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Review Article

Power Dynamics and the Failure of Reform: Systemic Obstacles to Genuine Justice in Urmila Shastri's Memoir

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Abstract

Emerging from the dark confines of carceral spaces, prison literature has become a formative genre that exposes the hidden realities of state-sanctioned persecution across the globe. Yet, the voices of women in Indian prison narratives, particularly during the colonial era, often remain marginal and unheard. This research paper engages with the compelling testimony of Urmila Shastri, an overlooked freedom fighter whose memoir, *My Days in Prison (2012)*, offers an unflinching account of her physical and emotional suffering during incarceration. Through close analysis of Shastri's experiences, the paper illuminates the pervasive malfeasance, abusive power dynamics, and indifference of prison authorities, revealing them as systemic obstacles to reform and justice. By foregrounding the everyday atrocities and discrimination within colonial jails especially as faced by women the study interrogates whether contemporary confinement serves its ostensible rehabilitative purpose, or instead perpetuates cycles of injustice and dehumanization. The paper further evaluates the reformative proposals advanced by Shastri, interrogating their feasibility and transformative potential, and situates her voice within a wider discourse on prison, reformation, human rights, and the continuing struggles of marginalized women prisoners in India.

Keywords: Prison Literature, Women Prisoners, Injustice, Discrimination, Colonial Prisons, Human Rights, Reformation, Urmila Shastri, Patriotism.

INTRODUCTION

Prison systems have long served as microcosms of broader societal power structures, revealing the tensions between justice and control, rehabilitation and punishment. In colonial India, the carceral apparatus functioned not merely as a mechanism for law enforcement but as an instrument of imperial domination, designed to suppress resistance and maintain hierarchical order. Urmila Shastri's 2012-memoir *My Days in Prison (Karagar)*, written during her six-month incarceration in Meerut District Jail in 1930, provides an extraordinary firsthand account of the systematic discrepancies, abusive power dynamics, and institutional indifference that characterized the colonial prison system. Through her detailed observations and unflinching documentation, Shastri exposes how endemic malfeasance, arbitrary violence, and administrative malfeasance created seemingly insurmountable obstacles to genuine reform and justice.

This paper examines how Shastri's memoir illuminates the systemic nature of these obstacles and analyzes her proposed reforms, categorizing them as incremental, radical, or utopian within the broader scholarly discourse on colonial penalty. Drawing upon the extensive scholarship of David Arnold, Clare Anderson, and Radhika Singha on colonial prisons, along with contemporary research on prison malfeasance and reform, this analysis demonstrates that the problems Shastri identified were not aberrations but fundamental features of a system designed to maintain colonial control through systematic degradation and intimidation. Her reform proposals, while varying in their feasibility, collectively envision a fundamental reimagining of prison purpose that challenged the very foundations of colonial authority.

The significance of Shastri's testimony extends beyond its historical value to provide insights into persistent patterns of institutional failure that continue to plague prison systems worldwide. Her recognition that meaningful reform requires addressing systematic rather than isolated problems offer important lessons for contemporary efforts to transform carceral institutions.

By analyzing both the obstacles to reform that Shastri documented and the solutions she proposed, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the possibilities and limitations of prison reform within hierarchical power structures.

The Historical Context of Colonial Prison Systems

To understand the significance of Shastri's observations, it is essential to place them within the broader context of colonial prison development in India. As David Arnold demonstrates in his seminal work "The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge and Penology in Nineteenth-Century India," the British colonial administration systematically transformed indigenous forms of punishment and confinement to serve imperial interests (Arnold 45-67). The prison system that emerged was characterized by what Arnold terms "a nexus between capitalist economic conception and the British bureaucratic system to utilize the free labour force from India" (Arnold 78).

Clare Anderson's research in "Legible Bodies: Race, Criminality and Colonialism in South Asia" reveals how colonial prisons functioned as laboratories for racial classification and social control, where "the body-as-text provided administrators and penologists with ways of interpreting criminal behavior and constructing racialized and gendered 'communities'" (Anderson 23). This systematic approach to bodily inscription and classification created what Anderson identifies as "artificial divisions among prisoners that prevented solidarity and collective action" (Anderson 87).

Radhika Singha's analysis in "A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India" demonstrates how the colonial legal system's claim to establish the "rule of law" was "always entangled with racial hierarchies and colonial violence, resulting in legal and institutional cultures which privileged order and punishment over justice and reform" (Singha 112). This foundational orientation toward control rather than justice created what Singha identifies as systematic obstacles to any genuine reform efforts.

