

Foucauldian exploration of K Ajitha's autobiography

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Abstract

Prison is not a place of confinement alone. It was indeed the birth place of many renowned works of literature. The paper is an attempt on my part to analyze K. Ajitha's *Ormakkurippukal* on the basis of Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*. I have tried to bring to light how well the work reflects the idea of prison developed by Foucault. The paper also explores Ajitha's own experiences as presented in her autobiographical work *Ormakkurippukal*, keeping Foucault's ideas in view. It explores how the people in power execute their rules and norms upon the ordinary. The work portrays the real humiliations of prison life, making the prisoners inhuman creatures.

Keywords: Prison literature- foucauldian notion of prison - revolutionary idea- power structure- surveillance

1. Introduction

Kunnikkal Ajitha is a social activist, writer and critic, who is a former Indian naxalite who took active part in the naxalite movements in Kerala in the 1960's when the group conducted armed raids on Thalassery and Pulpally police stations to the death of two policemen. Ajitha was subsequently arrested, trialed and imprisoned for nine years. After her jail sentence, Ajitha is currently a human rights activist and social reformer with an active presence in Kerala's social milieu. She founded a non-governmental organization named Anweshi in the year 1993, and now it is a constituent of Kerala Sthree VEDI (Kerala Women's Forum) works for the empowerment of women. She was an active participant in many sensational human rights cases in Kerala.

Ajitha's father was a staunch support for her in her political life. Her family was highly influenced by the philosophies of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Mao Se Tung, Lenin and such revolutionary leaders who made invaluable contributions to the world. Her family was completely devoted to communist ideology and revolutionary movements. She wrote this work after a year she released from the prison in 1977. It is a work which tells the touching stories of the naxalbari movement during its emergence and its growth. Most importantly it reveals the heart breaking experiences that Ajitha had to face during her imprisonment and after. Her aim of writing this book is to reveal all the real incidents which are misrepresented by the government, police and the political parties. She was a strong supporter of the naxalbari movement during the period of 1970's. She was at her energetic youth at that time. She wrote this book when she felt that it is necessary to write a book about her family experiences as a historical necessity. naxalbari movement had immense influence in her personal life in forming a personal ideology and viewpoint. It had also helped her to move forward especially in the field of feminist movement in Kerala. During the hard and harsh stages of revolution, she had to face much discrimination as a woman. When some comrades protect her for she is a 'woman' but on the other hand, some consider her only as an object to satisfy their sexual desires. It was also women's duty to prepare food for all the comrades in the camp. It is also disturbed her as a woman and a communist. She states that,

women are still in the prisons of society on the basis of gender and duties. Even the comrades in the movement were suppressed their female comrades, wives and other women they are related to. It was rare to consider women comrades as just 'human beings'.

As a movement, infatuation, love, institutions of marriages and family were highly discouraged and suppressed. Such people were eliminated and suspended from the movement. The movement followed the ideas of Marx, Mao Se Tung and the ideology of communism. 'Freedom' was again a paradox every time. The movement was meant for freedom and basic human rights, at the same time, there were violations of rights and freedom existed within the movement itself. Ajitha doubts how a communist, freedom movement itself can become a prison for some of its members, especially for women. Ajitha was discovering new meanings in the male-female relationships. She was highly influenced by the feminist movements emerged in the 1970's and 1980's. She was very confident that she could make some more changes in the party and most importantly in the society itself. This book itself is a historical record of the naxalbari movement and its crucial role played against the degradations in Communist, left movements. It is also a book which encouraged youth to work together against the feudal system and the inhuman attitude of the changing governments in the state, especially in the state of Kerala.

In the beginning chapter, Ajitha describes her first experience as a leader and who participated in a strike against the government's decision in 1964 to cut down the subsidy of ration goods. It made her continue in politics and the revolutionary movement.

She was voracious reader even during her childhood. She had read the historical books of Adolph Hitler, Edgar snow, Mira Ropper, Autobiography of Charlie Chaplin, Karl Marx, Lenin, Mao Se Tung and many others'. She was very much interested in the revolutionary history of China and Russia. She kept a great admiration towards the wonderful history of these nations.

During her pre-degree period, her father was arrested for being participated in a 'Kerala strike'. Actually he did not participate in the strike, as the police thought. This was a sudden shock to

her, and she grew unending hatred towards the government. She visited her father in the prison. The scene broke her into pieces. This was the moment she asked herself whether to get involved in politics. This visit to the prison changed Ajitha into another individual.

