




RESEARCH ARTICLE

The prison-handicraft complex: Convict labour in colonial India

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Abstract

Prison labour was an integral part of the penal order in colonial India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Especially in Bengal, such coerced labour, overwhelmingly male, was increasingly deployed in handicrafts production rather than in extramural construction projects, a regimen that led to the development of a prison-handicraft complex. Colonial efforts to refine this system focused largely on increasing the severity of the conditions of incarceration and indoor work, but also on the conflicting goal of maximizing the profits of its handiwork. Prisons thus emerged as effective sites of handicrafts production, with the products of their forced labour facilitating the revival of the crafts industry whose growth is generally attributed to the rise of an international arts and crafts movement in Britain and India.

Keywords: Market economy; bazaars; embedded exchange

Introduction

This article traces the development of a penal order or prison disciplinary system in nineteenth-century colonial India designed to extract the labour of convicts, particularly in handicrafts production.¹ I pair the word ‘complex’ with prisons and handicrafts to underscore their intimate and intricate connections—in much the same way that writings about the carceral system in the United States points to the existence of a prison-industrial complex²—and to locate the colonial prison as a key site

¹Handicrafts, to use one definition, are ‘products produced with: (i) manual labour with minimal or no input from machines; (ii) a substantial level of skill or expertise; (iii) a significant element of tradition; and (iv) history of survival in significant scale’. See Maureen Liebl and Tirthankar Roy, ‘Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, no. 51/52, 2003–4, pp. 5366–5376, 5367.

²In the US carceral literature the ‘prison-industrial complex’ refers to ‘a set of bureaucratic, political and economic interests’ or ‘a confluence of special interests’ that exploits the existing incarceration system—its increasing deployment and growing inmate population—to recruit prisoners as cheap labour in competition with wage labour on the outside. This idea of interest groups and institutions exerting

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of handicrafts production resulting from the 'trades' or 'manufacturing' that convicts were compelled to undertake as a condition of their sentences of imprisonment with 'hard labour'. Colonial authorities, particularly in Bengal, the largest presidency of India, which then included the present-day states of West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, and Jharkhand, and the nation-state of Bangladesh, increasingly deployed prisoners in intramural instead of extramural work. This change, instituted in the early 1840s, meant that large numbers of prisoners were withdrawn from the public works they had been engaged in since the late eighteenth century to labour indoors in 'manufacturing' or handicrafts production.

The shift to handicrafts production resulted from the efforts of the colonial state to increase the severity of the conditions of incarceration as per the recommendations of the influential Prison-Discipline Committee of the late 1830s that found the existing penal disciplinary system wanting, especially in the workings of extramural labour. According to this Committee, whose report became the primer for penal and judicial reform in the nineteenth century, the employment of prisoners in public works, especially road construction, was definitely 'the worst method of treatment ... ever ... provided under the British Government for this class of persons'.³

Therefore, the Committee recommended ending that practice immediately. In its estimation, the costs of extramural labour were inordinately high because of the money expended on the feeding, clothing, lodging, and guarding of prisoners on the road, far in excess of the costs if they remained behind bars, and the returns wanting because the standards of the prisoners' handiwork fell far short of that generated by free labour. Furthermore, such outdoor work organized in road gangs operated under a lax disciplinary system that had the additional problem of developing 'frightful' rates of mortality.⁴

This article first examines the system of extramural prison labour across India in the closing years of the eighteenth century and the initial decades of the nineteenth century before turning to the changes instituted in response to the recommendations of the Prison-Discipline Committee whose report was published in 1838. Particularly in Bengal, the initial experiments with intramural labour in a handful of jails gave way to the extensive employment of prisoners indoors in handicrafts production of one sort or another, beginning in the 1840s. No one championed that practice more enthusiastically than F. J. Mouat, a medical officer who became the inspector-general of prisons

'unwarranted influence' harks back to President Dwight Eisenhower's 1961 farewell speech warning of the existence of a 'military-industrial complex'. For an initial formulation of the former concept, see Eric Schlosser, 'The Prison-Industrial Complex', *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1998, pp. 51–77; for the latter, Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., 'The Military-Industrial Complex', *Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 3, 2011, pp. 135–147. See also Philip D. Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), for another well-known use of the notion of 'complex' to refer to an 'economic or political order' or 'interrelated aggregate' of interests.

³India, *Report of the Committee on Prison-Discipline* (hereafter *PDC*) (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1838), p. 59. T. B. Macaulay, the Whig politician and writer, headed this Committee, whose report was instrumental in shaping penal policy and practices in India. For additional details, see Anand A. Yang, 'The Voice of Colonial Discipline and Punishment: Knowledge, Power and the Penological Discourse in Early Nineteenth Century India', *Indo-British Review*, vol. 21, 1995, pp. 62–71.

⁴*PDC*, pp. 59–61.

in Bengal in 1855 and convened the first ever province-wide exhibition in Calcutta in 1856 to celebrate and stimulate jail handicrafts in the region.

Well into the 1870s, the jail remained a site of handicrafts production, especially in Bengal. That began to change, however, as administrators at different levels of government raised concerns about the lack of severity of indoor penal regimens, particularly with the introduction of machines to enhance the productivity and profits of jailhouse manufactures. An 1877 conference convened to improve jail discipline concluded that colonial authorities needed to reconsider the merits of public works, that is, of deploying prisoners extramurally. In the early 1880s Calcutta followed up with a directive urging local officials to restrict the production of jail handicrafts and to employ more inmates in public works. Even though that order was modified at the instigation of the secretary of state in London, the Government of India thereafter was much more receptive to extramural work and to reducing the numbers of prisoners involved in intramural labour. Furthermore, many who laboured indoors were increasingly employed in working the machines introduced into jails to expand and expedite production.