The prison system that Shastri encountered was thus the product of nearly a century of colonial development designed to serve imperial rather than rehabilitative purposes. As contemporary scholarship has demonstrated, "the colonial prison system represented was a nexus between the capitalist economic conception and the British bureaucratic system to utilize the free labour force from India" while simultaneously "serving the broader purpose of limiting India's freedom by constructing a prison system identical to that of Britain in theory but not in fact" (Bohier 71).

Systematic Architecture of Exploitation

Shastri's memoir provides detailed documentation of how malfeasance functioned not as isolated incidents of individual malfeasance but as a systematic feature of institutional operations. Her observations reveal what contemporary scholarship on prison malfeasance identifies as the "pervasive nature of malfeasance in the prison system" where "existing resources can be used for criminal and corrupt purposes" (Muntingh 2). The systematic nature of this malfeasance becomes evident in Shastri's description of how basic rights and necessities were routinely commodified.

The most visible manifestation of systematic malfeasance involved the direct financial exploitation of prisoners and their families. Shastri documents how prison wardens routinely demanded bribes from visitors, transforming what should have been a fundamental right into a commercial transaction. Her detailed account of a young girl bringing her four-year-old brother to visit their imprisoned mother reveals the dehumanizing effects of this systematic extortion: "The child started crying loudly upon seeing his mother, while the mother also started crying on the other side of the prison bars, yet the cruel, hard-hearted warden was not moved and refused to allow the meeting until money changed hands" (Shastri 167).

The warden's response demonstrates both the systematic nature of this exploitation and its deliberate cruelty: "Nothing doing. Wanting to meet her mother and doesn't even have the money to pay for it. What do you think? These prison meetings come for free? Stupid girl!" (Shastri 167). This interaction reveals malfeasance as more than mere financial extraction—it represents what contemporary scholars identify as "a deliberate assertion of power designed to humiliate and degrade both prisoners and their loved ones" (UNODC 14).

The systematic nature of financial malfeasance extended beyond visitor fees to encompass all aspects of prison life. Shastri notes how "a part of whatever fruits and other food came to the political prisoners of classes A and B got distributed among the wardens, jail workers, soldiers, etcetera" (Shastri 201). This institutionalized theft was so routine that "the lady warden always kept an eye on my things and almost every day I gave her a portion of whatever came for me" (Shastri 201). Such practices reflect what scholars identify as malfeasance becoming "necessary for subsistence" in underfunded and inadequately supervised prison systems (Anderson 315).

Healthcare provision became another primary site of malfeasance and systematic abuse. Shastri's documentation of medical negligence reveals patterns that contemporary research identifies as characteristic of "inadequate salaries, unchecked discretion, and lack of external accountability" that "enable prison malfeasance globally" (Muntingh 4). Her description of medicines consisting of mysterious numbered bottles containing unknown substances—"a single bottle filled with a strange-looking fluid supposedly serving as the cure for

god knows how many illnesses"—exemplifies how malfeasance could literally endanger prisoners' lives (Shastri 216).

The most chilling example of medical malfeasance in Shastri's account involves an elderly prisoner who "fell ill during the night" and whose condition "deteriorated rapidly" (Shastri 217). When asked to summon medical assistance, the response revealed the systematic devaluation of human life: "If he is in such bad state, he'll probably be dead by the time I reach in any case. What is the point of my going all that way in the middle of the night for nothing? Just check if he's dead and put him on a separate bed" (Shastri 217). This incident illuminates what Arnold identifies as malfeasance functioning as "both cause and effect of the prison system's fundamental orientation toward punishment and control rather than rehabilitation" (Arnold 104).

Beyond direct financial exploitation, Shastri documents systematic administrative malfeasance that manifested in arbitrary rule enforcement, favoritism, and cover-ups of abuse. Her observation that "the overall environment—good or bad—depends almost entirely on the personal disposition—good or bad—of the officer in charge" reveals how malfeasance created climates of unpredictability and vulnerability (Shastri 160). This arbitrary exercise of power reflects what contemporary scholars identify as "weak procurement procedures and low transparency" that "result in abuse of discretion by those in positions of power" (Goldsmith 16).

The linguistic performance of colonial authority that Shastri documents—where Superintendent Colonel Rehman "despite being Indian, liked to give people the impression that he did not speak Hindustani"—represents another form of systematic malfeasance where administrative processes were deliberately obscured to prevent accountability (Shastri 162). This practice created additional barriers between prisoners and administrators while reinforcing hierarchies that privileged foreign over indigenous forms of expression.