After long five 'days', her father was released from the prison. But still Ajitha couldn't recover from the shock. This experience shows us how pathetic the condition would be, when our closed ones get imprisoned. That imprisonment was actually one of the important reasons for her to get involved in the revolutionary movement. It changed her attitude, and she grew unending anger towards the people who are in power and the entire power system also.

On 5th July 1967, Ajitha and her comrades came to confront with a radio tape. It talked about the naxelbari movement and it ordered to fight for the poor agrarian people who are being suppressed by the government. Ajitha and her friends planned to translate the speech into Malayalam and moreover to form a 'naxelbari Assistance Committee' in the state of Kerala. Later on they kept constant touch with the universal naxelbari movement, especially Mao Se Tung's teachings.

The need for such a movement in a state like Kerala was crucial. Because, the socio-political condition of the state was that horrible, because, both the left and right governments were completely anti-human. They were exploiting the poor people in the state. They didn't provide even the basic necessities of life. Huge amounts of taxes were imposed on them. Though the nation was free from the colonial hands, the state was still in the hands of feudal lords. They controlled the state and they were the agents of governments to interact with the people. It is easy to understand how "democratic" would be their attitude. They exploited the poor farmers without giving any wages for their work. It made the people live in utter poverty. They were not permitted to irrigate even their own fields. Majority of the people didn't have any land of their own. They were devoid of houses, toilets and even dresses to wear. The condition of poor tribal people was unexplainable. They lived in the haven of nature. They were also completely neglected by the government. The people were in short of enough food grains. The feudal lords kept all the harvested goods in their own household granaries. It was not made available for the poor farmers who were behind this harvest. They were actually the arch providers of the world. But they were also completely neglected by the government. The land was of Devaswom Board and they didn't allow the farmers to grow crops for their purposes. They exploited money from the poor farmers. Another issue was of the condition of the cigar workers in the district of Kannur. They too had to suffer a lot to meet the both ends of life. They are given proper payments for their work. The cigar company was under private ownership. So they exploited the workers badly. But the people had no other jobs to be engaged in. This was the root cause of the emergence of the naxelbari movement in Kerala. Thus this group was a rebel movement against the communist party, as they are the ones to take this issue into concern. This rebel group conducted various agitations. They published and distributed the works and pamphlets received from China. They conducted study classes. Thus the movement moved forward without fearing anyone and started to get spread all over the state of India.

Ajitha remembers one of his comrades, who spent all his time for the movement and worked for the welfare of the poor

agrarian people. He was imprisoned for many long years and he died of blood pressure which was a result of his imprisonment. He was imprisoned for attacking the Thalassery police station in the year 1968. He was not ready to obey the police officers, that is why he brutally beaten up in the prison. Ajitha wonders, the police officers were killing a courageous man who worked hard for the rights of the agrarian society. How power system eliminate these kinds of citizens using the 'simple' weapon of imprisonment. It was the only weapon which could eliminate a person in every sense.

Ajitha strongly opposed Gandhi's method of non-violence. It doesn't mean that she supports violence or violence is the ultimate solution. But to a certain extent, non-violence is impossible. Resistance sometimes becomes the necessary. It may lead to violence. She observes violence as a part of the social system. Violence is with us in one or another sense. We cannot withdraw ourselves from it, because, it will spread keeping the citizens aside. So the only way is to fight back with the same weapon. Violence is the creation of the power system. They use it to suppress the people, to confine them into what they wanted them to be.

By the year 1968, they started discussions on the revolution. They gathered hundreds of people from various sections of the society. Poor farmers, workers, tribal people and all other weaker sections of the society were ready to fight against the government, police system, devaswom board and the feudal lords. Because all these institutions were the people who hold 'power'. They violated the basic rights of these people and the attacked the people using the force of police. They conducted mainly two attacks. One is in MSP camp at Pulpally; other is in the Police station of Thalassery. They also attacked the houses of two major feudal lords, robbed food grains, money, and ornaments and distributed to the people. Finally they were caught by the police when they reached back at the urban area from the forests.