Moreover, by the 1880s other critics had entered the fray about penal handicrafts production, their concerns shaped not by an interest in refining the disciplinary system of prisons but in revitalizing the 'traditional' arts and crafts of India. George Birdwood's 1880 book *The Industrial Arts of India* embodied that line of thinking, its attack on the 'mongrel manufactures of the government jails' stemming from his belief that those products posed a 'disastrous competition' to the handiwork of 'native' craftsmen, especially carpet makers.⁵

In focusing on prisons as a site of handicrafts production in the nineteenth century, my interest is in supplementing the history of the revival of the crafts industry in India that is generally narrated as stemming from the cultural flows between the metropole and colony or the rise of an international arts and crafts movement in Britain and India in the late nineteenth century. In that account, the drive to revitalize artistic traditions in the face of industrialization and manufacturing by machines is largely a story about the initiatives taken by individuals and institutions to shape arts and aesthetics through art schools, exhibitions held in Europe and in India, museums, and other government bodies and policies coupled with the actions and reactions of Indian elites interested in producing a new nationalist art.⁶ By contrast, my version also locates

⁵George C. M. Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), pp. 290–294. See also E. B. Havell, *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India* (1912, reprint. New Delhi: Usha Publications, 1986), p. 13, regarding the importance of India retaining its 'accumulated skill of hand and eye' and not allowing machines to take over handicrafts production.

⁶For example, see Arindam Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of Its Global Reproducibility* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave, 2009). See also Abigail McGowan, 'Convict Carpets: Jail and the Revival of Historic Carpet Design in Colonial India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 72, 2013, pp. 391–416; and Padmini Swaminathan, 'Prison as Factory: A Study of Jail Manufactures in the Madras Presidency', *Studies in History*, n.s., vol. 11, 1995, pp. 77–96, for two studies that highlight the role of 'jail industries' in developing handicrafts production.

the revival of handicrafts squarely in the emerging colonial state's commitment to refine and make its system of penal discipline harder, particularly by deploying its growing convict body in productive and profitable labour. Indeed, colonial debates about mobilizing convict labour to work indoors or outdoors were always centred on concerns about ensuring and maximizing the severity of imprisonment and not the rehabilitation of prisoners.

My account also identifies an earlier chronology to the handicrafts story than the arts and aesthetics scholarship that generally considers the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held at Crystal Palace in 1851 and the National Art Training School established at South Kensington in 1853 as the starting points for developments that led to efforts in India (and Britain) to revive 'traditional' arts and crafts. Art schools, established at Madras (1850), Calcutta (1854), Bombay (1857), and Lahore (1864), were critical to this revival, although they differed in their approach in that the institutions at Madras and Lahore focused on developing 'the "industrial arts" or "decorative arts" ... defined as the domain of the Indian craftsman' and those at Calcutta and Bombay on 'the "fine arts" ... defined as the product of Western training in painting or sculpture'.⁷

At the turn of the nineteenth century, prisoners in Bengal, as in the other presidencies of Bombay and Madras, worked extramurally in public works, primarily in building and repairing roads, as judicial officials noted in their answers to the governor-general's 'interrogatories' in 1800. In a few jails, inmates remained behind bars and did nothing, either because their numbers were too small to constitute into a workforce, or their localities were flooded, or local officials did not have the personnel to guard them outdoors. Only one district, Tipperah in Chittagong Division, reported that it had yet to send its convicts outdoors and responded by requesting the government's approval to do so.⁸

For security reasons, prisoners generally worked in the vicinity of their places of confinement, close enough to ensure that they did not have to spend nights away from their quarters—not that most district jails, largely constructed in the 1790s and the first decade or two of the nineteenth century, were secure buildings. Most judicial officials whose responsibilities included supervising their local prisons expressed satisfaction with the 'public' work performed by their prisoners; in their words, prisoners were 'advantageously' and 'usefully employed'. A few expressed concerns about the costs entailed in guarding prisoners beyond the confines of the prison and noted that their labour value would never match what the government had to spend on prisons. A Banaras judge raised the possibility of training prisoners in 'mechanical trades' so that they would have a 'livelihood' to take up after their release.⁹

⁷Mathur, *India by Design*, pp. 92–93. For earlier works on the rise of art schools and the interest in the development of 'traditional' arts, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), Chapters 5, 6; Guha-Thakurta, *Making of 'Indian' Art*, Chapters 1, 2.

⁸Great Britain, 'Answers to the Interrogatories of the Governor General and New Systems of Revenue, and Judicial Administration (1801)', *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 9, 1812–1813, p. 417.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 274, 280; and for responses from areas other than Banaras, see, for example, pp. 8, 14, 39, 54, 66, 84, 102, etc. See also John Mulvaney, 'Bengal Jails in Early Days', *Calcutta Review*, n.s., vol. 6, no. 292, 1918, pp. 295–296.