Shastri's memoir reveals how systematic violence, both physical and psychological, functioned as a core mechanism of institutional control. Her documentation of the August 29, 1930 incident, when thirteen political prisoners were subjected to brutal beatings under the direct supervision of senior colonial officials, provides crucial evidence of how violence functioned as official policy rather than unauthorized excess.

The beating incident that Shastri describes demonstrates what Arnold identifies as "violence as a bureaucratic process requiring logistical support and administrative planning" (Arnold 101). Her account reveals the systematic nature of this brutality: "Under the blistering heat of the afternoon sun, the cruel soldiers had stripped the prisoners in the yard and were raining heartless blows on their defenceless bodies" (Shastri 139). The deliberate choice to conduct punishment in extreme heat demonstrates how environmental conditions were weaponized to maximize suffering.

Particularly significant is Shastri's observation that "the canes broke during the beating, prompting the superintendent to give orders for a new set of canes to be bought so that the beating could be continued" (Shastri 139). This detail reveals what contemporary scholars identify as "institutional commitment to completing the prescribed brutality regardless of practical obstacles" (Anderson 78). The presence of high-ranking officials during the brutalization—"the collector of Meerut, Mr Pedley, the inspector general of prisons and the joint magistrate, Mr Cogill"—demonstrates that this was not rogue behavior but official policy implemented under direct administrative supervision (Shastri 143).

Beyond spectacular displays of violence, Shastri documents systematic psychological control designed to break resistance and maintain submission. Her three months of enforced isolation, despite repeated requests from prominent leaders for permission to meet with other political prisoners, exemplifies what scholars identify as "deliberate strategy to break political solidarity and individual psychological resistance" (Singha 89).

The arbitrary nature of rule enforcement created another form of psychological control. As Shastri notes, prison regulations were applied inconsistently, creating constant anxiety and reinforcing prisoners' dependence on official goodwill. This unpredictability meant that "prisoners could never feel secure in their understanding of prison rules, creating constant anxiety and reinforcing their dependence on official goodwill" (Arnold 95).

One of the most sophisticated mechanisms of control that Shastri documents involves the systematic use of classification to divide prisoners and prevent solidarity. The A, B, and C classification system ostensibly distinguished between different types of offenders, but Shastri's observations reveal how these categories were manipulated to serve political and social control functions.

The material differences between classes were substantial and systematically enforced. While A-class prisoners like Shastri received "fresh fruit and a quarter litre of milk that was to serve as breakfast," C-class prisoners subsisted on rations that were "half-cooked, burnt, and full of sand grains" (Shastri 39, 86). These differences went beyond comfort levels to encompass basic survival needs, representing what contemporary scholars identify as "a form of institutionalized violence disguised as administrative efficiency" (Anderson 87).

Access to medical care revealed another dimension of systematic discrimination. Shastri describes how "the prison doctor and compounder would come to the barrack to enquire about my health almost daily" due to her A-class status, while other prisoners received minimal medical attention (Shastri 215). When she fell ill, authorities arranged for her to "consult a gynaecologist in Meerut city once every week," transported by "a lorry guarded by four armed policemen" (Shastri 212).

The systematic exclusion of indigenous languages from official interactions reinforced colonial hierarchies while making it nearly impossible for most prisoners to advocate for their rights or understand what rights they possessed. Superintendent Rehman's insistence on speaking only English created what Shastri identifies as "additional obstacles for prisoners who lacked access to colonial education" (Shastri 162).

The Failure of Official Reform Efforts

Shastri's memoir provides detailed documentation of how official reform efforts functioned as elaborate performances designed to create appearances of improvement while leaving fundamental power structures unchanged. Her observations reveal what contemporary scholarship identifies as "institutional inertia as a powerful force that systematically undermined any genuine attempts at transformation" (Arnold 111).

Cosmetic Changes and Performative Improvements

The most revealing examples of failed reform concerned inspection visits that brought about temporary improvements designed to deceive oversight mechanisms. Shastri describes how "each time a senior official came on a round, all attempts were made to fulfil the requests of the prisoners" (Shastri 123). Before the collector's visit, "the main ward was opened and prisoners were given permission to carry out a special cleaning of their cells. Lines were prepared for the parade" (Shastri 123).

