what kind of person will I be upon release? Will I be physically and mentally healthy? Will I still have a family and friends to assist me on the outside? Will I have a chance to lead a meaningful and useful life?" The lifers had no answer to their own queries. The lack of answers added more to their sufferance.

DAILY LIFE IN JAILS: LIFER'S ENCOUNTER WITH MONOTONY

The convicts in jail are to follow a daily routine with an objective of ensuring general discipline. The lifers outside the jails too follow a routine, but with a difference. A free man, without the shackles is like a free bird. He lives an unstructured life in sharp contrast to the regimentation of the penal institutions. For the man in prison, fixed schedules are imposed, and variation from the behaviours expected at a particular time is followed by punishment. To the outsider, what most distinguishes life in penal institutions from elsewhere is its uniformity. Apart from missing family and friends, the prisoner also misses other kinds of day to day to activity. The routine of prisons and the fact that there is little variety in the surroundings, in the faces that one sees and the work that one does, means that life can become monotonous. The convicts are subject to the uniformity of routine, with little variation on specified occasions. The daily routine has been fixed in such a way that suits the jail administration.

To understand the lifer's existence in the context of his daily life in prison, the following account describing the daily schedules of the life convicts is narrated. The narration is based on the author's observation of the life convicts in the jail of Guwahati. The convicts also expressed their experiences of daily life in prison. The opinion of the prison officials had also been taken into account.

Morning starts very early for the inmates of these prisons, as soon as, the barrack and cells are unlocked. Previous to the opening of the wards the convict night watchman awakes all the prisoners and keeps them in readiness to march out in files. While marching, the prisoner carries his individual bedding outside and shakes it well. Then he folds it and leaves it outside to air for some hours. The jail officer starts the counting of the prisoners. After the counting is over, the prisoners are allowed to go to the latrines and are given opportunities to respond to the call of nature. Then they are marched to the bathing platform to wash their hands and faces and clean their teeth.

After completion of latrine and bathing parade, the breakfast is served. Then the prisoners are arranged in their working gangs according to their gang rolls. After calling the rolls, the gangs are marched to the working places. The allotment of labour is already made by the jailer. The prisoners are to perform their allotted task.

The prison bell rings at 10.30 a.m. and the prisoners are to march back from the work places. They are given the opportunities to visit the latrine and take one more wash, if necessary. At 11 a.m. the bell rings again to indicate the start of lunch hour. The prisoners, carrying their utensils, wait for their individual turn to collect the lunch. The lunch so served is usually poor both in quantity and quality. The prisoners are then allowed to take rest for half an hour.

The prisoners regroup their gangs and march back to their work. The work continues till 5 p.m. in winter and 5.30 p.m. in summer. The work hours of the prisoners are as follows¹⁹: Summer (April to September) — Commence work at 6.30 a.m., rest during the middle of the day (includes time for midday meal), from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 a.m., leave off work at 5.30 p.m. Total hours of labour being nine hours. Winter (October to March) — Commence work at 7 a.m., rest during the middle of the day (including time for midday meal, if given), from 11 a.m. to 12 noon, leave off work at 5 p.m. Total hours of labour being nine hours. After completion of works, the prisoners are taken back to their yards. They are given opportunity to visit the latrine and take bath.

Upon cessation of a day's hard work, the prisoners are allowed to resort to recreational activities. Some play football, others play volleyball, but majority of them, prefer to take rest and see the day off quietly. The time for dinner starts at 6.30 p.m. and continues for about half an hour. The dinner also does not offer any variety since the menu is pre-determined and never offers any surprises. After the meal is completed, another half an hour is allotted for the recreation of the prisoners. Some of them watch the Television and others are engaged in chatting. Then they march to their barrack gates and sit in file there until counted and locked-up by the prison officials. They are also searched up thoroughly before being locked-up. After occupying their individual sleeping berth, the prisoners go to sleep.

The daily routine as mentioned above is also observed on Sundays and other holidays, except that no prisoners are required to work on these days. The prisoners are also allowed to enjoy holidays on a number of occasions like Good Friday, Christmas Day, Republic Day, Independence Day, Gandhi Jayanti, Bijoya Dashami, Doljatra, Idd festivals etc. On some rare occasions, the prisoners get opportunity to witness cultural shows organized by the jail authority within the jail premises.

Thus, the life of the lifers in prison is subject to uniformity. The time they spend in prisons does not offer any alternatives or choices rather than forcing them to conform to the daily schedule. The restrictions on time are accompanied by restriction on physical movement. They must spend specified times in a work place, while at other specified times they may resort to the recreational activities and that too in the specified places which do not offer any choices to them. The lifers are always restricted as to the places where they are allowed to be at any given time, and most of the times they have no choice at all. The monotony of prison schedule imposes a strong set of constraints operating at every minute of lifer's lives, with the effect that makes their lives dull and monotonous, which thoroughly add up to their share of miseries.

CONCLUSION

The above account shows that incarceration is accompanied by multiple pains. This may lead to the conclusion that the prison environment is in a large measure responsible for development of stress among the long-term convicts. The absence of family and home, the multiplicity of rules and restrictions, the tedious monotony, the curtailment of freedom, the forced subjection to an unusual severe discipline, the worries for the family and the bleak outlook for the future, all are quite disturbing and lead to abnormal mental reactions among the lifers, which in turn, negates the process of their rehabilitation. The effect of mortification process continues to inflict pain on lifers, though various lines of adaptation were followed by them to come in terms with incarceration. The deprivation of basic human rights to the prisoners is another cause of concern for the lifers. . If the prison really wants to play a correctional role, it must ameliorate the living condition of the prisoners. The existing prison system surely needs some immediate and urgent

reforms to give the institution a more humane and reformatory character. The outcome of this would not only benefit the prisoners, but also make for a more peaceful prison.

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