Even at this early juncture, authorities at the highest level of the colonial and imperial government were concerned with how best to make use of their growing inmate population (numbering 7,523 in Bengal in 1798 and overwhelmingly male). They also worried that their disciplinary practices relating to imprisonment were not severe enough: prisoners were not tasked with chores requiring greater exertion and many remained idle all day long. Consequently, London and Calcutta encouraged local officials to employ prisoners in public works, roads in particular, but also in other kinds of manual work such as the digging of tanks. They also broached the possibility of moving convicts away from their home districts so that they would not have access to friends and family.¹⁰

While most local administrators recognized the value of convict labour in building and repairing roads, they worried about the costs of supervising convicts out in the open, even though many jails at the turn of the nineteenth century were flimsy structures and outdoor labour helped ease overcrowding.¹¹ Nevertheless, by the late 1790s, prisoners, across Bengal, as per the orders of the Nizam Adawlat (criminal court), were employed in public works, as long as they were physically capable. And with local officials eager to capitalise on prison labour, judicial authorities helped increase convict numbers by instituting legal changes in the first decade of the nineteenth century that authorized courts to tack on hard labour (and banishment) for particular offences.¹²

By the 1830s, as the Prison-Discipline Committee's findings reveal, most prisoners, especially in Bengal, engaged in extramural labour, typically in constructing roads. In some jails a small number worked indoors, as did all female prisoners who, if tasked with work, invariably did the cleaning, sweeping, and washing of the floors and walls of their jails. In some instances, intramural or 'private' labour, as it was sometimes termed, for male prisoners also involved cleaning jail premises and tending to sick inmates. In many jails intramural labour was organized by caste, as in the Kanpur Jail where cleaning its 'necessaries and sewers' and sweeping its wards were assigned to inmates of so-called 'Untouchable' or Scheduled or Dalit castes, whereas the work of ministering to sick inmates and applying cow dung and mud to the interior walls of the jail were assigned to 'good' castes, presumably meaning the higher castes.¹³

In a handful of jails in Bengal, intramural work entailed manufacturing or handicrafts production. For instance, some inmates in the Alipore jail in Calcutta, whose occupants were typically the region's most serious offenders and therefore barred from leaving its premises, were involved in spinning twine from flax; in Cuttack, 24 inmates spun thread—earlier they had been charged with grinding *atta* (wheat flour)

¹⁰Extract Judicial Letter to Bengal, June 4, 1802; Letter from Bengal, Sept. 5, 1800, Board's Collection (BC), 1803–1804. Here and elsewhere, all unpublished archival sources are from the British Library, London (BL).

¹¹Orders to Nizam Adalat, from Governor General, with Extract Bengal Judicial, 8 May 1797, BC, 1798–1799.

¹²PDC, pp. 42–43. See also Anand A. Yang, *Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021) regarding the colonial government's interest in deploying transportation as a particularly harsh punishment and its relation to imprisonment. At times, transportation was utilized to reduce the size of the inmate population in India and alleviate overcrowding in jails.

¹³PDC, appendix no. 4, p. 12.

and *dal* (lentils). Some also swept and cleaned the jails, others washed clothes, cleaned cotton and wool, spun thread, and made blankets.¹⁴

Similarly, prisoners in several jails in Madras and Bombay in the early nineteenth century performed intramural labour that included the making of handicrafts. In Malabar, they worked 'as stone-cutters, bricklayers, tile-makers, shell-gatherers, (to be burnt into lime), road-menders, carpenters, blacksmiths, sawyers, beaters of mortar, tillers, mat-makers, basket-makers, carriers of stones, and to draw carts'. In Chicacole (now Srikakulam), inmates wove cloth, made paper, and some repaired fetters or made nails and hinges for sale or baskets. In Chingleput (now Chengalpattu), the local administration, having secured authorization to erect looms in 1833, engaged 20 inmates in weaving different kinds of cloth into riding trousers and ordinary jackets worn by natives. Some officials were eager to introduce treadmills into the production process, in part to make imprisonment a less 'comfortable' experience and more filled with 'terrors'.¹⁵

In the Bombay presidency, too, some inmates were entrusted with indoor work. As many as 400 male prisoners in Ahmedabad jail, for example, were involved in manufacturing coarse clothes, carpets, silks, table linen, kincob, cotton lace for belts, and other articles. In Konkan inmates produced cloth, carpets, rope, and paper—products that a judge worried competed with the handiwork of free manufacturers. That concern would be taken up again later in the century when senior administrators debated restricting the wares produced by prisoners for fear of overwhelming private enterprise. Elsewhere in the Bombay presidency prison labour was engaged in 'spinning, weaving, making baskets, paper[,] carpets[,] cumblies [blankets,] gunnies [gunny bags,] pottery'; in a few instances, female prisoners were involved as well.¹⁶

As a rule, female prisoners did not participate in extramural labour and were generally tasked with cleaning the jail and washing. In 1840 they added up to 425 prisoners in all of Bengal, or a little over 2 per cent of the 52,000 people or so who comprised the inmate population. In the initial decades of the nineteenth century most prisons built separate quarters to house them.¹⁷

As the findings of the Prison-Discipline Committee indicate, in the late 1830s most local jails across India deployed a significant proportion of their inmate population on public works. And that, in the Committee's eyes, especially based on its information for the 13,000 prisoners in Bengal for which it had the most complete data, was problematic. Its concerns about extramural labour were manifold, including the widespread practice of having prisoners from local or district jails labouring on the roads under the supervision of the local engineer. Another sizeable cohort, beginning in 1833—and this usage troubled Committee members even more—was recruited from

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 8, 11, appendix no. 4, p. 6.