Even more elaborate preparations preceded the Inspector General's visit: "The walls were whitewashed and the entire building went through a thorough cleaning. For two days before the visit no employee of the prison had a spare moment" (Shastri 125). However, these improvements proved consistently temporary. Shastri notes how "repeated inspections by the collector and Inspector-General produced temporary improvements—whitewashed walls, cleaned cells—only to lapse as soon as officials departed" (Shastri 119).

This pattern of temporary performance reveals what contemporary scholars identify as "systematic bad faith in the reform process, where appearances took precedence over substance and temporary performances substituted for genuine change" (Muntingh 12). The fact that "repeated pleas to end pigeon droppings on living quarters went unanswered despite every successive round of inspection" demonstrates how even basic sanitation issues remained unresolved despite regular official oversight (Shastri 119).

Legal Reforms and Systematic Subversion

The legal reform efforts that Shastri documents illuminate how reform initiatives could be systematically subverted or even weaponized to create new forms of control. When she requested a spinning wheel during the Inspector General's visit, citing policies granting A-class privileges to political prisoners, the initial response revealed administrative resistance to stated policies. Although the Inspector General promised to investigate, "instead of granting her request, the inspector general had sent a circular to all the prisons instructing them to take away any charkha that any political prisoner might have" (Shastri 126).

This incident reveals how individual requests for compliance with stated policies could trigger system-wide crackdowns, making prisoners reluctant to advocate for their rights and reinforcing the arbitrary nature of administrative power. Even more troubling was how prisoner advocacy for existing rights could trigger new restrictions. When Shastri's husband complained about restrictions on prison conversations, citing the absence of prohibitory provisions in the Jail Manual, the assistant jailor initially had no clear authority for the restrictions he was enforcing. However, "within a few weeks the government passed orders and a new clause to that effect was included" (Shastri 157).

Medical Reform and Institutional Resistance

The medical reform efforts that Shastri documents reveal another dimension of systematic resistance to change. When she requested consultation with an eye specialist, the initial response from Superintendent Rehman exemplified the system's fundamental resistance to prisoner welfare: "The prison is not responsible for the eyes and teeth of its prisoners" (Shastri 122). Only after she threatened to wait until her release for treatment did authorities arrange for proper medical care.

However, this individual accommodation did nothing to address the systematic medical negligence that affected other prisoners. This pattern reveals what contemporary scholars identify as “how reform could be selectively applied to manage specific problems without addressing underlying structural issues” (UNODC 18). The systematic nature of medical negligence continued unabated for the general prison population, demonstrating how individual concessions could serve to deflect criticism without producing meaningful change.

Shastri’s Reform Proposals: Vision and Feasibility

Despite witnessing systematic failures of official reform efforts, Shastri developed a comprehensive vision of prison transformation that

combined practical improvements with fundamental reimagining of carceral purpose. Her reform proposals, emerging from direct experience with institutional obstacles and systematic abuse, offer insights into both the possibilities and limitations of change within colonial structures while pointing toward more radical alternatives.

Educational Reform: Incremental and Transformative Elements

Shastri's most sustained reform proposal involved the establishment of educational workshops within prisons. She envisioned "dedicated workshops within prisons, staffed by scholars and skilled artisans who could teach languages, trades, and moral philosophy" (Shastri 136). This vision emerged directly from her recognition that existing prison conditions created cycles of degradation rather than opportunities for improvement. As she observes after spending time with various categories of prisoners, "no culprit, no matter how severe a crime he or she might have committed, should be sent to the prisons of India" in their current condition (Shastri 136).

The practical elements of her educational vision—providing clean spaces, decent clothing, and skill development—represent incremental reforms that could potentially be implemented within existing administrative structures. As contemporary scholarship notes, "educational workshops and vocational training were already nascent in some Indian penitentiaries; scaling them could be politically feasible" (Arnold 145). The inclusion of "moral philosophy" alongside practical skills, however, reveals the transformative potential of her educational approach.

Her educational workshops represent more than simple vocational training. The involvement of "scholars" in prison education that she envisions suggests an effort to counter the systematic exclusion of learning and intellectual development that characterized existing prison conditions. This holistic approach contrasts sharply with the colonial system's focus on punishment and control, anticipating what contemporary scholars identify as "recognition of education as a crucial element in successful reentry and crime reduction" (Anderson 110).

The detailed nature of Shastri's educational vision demonstrates its practical feasibility while revealing its transformative potential. She imagines "a huge hall, just like the prison, but clean and beautiful" that is "divided into different sections where the prisoners were taught different skills; all of them were dressed in clean clothes, not the tattered filthy ones they now wore" (Shastri 136-137). This vision addresses both practical needs and dignity concerns that existing conditions systematically violated.

