

Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Terror in Literature and Culture

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Preface

I grew up on stories. A product of post-British India, I was swamped by English fairy tales, Enid Blyton, and stories of the British partition of India, seamlessly intertwined for me by a storytelling mother. She embodies for me the myriad legacies of British colonialism in India—as the daughter and niece of incarcerated freedom fighters against British foreign rule, as someone who saw first hand the 1947 partition riots, and who, like many intellectuals of her generation in Bengal, grew up to be a professor of British literature. She infected me with her love of literature and her passion for the Indian independence movement from British foreign rule. Little did I know then that those childhood memories of my mother’s storytelling would be so powerfully imprinted into my brain that I would one day write a book about terror and torture in literary and cultural productions, of incarceration, and of liberation movements across the world.

Among my earliest memories of the house in which my maternal grandfather, Jagadish Chandra Majumdar, and my maternal grand-uncle, Byomkesh Majumdar, lived were two copper plaques—“Tamra Patra.” They were awarded by the then Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi to the two brothers for their “memorable contribution to India’s Freedom movement” on 15th August 1972 on the 25th anniversary of India’s independence from British foreign rule in 1947. As members of the revolutionary Jugantar Party, the brothers had been highly active in the *Swadeshi* (independence) movement on the national level.

The British had labeled the brothers as “terrorists” while independent India had revered them as freedom fighters. The British government had incarcerated them in separate facilities for seven and eight years respectively during which they were moved frequently from prison to prison across the country. This kind of displacement was part of the colonial administrations’ torture technique to disorient leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement like my grandfather and grand-uncle and to prevent any kind of organizational possibilities. My grandfather Jagadish Chandra Majumdar, Prison File No. 270 (X) 28, was incarcerated on August 7, 1931 at Mymensingh Jail (now in Bangladesh).¹ Subsequently he was moved through a series of detention sites: Buxa Camp—September 12, 1931; Presidency Jail—January 25, 1933; Deoli Camp—July 10, 1933; Presidency Jail—July 30, 1934; Deoli Camp—April 27, 1935;

Behrampore Camp—December 9, 1937; Village Domicile at Pursura, Hoogly—January 6, 1938. He was released unconditionally on July 19, 1938. My maternal grand-uncle Byomkesh Majumdar, Prison File No. 698 (X) 30, was imprisoned in Mymensingh Jail on October 10, 1930. Through subsequent orders of the British administration he was moved to Behrampore Jail—December 12, 1930; Hijli Camp—May 3, 1931; Deoli Camp—September 14, 1933; Behrampore Camp—December 12, 1937; Village Domicile at Barakhari, Ramgati in Noakhali (now in Bangladesh)—December 22, 1937; Village Domicile at Bancharampur, Teppara—January 21–22, 1938. He was unconditionally released on August 31, 1938.

Many of my grandfather's and grand-uncle's disciples in the freedom movement were transported to the Cellular Jail at Port Blair in the Indian archipelago of the Andaman Islands. Like Robben Island in South Africa where political prisoners like Nelson Mandela were incarcerated, the Cellular Jail was a colonial prison, cut off from the mainland, where prisoners could be tortured without any intervention in the most horrendous ways in complete secrecy. In 1985, the year after my grand-uncle passed away, the then President of India Zail Singh invited my grandfather to accompany him to Port Blair along with a group of his pupils and other anti-colonial revolutionaries who had spent their time in the Cellular Jail. I still remember the day when, together with the President, they set out for the site of the British colonial prison with its history smeared and stained with the blood of revolutionaries in order to dedicate the newly built Martyr's Column to the nation. Since then the Cellular Jail has been transformed into a museum, eloquently representing its infamous history through the many instruments of torture preserved in the museum.

I never met my revolutionary grandmother, Suprava Chaudhuri, who died three years before I was born. But I came to know her through the deep emotions in my mother's voice during her storytelling sessions when she remembered her dead mother, who became an active freedom fighter as a young college student. My grandmother's closest comrades in the independence movement were Pritilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta, both of whom participated in the 1930 Chittagong Armory Raid under the leadership of Surya Sen, who was later brutally tortured and hanged by the British. Waddedar also led the 1932 attack on the Pahartali European Club. Upon capture by the British colonial police she took her own life to avoid torture.

It is this inheritance by the accident of birth into a revolutionary family in post-independence India that drew me toward these lives with an inexplicable intensity of connection. When I heard that the British conquered India and tortured the people for resisting conquest, with a child's common sense and clarity of perception it seemed only fair to say that the British colonial government was the terrorist. It was not till my teenage years that I started thinking about how so much of the world came to support the British, and about the inevitable linkage between power-sharers and their ability to represent what will be known as the "truth"—what will be known as justice.

It is from this deep investment in rewriting political lives from the point of view of those who are not the power-sharers of the world that *Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Terror in Literature and Culture* has been written. Even more so, it has been written from the perspectives of those who were not equal power-sharers within the revolution itself. The fact that we know so much more about the Surya Sens of the Indian independence movement than the Pritilata Waddedars and the Kalpana Duttas of anti-colonial militancy speaks volumes as to why a transnational feminist uncovering of such repressed stories across the world remains of vital significance.

NOTE

- 1 Manohar Mukherjee et al. *Biplabi Jugantarer Shankhipta Itihas* (*A Short History of the Revolutionaries of Jugantar Party*). Calcutta: Jugantar Biplabi Sammelani, 1997.