¹⁵Ibid., appendix no. 4, pp. 4, 14, 15. The Chingleput administrator expressed interest in using a treadmill to make paper out of rags. See 'Correspondence relative to introduction of tread mills', BC, 1833–1834.

¹⁶Medical Board to J. P. Willoughby, Secretary (Secty.), to Govt., Bombay, no. 113, Feb. 9, 1837, India Criminal Judicial Consultations (ICJC), 3 April to 26 June 1837, 19 June, no. 12; PDC, appendix no. 4, p. 16.

¹⁷Statement exhibiting the number of female convicts ... 31 December 1840 ... in the Lower Provinces', with J. Hawkins, Registrar, to F. J. Halliday, Secty., no. 891, 19 March 1841, Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations (BCJC), 16 Feb. to 20 April 1841, 30 March, no. 2.

jails in Bihar, Banaras, and select Bengal districts to serve under the command of a military officer, Captain Thomson, to build the Grand Trunk Road, the main artery extending from east to west across North India. Unlike those working in and around district jails under a local engineer, these men had been removed from their home areas; slept in huts or tents; required extensive surveillance from a group of petty officials termed *barkandazs*, *daffadars*, and *jemadars*; and were secured together by a long chain that ran through a ring in each person's 'heavy fetters' that apparently made working difficult.¹⁸

In the Committee's view the system of extramural labour, particularly in Bengal, was 'the worst method of treatment' that the British Government in India had ever meted out to prisoners. It also ranked the disciplinary system under which they worked in the 'worst' category because the supervising local engineer acted more as a 'governor' and left the day-to-day management in the hands of guards who were invariably in league with the convicts.¹⁹ As a result, as colonial administrators frequently observed, convict labourers on the roads did not apply themselves with any diligence, one-half of them generally 'smoking, and the other [half] pretending to work; singing, laughing, joking, and only waiting their turn to exchange the spade for the hukah [hookah or water pipe]'.²⁰

The Committee also found the costs of extramural labour excessive: more was expended on the feeding, clothing, lodging, and surveillance of prisoners on the roads than those behind bars. According to its calculations, prisoners working extramurally in Bengal cost on average 46-4-6 sicca rupees per annum versus 32-13-2 sicca rupees if they stayed in jail, an excess of 13-7-4 per annum. In the North-Western Provinces that differential was less but still in excess of 8-13-0 sicca rupees per annum. On the whole, prisoners working outdoors cost an extra 24 rupees a year, or about 2 rupees a month, for a total of 26,000 rupees a month or 312,000 rupees a year for the 13,000 prisoners in Bengal who laboured extramurally. Moreover, by all accounts, their labour was not as productive as that which hired hands were apparently capable of doing.²¹

Nor was the Committee pleased with the 'frightful mortality' of some road gangs. In a two-year period leading up to April 1836, prisoners working extramurally had a mortality rate of nearly 7.3 per cent—actually closer to 11.7 per cent once the numbers were more accurately calculated—far more than the 6.6 per cent rate in jails in general. Moreover, in one instance, in a six-month period in 1836, a staggering 34 per cent of the prisoners working under Captain Thomson in Ramgarh (formerly Hazaribagh district, Jharkhand) on the Grand Trunk Road perished. On the Banaras Road, also under Thomson, the death rate was an alarming 14.2 per cent over the same duration.²²

¹⁸PDC, pp. 45–46, 55.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59. The Committee also took issue with extramural labour because it unnecessarily disgraced prisoners by parading them in public, particularly those whose crimes were not heinous.

²⁰W. Young, 'Prison Discipline in India', *Calcutta Review*, vol. 6, no. 12, 1846, p. 471.

²¹PDC, pp. 53, 55. By one estimate the total number of prisoners in India in the late 1830s was a little over 50,000. See C. Hudson to T. H. Maddock, Officiating (Offg.) Secty., GOI, 10 Sept. 1838, ICJC, 20 Aug. to 3 Dec. 1838, 17 Sept., no. 3.

²²PDC, pp. 48–50, 60. See also James Hutchinson, *Observations on the General and Medical Management of Indian Jails*, 2nd edn (Calcutta: G. H. Huttman, 1845), for another highly influential report that expressed alarm about the high mortality rates of extramural labour. As Hutchinson noted, with some annoyance,

For all these reasons the Committee insisted on the immediate suspension of extramural labour, which it characterized as the 'root of the existing defective and rotten system' and 'a dead loss upon the state' because of its high costs. In its view, outdoor labour did not ameliorate prison discipline.²³

In its stead the Committee proposed shifting most prisoners into working intramurally, ideally in 'trades' that would largely cover their subsistence costs, 'allowing those who know a trade suitable to a prison to practice it, and teaching some trade to those who know none'. As far as possible it wanted their labour to entail 'some dull, monotonous, wearisome, and uninteresting task, such as stepping up a tread-wheel, turning a capstan or handcrank, pumping water, pounding bricks, grinding flour or the like'.²⁴ It expressed a preference for treadwheels because these mechanisms eliminated the favouritism that Indian prison staff were said to extend to well-to-do prisoners and no more favoured 'the foot of a rich Rajpoot [upper caste Kshatriya] than ... the foot of a poor Chumar [Dalit caste]'. Inmates, furthermore, dreaded them, even though colonial officials believed that they had no long-term 'ill consequence, moral or physical'.²⁵