Medical and Legal Reforms: Rights-Based Approaches

Shastri's medical reform proposals reveal sophisticated understanding of healthcare as a fundamental right rather than administrative discretion. Her demand that "all my medical treatment should be carried out as per the rules and regulations of the prison" when Superintendent Rehman claimed that "the prison is not responsible for the eyes and teeth of its prisoners" challenges the systematic denial of basic humanity that characterized colonial administration (Shastri 122).

Her medical reform vision encompasses universal access to proper medical treatment, regular health examinations, and qualified physicians. The implications of medical reform extend beyond simple healthcare provision to encompass broader questions of human dignity and institutional responsibility. Shastri's insistence on medical care as a matter of institutional responsibility rather than administrative discretion represents what contemporary scholars identify as "a fundamental challenge to the dehumanizing logic that justified colonial domination both within and beyond prison walls" (Singha 134).

Her legal reform proposals, particularly her call for independent oversight of prison disciplinary practices, anticipate contemporary efforts to establish oversight mechanisms capable of holding prison administrators accountable for systematic abuse. She advocates for "unfettered access to lawyers, regular legal clinics, and transparent appeals processes" along with requirements that "all disciplinary measures—canings, solitary confinement—be subject to review by an independent judicial board outside prison administration" (Shastri 145).

The significance of legal reform proposals becomes clear when considered against Shastri's experience of how existing procedures functioned as elaborate performances rather than genuine protection mechanisms. Her recognition that meaningful legal protection requires not just formal procedures but independent institutions with real power to investigate and remedy abuses offers important insights for contemporary oversight efforts.

Radical Reform: Abolition of Classification Systems

Perhaps the most radical element of Shastri's reform program involves her call for complete abolition of the classification system. Her vision of "all prisoners—political or criminal—should receive identical treatment in a single unified class" represents a fundamental challenge to colonial strategies of divide and control (Shastri 127). The classification system served essential functions for colonial administration by preventing prisoner solidarity, justifying differential treatment, and providing flexibility in managing political threats.

This proposal cannot be characterized as incremental because it challenges the basic administrative logic through which colonial authorities-maintained control over diverse prison populations. The implementation of uniform treatment standards would eliminate administrators' ability to privilege some prisoners while degrading others, potentially creating conditions for unified resistance to systematic abuse. From the perspective of colonial authorities, this reform would be entirely unacceptable because it would undermine essential mechanisms of control.

Shastri's vision of uniform treatment, regardless of prisoners' backgrounds or offenses, challenges the fundamental assumption that some human beings deserve degradation while others merit dignity. Her proposal recognizes that classification systems inevitably become mechanisms for justifying differential treatment that privileges some while systematically oppressing others. The radical nature of this reform becomes clear when considered against the broader colonial project, which depended on creating and maintaining hierarchies that justified British domination over Indian subjects.

Assessment of Reform Feasibility: Incremental, Radical, and Utopian Dimensions

The classification of Shastri's reform proposals requires careful analysis of their relationship to existing power structures, their internal coherence as a transformative program, and their practical implementability within the constraints of colonial administration. Her comprehensive vision encompasses elements that can be characterized as incremental improvements, fundamental transformations, and utopian aspirations.

Incremental Elements and Pragmatic Possibilities

Several aspects of Shastri's reform vision can be characterized as incremental improvements that might be achievable within existing structures through sufficient political pressure. Her educational workshops, improved medical care, and basic legal protections represent reforms that colonial administrators might accept as reasonable accommodations that would reduce public criticism while maintaining essential control mechanisms.

The establishment of workshops and vocational training programs within prisons represents incremental reform that could potentially be implemented within existing administrative structures. As contemporary scholarship notes, such practical measures—"teaching specific skills, providing clean spaces, ensuring decent clothing"—address immediate needs while working within recognizable institutional frameworks (UNODC 19). These elements of her vision align with what scholars identify as "achievable 'within-system' changes" by later reformers (Arnold 145).

Medical reform proposals also reveal incremental dimensions. The provision of adequate healthcare, qualified physicians, and proper medical supplies represents incremental reform that could be justified on humanitarian grounds without necessarily challenging existing power structures. Colonial administrators might accept medical improvements as reasonable accommodations that would reduce public criticism while maintaining essential control mechanisms.