They had to face a lot of hardships from the moment they were caught. The police beat them cruelly. Police brought them to various police outlets and asked them to beat again. All their anger towards them was showered brutally. This revolutionary group had attacked the MSP camp and killed the wireless operator. The police questioned them. Four or five policemen handled each person. They beat unkindly. It damaged the inner organs of the comrades. They hit on their chests using their shoes. It prolonged for almost half an hour. By this time, every comrade was almost broken. It was a shocking experience for Ajitha that her comrades are being brutally beaten up by the police. Later they turned to Ajitha. They hit her stomach with their boots. They showered verbal abuses on her. They beat using the cane stick also. The harsh treatments they had to bear were as cruel as no one can think. Later they were locked up in single prison. But when the DYSP reached, he again started to beat asking for comrade Varghese. Ajitha was brutally beaten up by the police even without considering her gender. They were forced to lie on the ground and the policemen beat with a cane stick. Later they were asked to beat each other. It was unbearable for them when they were made to pluck hair from the bearded comrade among them. They felt pain in each and every nerve. The pain was intolerable. When they reached Mananthavady prison, she met her mother, in whose face; she saw imprints of a hand. Unexpectedly, Ajitha was their next prey and she was asked to remove the sari and was made to pose before the people with a

pant and a simple blouse. She bowed her head before the people around her with pain and humiliation. Police officer successfully projected Ajitha as a prostitute. Media persons took photographs again and again. A comrade's three ribs were broken, some others' tooth was lost by their punch, and many others' inner organs were damaged. They have arrested hundreds of tribal people in order to fill the prison. They were also brutally beaten up. The police officers arrested Ajitha's mother from a villager's home. And that family was also brutally beat by the police and their daughter was raped by the police. They had also tried to rape Ajitha during the nights. They were shifted to different prisons, but the condition remained the same. They were not allowed to sit together, banned books in the prison, visitors were not permitted even they were not allowed to chat with the nearby prisoners.

These incidents made Ajitha stunned and she observed that the police officers are a group of people who doesn't have any cultural background. She understood how the male dominated society concerns women. They did all these because, during the Pulpally police camp attack, revolutionaries had killed a police officer. It is only because people had in them much grudge and hatred towards the police. The condition of violence was completely caused by the government and the police. So it is quite natural that people will react with the same weapon when it crosses all the boundaries. There is a saying in Malayalam that "violence gives birth to violence". This violence broke out only after the government violated the situation standing with the Devaswom board, Police force and Feudal lords. The state was in a climate of an emergency especially the Wayanad district. But the chief Minister and the government never show any humanistic attitude to the issue. They acted like the rubber stamp of police and feudal lords, because, they concerned about their power and positions not the pathetic condition of the poor people.

These are some incidents which Ajitha shares in her books. Prison offered many experiences. As she observes, it was a repository of real life experiences and it made her think of the lives in the prisons. Stories of female prisoners were horrible. They were sex workers, murderers, thieves, spies, and smugglers. But it was sure for Ajitha that every female prisoner had something to say about their crimes. Because, majority of them committed mistakes in their life to escape from poverty, to escape from sexual harassments, to meet both ends of life, to make their child study well. The important thing is that most of them were widows. Married life led them to commit mistakes and crimes. Thus, Ajitha found a miniature of the society in every prison she had been.

Ajitha states that police system was completely against all those who stand against the government. They also arrested people who declared solidarity to the movement. Everyone was a criminal for them, as each one has something bad to say about the government. Basic human rights were violated in the prisons. They were not allowed to read books. Many of the prisoners left or remained in prisons with various deadly diseases. The paradox is that, all these were happening in the 'independent' India, after 1947. Thus the police system suppressed the civilians. They were not allowed to utter a word for their basic needs. They were totally silenced. The government had already decided not to grant any facilities for these revolutionaries. Both the central and state governments were trying to suppress these revolutionaries. Political parties also published pamphlets against the movement. Popular

media too turned against them. Thus, it's quite clear how a whole state stood against a movement which strongly raised their hands for the welfare of the people. It shows us how powerful the state is to influence each element which stood against the state's will and decisions. Even mediators approached them to influence the members of the revolutionary movement to their parties. Government also sent mediators with many offers to enquire whether they are ready to abide with the government. Between this many murders had occurred which are not even made known to the public. Comrade Varghese was brutally murdered in the prison accusing him as the brain behind all these incidents. He had to face the cruelest forms of punishments in the prison. He was made to stand in the hot water and gouged out his eyes. Comrade Varghese' murder proved a government's fear for a revolutionary leader, who keeps close relationship with the people of the state. It was a murder which proclaimed the constitutional fact that the judicial system is the only authority which can punish a criminal. It was also a murder which again proved that those people who are responsible to protect the constitution, themselves violates the constitutional provisions. It again proved that the power structure, which will eliminate the person, whoever it, if he/she stand against the position and their attitude. It proved that the rules, regulations and the constitution are mere institutions to protect the people who are in power. Both the changing governments treated the prisoners brutally. They used police to suppress the enemies. They created crime stories and 'made' criminals. But, as a result, poor farmers, tribal people, and revolutionary leaders were imprisoned and murdered. They even threatened the persons who came for Ajitha's bail. They didn't extend Ajitha's bail tenure. Female prisoners were also treated badly. They didn't have enough space to sleep and was no facility for their basic necessities. A kind of smell spread all over the female ward. They felt like living in a huge well. They were affected by various diseases. Prisons are not a space where only 'criminals' were kept. But it is a place where many innocent people live their lives. A moment's mistake can make an individual a criminal. But the judiciary and government should have the capacity to trial and let them prove their guilty. Instead, they leave them to live in prisons, because, most of the prisoners are the only sources of the bread and butter of their families. So, actually by keeping them inside the prisons, the government is indirectly incarcerating their parents, wives, children and loved ones. It is the most inhumane activity in the world. Ajitha observes that most of the prisoners deserve bail and release, but the government deliberately makes them lifelong prisoners.