In advocating for 'trades' and indoor labour for prisoners, the Committee's objective was not to spur on handicrafts production and inculcate the requisite skills to do so, as many jail administrators increasingly would do in the 1840s. It stopped far short of that on the grounds that compelling prisoners to undertake certain crafts would lead to a violation of caste protocols. 'To force a man of a higher caste to work at any trade,' its report noted, 'would disgrace him forever, and be in fact inflicting a dreadful punishment not only on himself but on every member of his family. It would be looked upon as a barbarous cruelty, and excite nothing but indignation against the laws, in the strength of which the most dreadful crime would be forgotten.' Manual or agricultural labour, it claimed, did not lead to such transgressions.²⁶

The Committee's condemnation of extramural labour and advocacy of indoor work for prisoners, including that involving treadmills, was part and parcel of a larger set of changes it advanced to make prison discipline more punitive and severe—an objective that subsequent penal reform initiatives continued to pursue in the late nineteenth century.²⁷ In its estimation, the prevailing system did little more than confine people, rendering offenders 'immobile', as its report put it, while granting them 'better ... lodging, clothing, and food, than the greater part of the people' and 'lighter [work]

in the 1845 edition of his study that was originally issued in 1836, his findings and recommendations predated those of the PDC but were not acknowledged by the latter report (pp. 53–54).

²³PDC, p. 61.

²⁴Ibid., p. 105.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 109–111. Treadwheels were used to power various kinds of mills, for instance, for flour, oil, and other commodities. They were apparently in use in 67 jails in England. Only male prisoners were to be allowed to work them.

²⁶Ibid., p. 106.

²⁷See Christian Giuseppe De Vito and Alex Lichtenstein, *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), especially C. G. De Vito and A. Lichtenstein, 'Writing a Global History of Convict Labour' (pp. 1–46) and David Arnold, 'Labouring for the Raj: Convict Work Regimes, 1836–1939' (pp. 199–221). See also Taylor C. Sherman, 'Tensions of Colonial Punishment: Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Study of Coercive Networks in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean', *History Compass*, vol. 7, 2009, pp. 659–677, regarding the 'tripartite' purpose of prison labour regimes: punishment, reform, and reduction of the costs of punishment.

than the labour which an honest man of his class is obliged to undergo for his daily bread'. According to its calculations, inmates received cash allowances in Bengal and other areas that enabled them to access more and better quality food than 'nine out of ten of the population of the country', far superior to the daily fare of most agricultural labourers and on par with the food enjoyed by 'a sepoy, or a well-fed domestic servant'. Moreover, they enjoyed such privileges without having to perform labour whose value would 'best [re]pay the state'.²⁸ Their extramural labour, in other words, added up to a lot less than the costs of their maintenance.

Therefore, the Committee urged that the prevailing system of provisioning prisoners through money allowances to pay for their food be halted immediately. Instead, to pare down costs, they were to receive rations in accordance with a diet believed to be more than sufficient. It also recommended organizing prisoners into messes so that they could be fed in groups rather than being allowed to cook their own meals, which prisoners were said to enjoy. The introduction of these new modes of feeding inmates led to violent uprisings in many jails in the 1840s and 1850s.²⁹

The Committee also sought to make the penal regime more repressive in other ways. It argued for the building of solitary cells, noting that in England, Scotland, and the United States such arrangements were feared the most, along with serving time in silence, another practice apparently effectively tested in these countries. In addition, it urged prison officials to classify and separate prisoners according to the duration and severity of their offences.³⁰

While authorities at the highest level of government—the Court of Directors in London and the governor-general in Calcutta—expressed appreciation for the findings and recommendations of the Prison-Discipline Committee, they also worried about the colonial government's ability to implement many of the proposed changes because of the 'extraordinary expense' those would entail. Such concerns led them to urge local officials to make greater use of penal transportation, in part to reduce the overall size of the prison population. And while they agreed on the need for more central jails—the Committee recommended building penitentiaries at the centre of every cluster of six to eight districts—and reconfigure existing facilities to accommodate individual cells for the purpose of solitary confinement, they were not prepared to act on these directives right away. Without those changes, a classification system that grouped prisoners together by the seriousness of their offences and punishments and confined different groups separately also posed similar challenges.³¹

Nor was the governor-general—or many other administrators—fully ready to side with the Prison-Discipline Committee's recommendation to abandon extramural labour completely. As Governor-General Auckland remarked, outdoor work was

²⁸PDC, pp. 30–31, 63, 102, 104.

²⁹See Anand A. Yang, 'Disciplining "Natives": Prisons and Prisoners in Early Nineteenth Century India', *South Asia*, n.s., vol. 10, 1987, pp. 485–505; and Yang, 'The Voice of Colonial Discipline and Punishment'.

³⁰PDC, pp. 112–113.

³¹See India Legislative Department, no. 19 of 1839, India and Bengal Despatches, 7 Aug. to 27 Nov. 1839, 30 Oct. Colonial officials expressed concern about whether or not solitary confinement would have the same effect in the 'tropics' as it did in Europe and the United States where people were believed to be mentally and physically different. 'Europeans go mad in solitary,' noted one administrator, 'but a native just falls asleep!'