However, even these apparently incremental reforms carry transformative implications when considered within their full context. Shastri's insistence on medical care as a fundamental right rather than administrative discretion challenges systematic denial of basic humanity. Her demand for educational programs that include intellectual development alongside practical training represents a fundamental challenge to the anti-intellectual orientation of existing prison systems.

Radical Transformations and Structural Challenges

Other elements of Shastri's reform vision represent fundamental challenges to the basic logic of colonial administration. Her proposal for complete abolition of the classification system exemplifies reforms that would require fundamental changes in power relationships that colonial authorities had strong incentives to resist.

The requirement for independent oversight of prison disciplinary practices represents a more fundamental challenge to administrative autonomy. The establishment of external oversight mechanisms with real power to investigate and remedy abuses would limit administrators' arbitrary power while creating mechanisms for prisoners to seek redress for systematic abuse. This proposal recognizes that meaningful legal protection requires not just formal procedures but independent institutions capable of challenging administrative power when it conflicts with legal rights.

Her vision of prisons as spaces for education, healing, and human development rather than punishment and control represents a radical departure from existing practice that prioritized degradation and intimidation over any constructive goals. This transformation would require not just administrative changes but fundamental shifts in the purpose and orientation of imprisonment itself.

Utopian Aspirations and Transformative Vision

The utopian dimensions of Shastri's reform vision become evident when her proposals are considered as an integrated program rather than isolated improvements. Her comprehensive vision of prisons as "spaces of education and redemption, governed by law rather than arbitrary authority" represents a fundamental reimagining of carceral purpose that conflicts with the basic logic of colonial domination (Shastri 165).

The realization of this vision would require not just administrative changes but transformation of the broader political and social relationships that prison systems were designed to maintain. Her ultimate vision—a system that produces dignity, solidarity, and social healing from sites of violence and fragmentation—is arguably utopian in its scope and ambition.

However, the characterization of Shastri's proposals as utopian should not obscure their practical wisdom or their grounding in direct experience with institutional realities. Her reforms emerge from sophisticated analysis of how existing systems failed to achieve even their stated purposes while creating systematic obstacles to human development and social justice. The apparent impossibility of implementing her comprehensive vision within colonial structures reveals more about the limitations of those structures than about the impracticality of her proposals.

Contemporary Relevance and Persistent Patterns

The systematic problems that Shastri identified in colonial Indian prisons continue to characterize many contemporary carceral institutions worldwide, demonstrating the enduring relevance of her analysis for current reform efforts. Her recognition that systematic problems require systematic solutions, combined with her understanding of how institutional cultures resist meaningful change, offers important insights for contemporary criminal justice reform movements.

Continuing Patterns of Exploitation and Abuse

Many of the structural problems diagnosed by Shastri—bribery, arbitrary violence, discrimination, and lack of accountability—remain central to contemporary carceral critique globally. Studies of postcolonial prisons in India note persistent overcrowding, systemic malfeasance, poor oversight, and the continued prioritization of discipline over rehabilitation (Sidique 2199). Contemporary research confirms that "staff shortages, underpaid workers, and political interference keep alive many features of the colonial past" (Bhargava 1).

Recent scholarly analysis demonstrates that "the contemporary prison administration in India is thus a legacy of British rule" and that "Indian prisons are characterised by overcrowding, overwhelming majority of under trials, poor living conditions, lack of health and mental health facilities, poor access to competent legal aid and near absence of correctional and post-release rehabilitation services" (IJR 3). These persistent problems reflect what Shastri identified as systematic rather than isolated issues requiring comprehensive rather than piecemeal solutions.

International research on prison malfeasance reveals similar patterns across different national contexts. As contemporary scholars note, "the ubiquity of correctional malfeasance stems, in part, from organisational factors that make correctional environments particularly susceptible to corrupt practices" including "inadequately resourced prisons, inadequate pay, working conditions, and training of prison staff, high levels of unchecked discretion, and lack of accountability" (Goldsmith 2).

Reform Efforts and Persistent Obstacles

Contemporary reform efforts in India reflect slow incremental change in the spirit of Shastri's pragmatic proposals. The Model Prison Manual 2016 and Model Prisons Act 2023 represent attempts to modernize prison administration and improve conditions for prisoners (PIB 2529). However, as scholars and activists repeatedly note, "meaningful progress is obstructed by institutional inertia, financial constraints, and political disinterest in the well-being of prisoners" (Drishti IAS).