Ajitha felt a kind of dangerous silence creeping in her life. She observed that the government is silencing her in every sense. She had been offered with many things if she be ready to obey government's decisions. She was not even allowed to meet her father as she was not ready to obey the government. Thus prison life made many impacts in her life. In a sense prison was an aged teacher for her. She could experience various kinds of social life in prison. It opened her eyes and taught that there are many things to be learned from prison. It can never ever attain standing outside the prison. She bowed her head before the kindles and inhumane power structure. She even felt shy of being a part of this "democratic" country. Prison is a place where values have no value. It made her think about the way society observes the opposite gender. She felt for the

need of a revolution to ensure basic human values and rights. On analyzing Ajitha's *Ormakkurippukal* in the light of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, the important concept of "Delinquent" comes to the forefront. They are the part of a small, hardened group of criminals, identified with the lower social classes. Most importantly, they are defined as "abnormal", and analyzed and controlled by the mechanisms that Foucault describes. There are several advantages in replacing the criminal by the delinquent: delinquents are clearly set apart from the rest of society, and therefore easy to supervise and control. Thus "naxalites" was a group which was exploited in the name of "Delinquency". Ajitha was a naxalite. She was arrested and imprisoned for fighting against the government as it curtailed basic necessities of the people. So, here pops up the question 'who is a criminal?' It is the responsibility of the government to satisfy the needs of the people and as such to ensure their well-being. It is undoubtedly the irresponsibility of the government which gave rise to the naxalbari movement in Kerala. Hence, in the work, the notion of crime and criminals are inverted.

Foucault says that there should be a direct link between crime and punishment which is completely negated in Ajitha's case. Her group fought for their rights but they ended up in prison and had to bear the worst treatment from the people in power. The history of prisons reveals to us that they were set up to moralize the masses and to ensure peace. Instead of being a moralizing agency, prison, here, stands as something immoral and unappealing. How can the authorities in the prison ask a women prisoner to remove her sari? Is this the right punishment given for her crime? The failure of prisons and the need of reformation is well discussed by Foucault. The urgency of such a reformation comes after learning the experience that Ajitha narrates in her Autobiography. Truly the harsh treatments in the prison made the naxalites do more and more crimes.

"It is ugly to be punishable, but there is no glory in punishing" (Foucault, 10). In this work, this statement becomes just the opposite. It is not ugly for the naxalites to be punishable as they are punished for something which is just. On the contrary, the people in power seem to find a sense of glory in punishing such people. Instead of being a means of reducing crimes, they are leading the prisoners to commit more, for the prisoners develop a sense of revenge for humiliating them to the core.

The linear structure representing the function of prison is from order to offence and back to the norm. But here, "offence" is made to bring an order which did not pre-exist. Again the question of crime and criminal arises. There is a need to re-examine the legitimization and acceptance of the power to punish.

2. Conclusion

Prison produced a reverse result in Ajitha. It didn't make her suppress all her revolutionary spirit; instead, it made her stand strong in the field of revolution. Thus the institution of prison was an utter failure in her case. It couldn't alter her according to the norms and conditions of the power system. Prison is observed as the place where the devils of injustice are in power. They are not able to understand the simple fact that every crime is born from basic social problems. Prisons are meant to mould the character of the criminals. But after their

period of imprisonment, many prisoners turn violent and happen vice versa. By their period of imprisonment, they are changed to different kinds of personalities. It is said that prisons are made to alter a criminal into "normal" state of mind. But prisons are an utter failure in fulfilling this aim. For her, during the long years of imprisonment, nothing happened in particular, except making her strong enough to fight again for the working class people, tribal people and the poor farmers. Her release was actually a mock at the governments who tried their best to alter her to a "normal" mode.

3. References

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