effective when properly supervised and carried out within a 'reasonable distance from the prison'. He also disagreed with the proposal to make all indoor labour 'monotonous and disgustful' and not 'trades' or 'industrial labour', which the Committee took issue with because it did not wish to see prisons as a stepping stone for inmates to acquire the skills to become craftsmen and thus secure gainful employment. As its report observed, 'trades' would enable 'robbers, thieves, and rogues' to become the best craftsmen at the expense of 'honest workmen'. 'If the government will assume the paternal care of instructing its subjects in useful arts,' its report added, 'criminals would seem to be the least proper of all subjects to be commenced with.' The governor-general, by contrast, contended that prisoners would benefit from developing honest 'habits ... and gainful industry'. So did many local officials who argued for 'trades', their reasoning being that the resulting products helped defray the maintenance costs of prisoners and had the added bonus of developing handicrafts.³²

While London and Calcutta debated the relative merits of extramural versus intramural labour in the aftermath of the 1838 Prison-Discipline Committee report, the handful of jails in which 'manufacturing' already existed continued doing so, and were soon joined by others in the 1840s, particularly after 1843 when the governor-general issued a directive urging local administrators to employ prisoners indoors in handicrafts production. None of the deliberations at the different levels of governments was framed in terms of preserving or enhancing the handicrafts of India, that is, in the vocabulary that late nineteenth-century advocates of handicrafts articulated about rescuing 'native' arts and crafts that were floundering in the face of mechanization and industrialization.

In one instance, a jail in Madras became the site of handicrafts production in part because of an administrator's interest in carrying out a science experiment of sorts. For Alexander Hunter, the assistant surgeon of Chingleput district in the early 1840s, 'improving' local pottery was not so much about staking a position in the debate about indoor or outdoor penal labour as it was about applying the advances of science to make better pottery. He was aware that in doing so he was following the lead of William Brooke O'Shaughnessy, unsurprisingly another medical officer and a man of science, who had conducted experiments with earthenware in Calcutta in 1841. The latter, beginning in 1839, capitalized on his other position as a chemistry professor to access the facilities of the Calcutta Medical College to experiment with different clays and technology to manufacture what he deemed to be better earthenware and bricks. And to ensure that his wares were in accordance with local tastes, he enlisted an 'expert native potter, Bonomallee Paul' to help shape his products.³³

³²'Prison Discipline', Legislative Draft 602, 1839, Legislative Council to Board of Directors; 'Minute by the ... Governor General', 14 Sept. 1838, BC, 1838–1839; *PDC*, pp. 108–109. The governor-general was less optimistic about profits because of the low costs of manual labour and the excessive costs of machinery to scale up production.

³³W. B. O'Shaughnessy, *On the Improvement of Bengal Pottery* (Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, n.d.). See also Saroj Ghose, 'William O'Shaughnessy—An Innovator and Entrepreneur', *Indian Journal of History of Science*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1994, pp. 9–22. Shaughnessy began his India career as an assistant surgeon in Calcutta in 1833 after receiving his MD from the University of Edinburgh in 1829. Over the course of his 27 years in India, he conducted research in various fields, ranging from toxicology to chemistry to metallurgy and electricity. Knighted for his many achievements, he was 'a surgeon-turned-chemist-turned electrician and then ... the father of the Indian telegraph' (p. 9).

In Hunter's case, prisoners in his Chingleput jail carried out the actual production process. He, too, saw his goal as improving local wares through scientific knowledge and technology, which entailed, as his 'Report on the Pottery of India' spells out in detail, first experimenting with different kinds of clay obtained from near and far and then building 'the requisite apparatus and machinery' for production. To operate the latter, he employed a 'skilled European' with knowledge of pottery making and machinery. He also recruited a 'good mechanic', who he described as 'very intelligent' and 'well educated', from the ranks of the British military personnel, to which he also turned to find other experienced hands to manage different aspects of the production process.

For Hunter, European expertise and skills were critical to the success of his project to improve pottery production. While he acknowledged India's long history of pottery making, he regarded its production methods and products as backward because they involved 'the same coarse implements ... probably employed' centuries ago and in 'the rudest and most imperfect manner'. As with most of his countrymen, his presumption was that people in India blindly followed the 'customs of their forefathers' and lacked the 'sound knowledge of chemistry and mineralogy, which in all European countries, are now looked upon as the basis of all accurate manipulations in the manufactures of pottery, porcelain, enamel and glass'.³⁴ Such notions aligned perfectly with colonial understandings of village India as mired in backwardness and tradition, their inhabitants set in the ways of their ancestors and incapable of changing with the times.³⁵

Based on his experiments in Chingleput, he was optimistic that his methods could be replicated elsewhere, with 20 to 30 prisoners in jails across the country producing enough pottery for the entire population and also branching out into the manufacturing of porcelain and stone china. With the right supervision (that is, by Europeans), prisoners, he concluded, could be trained 'to make good building materials', and with the assistance of 'one or two of the ordinary village potters', to produce 'glazed cooking vessels, or other articles of domestic or economic use'.³⁶

Interestingly, Dr Hunter, who had also trained in the arts, features prominently in accounts of the development of arts and aesthetics in India in the late nineteenth century because his creative experiments were not confined to pottery and prisons. In 1850, using his own resources, he opened an art school in Madras in the hope of enhancing the taste of the people through 'the humanising culture of the fine arts' and, the following year, a school of industry to enhance the quality of local products.³⁷ His schools became part of a network of institutions—additional schools were established in Calcutta, Bombay, and Lahore—that 'mediated a relationship with South Asia's artistic heritage', often acting as the principal 'mechanism for the documentation

³⁴Alexander Hunter, 'Report on the Pottery of India', Chingleput, 1849, unpublished, BL.

³⁵See Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and Colonial State in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 5–8.

³⁶Hunter, 'Report on Pottery'. Hunter also believed that he could manufacture enough pottery in Madras to supply the entire country.