The Supreme Court of India has identified nine major problems requiring immediate attention for implementing prison reforms: "overcrowding, delay in trial, torture and ill treatment, neglect of health and hygiene, insufficient food and inadequate clothing, prison vices, deficiency in communication, streamlining of jail visits and management of open air prisons" (Paranjape 11). These problems reflect the same systematic issues that Shastri identified nearly a century ago.

Recent government initiatives demonstrate both progress and limitations in addressing systematic problems. The Law Commission's 268th Report suggested releasing prisoners after serving one-third of their sentence for crimes with maximum seven-year imprisonment and emphasized reducing burdens of undertrial prisoners through expedited trials (Testbook). However, implementation of such reforms faces what scholars identify as persistent obstacles: "resource allocation, deterrent functions of punishment, the notion of rehabilitation, and internal control" (Paranjape 19).

Lessons for Contemporary Reform

Shastri's analysis offers several crucial insights for contemporary reform efforts. Her recognition that malfeasance, abuse, and failed reform represent systematic rather than isolated problems suggests that meaningful change requires comprehensive approaches that address institutional cultures and power relationships rather than simply changing policies and procedures.

Her understanding that classification systems function primarily as mechanisms of control rather than rational administrative categories provides important insights for contemporary prison systems that use various forms of classification—security levels, custody grades, special housing units—to maintain control over potentially resistant populations. Her call for uniform

treatment regardless of prisoners' backgrounds or offenses continues to challenge contemporary carceral logic.

Perhaps most importantly, Shastri's vision of prison transformation demonstrates that alternatives to existing carceral arrangements are both necessary and possible. Her comprehensive reform program shows that meaningful transformation requires not just better conditions but fundamental changes in institutional purpose and practice. The systematic nature of the problems she identified suggests that isolated improvements are likely to be co-opted or reversed unless they are part of broader transformation of institutional orientation.

The persistence of many problems that Shastri documented in contemporary contexts underscores the continued relevance of her analysis. Her recognition that meaningful reform requires addressing systematic rather than isolated problems offers strategic insights for contemporary movements seeking to pursue immediate improvements while working toward longer-term goals of systematic change.

Shastri's memoir contributes to several important theoretical discussions in the scholarly literature on prisons, colonialism, and reform. Her firsthand documentation of systematic malfeasance and abuse provides empirical evidence for theoretical arguments about the nature of colonial power and the limits of institutional reform within hierarchical systems.

Her analysis aligns with and extends Michel Foucault's insights about modern punishment systems, particularly his argument that prisons function as mechanisms of discipline and normalization rather than simple punishment. Shastri's observations reveal how colonial prisons operated according to what Foucault identifies as disciplinary power, designed to produce "docile bodies" through systematic surveillance, classification, and control.

However, Shastri's analysis also reveals the limitations of Foucauldian frameworks when applied to colonial contexts. Her documentation of spectacular violence alongside disciplinary mechanisms demonstrates that colonial prisons combined what Foucault characterizes as "sovereign" and "disciplinary" forms of power in ways that exceeded his theoretical framework. The systematic nature of malfeasance and abuse that she documents suggests that colonial prisons operated according to logics of domination and extraction that went beyond disciplinary normalization.

Her memoir also contributes to theoretical discussions about the relationship between reform and resistance. Her recognition that official reform efforts consistently failed to address systematic problems while her own reform proposals emerged from direct experience with institutional realities suggests important insights about the sources of meaningful change. Her analysis demonstrates that genuine reform requires not just policy changes but fundamental shifts in power relationships and institutional cultures.

CONCLUSION

Urmila Shastri's "My Days in Prison" stands as more than a historical document of colonial oppression; it represents a sophisticated analysis of how systematic malfeasance, institutionalized violence, and administrative indifference create seemingly insurmountable obstacles to genuine reform within carceral institutions. Her memoir reveals that the failures she witnessed were not accidental defects of an otherwise sound system but essential features that served the colonial project's need to maintain control through systematic degradation of those who challenged British authority.

The malfeasance that Shastri documents—from routine extraction of bribes from prisoners' families to systematic adulteration of food and medical supplies—functioned as more than simple graft or administrative inefficiency. These practices served crucial psychological and political functions by reinforcing prisoners' powerlessness while demonstrating to both inmates and the broader public that those who challenged colonial authority would be subjected to systematic humiliation and degradation. The theatrical nature of this malfeasance, particularly its deliberate visibility to prisoners' families and communities, reveals its role in deterring resistance while reinforcing colonial hierarchies.

The spectacular violence of August 29, 1930, when thirteen political prisoners were brutally beaten under direct supervision of senior colonial officials, illuminates the systematic nature of institutional abuse within the prison system. The careful orchestration of this violence—conducted in public, with medical oversight deliberately ignored, and followed by systematic efforts to suppress information about the incident—demonstrates how brutality functioned as official policy rather than unauthorized excess. The psychological dimensions of this violence, designed to break not just immediate victims but all who witnessed or heard about it, reveal sophisticated understanding of how terror operates as a mechanism of political control.

The failure of official reform efforts that Shastri documents provides crucial insights into why incremental approaches to institutional change so often prove inadequate. The temporary improvements during official inspections, arbitrary interpretation of classification policies, and systematic subversion of prisoner rights reveal how existing power structures can co-opt and neutralize reform initiatives that threaten established interests. The introduction of new restrictions in response to prisoner advocacy for existing

rights demonstrates how reform processes themselves can become mechanisms for expanding rather than limiting administrative control.

Shastri's comprehensive reform vision represents a sophisticated response to these systematic obstacles. Her proposals for educational workshops, medical care, legal protection, and uniform treatment form an integrated program that recognizes the interconnected nature of institutional problems while addressing both immediate needs and fundamental questions about carceral purpose. The combination of practical improvements with visionary transformation demonstrates strategic thinking about how to pursue meaningful change under conditions of systematic constraint.

The assessment of Shastri's proposals as combining incremental, radical, and utopian elements reveals the complex relationship between pragmatic reform and systematic transformation. While some aspects of her vision—such as educational programs and improved medical care—might be implemented within existing structures through sufficient political pressure, others—particularly the abolition of classification systems and establishment of independent oversight—would require fundamental changes in power relationships that colonial authorities had strong incentives to resist.

However, the apparent impossibility of implementing Shastri's comprehensive vision within colonial structures should not obscure its practical wisdom or continuing relevance for contemporary reform efforts. Her recognition that meaningful change requires addressing systematic rather than isolated problems offers important insights for current criminal justice reform movements that often focus on specific issues without addressing the broader logic of mass incarceration.

The enduring significance of Shastri's analysis lies partly in its revelation of patterns that persist across different historical contexts and national systems. The forms of malfeasance, abuse, and reform failure that she documents continue to characterize many contemporary carceral institutions, suggesting that her insights about systematic obstacles to change remain relevant for current reform efforts. More fundamentally, Shastri's vision of prisons as potential spaces for education, healing, and human development rather than punishment and control anticipates contemporary discussions about transformative justice and prison abolition.

The gender dimensions of Shastri's analysis also provide continuing insights into how women's experiences of incarceration reveal particular aspects of institutional violence and discrimination that might otherwise remain invisible. Her documentation of isolation, medical neglect, and systematic humiliation offers a template for understanding how multiple forms of identity and social position interact to shape experiences of state custody.

Perhaps most importantly, Shastri's memoir demonstrates the crucial role of testimony and documentation in challenging systematic abuse and creating possibilities for meaningful reform. Her detailed recording of daily prison life, careful analysis of how institutional practices served broader political purposes, and comprehensive vision of alternative arrangements provide a model for how direct experience can inform strategic thinking about institutional change.

The systematic nature of the problems that Shastri identifies—malfeasance as institutionalized practice, violence as official policy, reform as performance rather than substance—suggests that meaningful change requires approaches that match the systematic nature of the problems being addressed. Her comprehensive reform vision recognizes that isolated improvements are likely to be co-opted or reversed unless they are part of broader transformation of institutional purpose and practice.

Ultimately, Shastri's memoir offers both sobering insights into obstacles facing reform efforts and hopeful vision of what genuine transformation might accomplish. Her recognition that systematic problems require systematic solutions, combined with her detailed proposals for comprehensive reform, demonstrates that alternatives to existing carceral arrangements are both necessary and possible. The question remains whether contemporary societies possess the political will and institutional commitment necessary to pursue the kind of fundamental transformation that her analysis suggests is required for genuine justice and meaningful reform.

Her enduring contribution lies in demonstrating that the choice between accepting existing injustices and pursuing impossible utopias represents a false dilemma. Through careful analysis of systematic problems and comprehensive vision of practical alternatives, meaningful reform becomes not just possible but necessary for any society committed to genuine justice and human dignity. The systematic nature of the malfeasance, abuse, and failed reform that she documents reveals that incremental adjustments are insufficient to address fundamental problems, while her comprehensive reform vision demonstrates that transformation is both necessary and achievable given sufficient commitment to systematic change.

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