³⁷Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 31. Hunter stayed on as superintendent of the Madras school until his retirement in 1873.

of architectural sites, the codification of regional aesthetics, and the incorporation of older forms into new commodities. Through the invention or “revival” of various industries, they came to determine what constituted “Indian art”.³⁸

O’Shaughnessy and Hunter were not alone among colonial officials in their interest in developing local handicrafts in the early nineteenth century. Many others did as well, mostly in their capacity as jail administrators.

In the wake of the 1838 Prison-Discipline Committee’s condemnation of extramural labour, many local officials turned to manufacturing as a means to employ convicts indoors. In some Bengal jails, officials, ostensibly following the lead of Madras jails, began paper manufacturing, in part because its production could be conveniently carried out in their facilities. Furthermore, raw materials for paper making—jute, bamboo, and rag—were readily available and the possibility of sales to other jails and government offices was promising. In fact, these officials believed that they had the potential to produce enough paper to meet all of the government’s needs and thus save on its annual expenditure on imported paper, which amounted to 300,000 to 400,000 rupees. No wonder Calcutta was enthusiastic about this ‘new resource and application of industry’ and urged Hughli and Patna administrators in particular to take up its manufacture. R. H. Mytton, the superintendent of Alipore Jail, also expressed an interest in employing his prisoners in its production; his men were already engaged in making towels, cloth, and gunnysacks.³⁹

The success stories of handicrafts production trickling in from some jails were well received by senior officials who were largely in agreement with the Prison-Discipline Committee’s severe censure of extramural labour. In 1843, Calcutta urged jail officials to stop that practice and engage inmates in ‘useful and profitable labour’ indoors. This directive, usually attributed to Governor-General Ellenborough, led most jails in Bengal to commit their convicts to manufacturing activities ranging from cloth production to husking and grinding such grains as rice, wheat, and especially *atta* (wheat flour). Some jails in Bihar took up the work of making blankets; in many jails, administrators assigned such tasks as shaving people and washing clothes, work usually done by the lowest castes, to Dalit inmates.

Calcutta also urged jail officials to consider the marketability and profitability of their products. That is, it reminded them to manufacture with local circumstances in mind, advising prisons located in the proximity of military stations to cater to sepoy by producing such items as shoes, belts, and tents. For the ‘trades’ had to be remunerative enough to cover the maintenance costs of inmates, which the authorities calculated to be about 3 rupees per month or 36 rupees per annum per individual. And they were willing to offer incentives to productive prisoners: a share of all or a portion of the surplus earnings generated by them at the time of their release.⁴⁰

³⁸Deepali Dewan, ‘Useful but Dangerous: Photography and the Madras School of Art, 1850–73’, in *Rethinking Place in South Asian and Islamic Art, 1500–Present*, (eds) Deborah S. Hutton and Rebecca M. Brown (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 209.

³⁹R. H. Mytton, Alipore Jail, to Registrar, N.A., 28 May 1842, no. 506, BCJC, 23 May to 27 June 1842, 13 June, no. 9; F. J. Halliday, Secty., to GOI, 6 April 1841, BCJC, 16 Feb. to 20 April 1841, 6 April, no. 1.

⁴⁰A. Turnbull, Undersecty., GOB, to magistrates and others, circular, no. 525, 5 June 1843, BCJC, 24 May to 5 June 1843, 5 June, no. 139. The government seemed aware that the Dalit caste of Chamars usually did the leatherwork.

In Bengal, more so than in Madras and especially Bombay, jails increasingly switched to intramural labour in the 1840s. But not all jails abandoned extramural projects right away. A few continued employing prisoners on 'station' or town roads as long as the men returned at nightfall; others were granted permission to carry on because releasing some convicts to work outdoors relieved overcrowding or helped ease mortality rates in some jails which were higher for those confined indoors. By mid-1850 more prisoners worked indoors than outdoors in most Bengal jails.⁴¹

Bombay followed a different pattern and Calcutta was willing to make an exception in its case. Its authorities claimed that their system of extramural work not only operated effectively but also kept prisoners in better health than if the latter were to remain indoors. Most convict gangs in the region laboured on roads or tanks or buildings close to where they were housed, typically a few miles away at most. Women, by contrast, toiled indoors, primarily in spinning and weaving and making baskets, paper, carpets, blankets, gunnysacks, and pottery.⁴²

The extent to which Bengal jails in the late 1840s and early 1850s were involved in handicrafts production is evident from the first exhibition of jail manufactures held at the Calcutta Town Hall in November 1856, five years after the 1851 Great Exhibition of Crystal Palace. Organized by F. J. Mouat, the medical doctor who had become the second inspector-general of prisons in Bengal in 1855 and subsequently a highly influential figure in penal reform circles in India and internationally, the exhibition featured the products of 46 jails in all—36 from Bengal and 10 from the North-Western Provinces. The articles on display included: 'hand-woven cloth, towel-ing, carpets, rugs, blankets, horse clothing, saddlery, carpentry, iron work, tape, paper, coarse gunny cloth for rice and sugar bags, bamboo, rattan, and reed fabrics'.⁴³

Mouat's preface to the exhibition catalogue made a point of identifying the event as the 'first occasion' on which 'the results of the introduction of manufactures, as a measure of prison discipline ... have been brought together'. He also emphasized that none of the items was 'specially' produced for the exhibition but represented 'the average ... proficiency [of the] convicts', some of whom had 'become highly skilled workmen'. Furthermore, everything on display was for sale—each and every one of the several hundred items listed had a sales price attached to it, along with the cost of the raw materials used to make them, their differential obviously highlighting the profitability of convict labour. He also made sure to point out that his prisons had the capacity to scale up and supply products in bulk if demand existed.⁴⁴

⁴¹F. J. Mouat, *Reports on Jails Visited and Inspected in Bengal, Behar, and Arracan* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1856); A. Turnbull, Undersecretary, GOB, to superintendents, no. 335, 25 March 1844, BCJC, 11 March to 9 April 1844, 25 March, no. 38. See also letters from E. Drummond, Magistrate, Bihar, and E. A. Samuells, Tirhut, 19 Jan. and 27 Jan. 1844, nos. 19 and 23. Also Extract of letter from GOI to Court of Directors, 4 May 1840, no. 13, 1840, Legislative, BC, 1840–1841.

⁴²J. Scott, Secty., Medical Board, to J. P. Willoughby, Secty., Bombay, no. 113, 9 Feb. 1837, India Judicial Consultations (IJC), 3 April to 26 June 1837, 19 June, no. 12; W. S. Boyd, Acting Secty., Bombay, to H. T. Prinsep, Secty., GOI, no. 3180, 19 Nov. 1839; and R. Foster, Captain and Suptd., Roads, Tannah, to J. P. Willoughby, Secty., Bombay, 9 Sept. 1839, IJC, 27 Jan.–April 1840, 13 Jan., nos. 15; 17.

⁴³F. J. Mouat, 'On Prison Statistics and Discipline in Lower Bengal', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1862, pp. 210–211.

⁴⁴N.A., *List of Jail Manufactures Executed in the Prisons of Bengal and the North-Western Provinces* (Calcutta: John Gray, 1856).

Many years later Mouat acknowledged some exceptions to the rule about only displaying the 'ordinary' jail manufactures at the 1856 exhibition, in that the 'fine quality' fabrics were especially made as 'samples of the skill attained by [some] convict workmen'. He also mentioned that some convict workers 'were members of different crafts and proficient workmen, prior to imprisonment', a point that he played down, however, by adding that most 'were agriculturists, who had no knowledge of any handicrafts, and were entirely taught in the gaols'.⁴⁵

Mouat's intent in staging the 1856 Exhibition aligned well with his stated objectives for prison discipline and management. As he emphasized in his official reports—he remained inspector-general of prisons for Bengal until his retirement in 1870—and his extensive public writings during and after his long India career, his goal was to make convict labour 'penal, profitable and if possible, reformatory'.⁴⁶

He believed that those objectives were best realized by moving convict labour indoors, ideally into handicrafts production, although his commitment to that type of manufacturing had little to do with revitalizing crafts in India. Rather, as he remarked after he made the rounds of Bengal prisons the year after he assumed charge of them in 1855, a significant number of inmates were still engaged in extramural labour, which he decried as not only 'destructive of all discipline, and involving greater expense in the custody of the prisoners' but 'also questionable' from 'an economical point of view'.⁴⁷

While he approved of making punishments more severe, he took issue with the Prison-Discipline Committee's proposal to make imprisonment 'a terror to evil-doers' by compelling inmates to engage in 'dull, wearisome, monotonous tasks', which he characterized as anachronistic and out of line with the latest penological ideas. His ideal was to make hard labour a condition of 'every sentence of rigorous imprisonment', which to him meant having convicts engage in indoor labour involving 'some form of handicraft' that could be 'easily learnt by the ignorant agricultural population of the country'.⁴⁸ Mouat—as did Hunter in his Chingleput experiments in pottery making—had full confidence in colonial supervision: only British ability and expertise could make up the inherent inadequacies of the local population.

Mouat's plan was to transform jails into 'schools of industry' where prisoners acquired the requisite training or skills in 'industrial arts'—to use a phrase that he and his contemporaries employed to refer to training in handicrafts production of some kind. Work was essential to prevent 'idleness', which he termed 'the parent of vice', particularly behind bars where temptations abounded. In his estimation, a work regime was especially critical for India because its inhabitants were wanting in 'ordinary motives and incentives to exertion'; in his words, there was an 'utter dearth of intellectual resources, and the proneness to plot and scheme mischief are developed in the highest degree in Asiatics'. By compelling all able-bodied inmates to labour, he envisioned his penal system as correcting 'a fatal error among a people who are already

⁴⁵F. J. Mouat, 'Prison Labour, As an Instrument of Punishment, Profit, and Reformation: An Episode in the Prison History of Lower Bengal', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 23 February 1872, p. 268.

⁴⁶F. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for 1856–57* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1857), pp. 24–25; F. J. Mouat, 'On Prison Ethics and Prison Labour', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1891, p. 230.

⁴⁷Mouat, *Reports on Jails Visited*, p. 9.

⁴⁸Mouat, 'Prison Discipline and Statistics', p. 46.

too prone to regard all industrial pursuits as mean and ignoble, and to be the heritage of those born to toil'.⁴⁹

Interestingly, he did not favour educating prisoners, as some officials did, even though his statistics revealed abysmally low rates of literacy. He also dismissed out of hand the need for religious education. 'Indian jails,' he once declared, 'are not fit arenas for missionary enterprise.'⁵⁰ Inspector-General Mouat also underlined the importance of convict labour being remunerative. In his words, it had to be profitable enough to help recoup the maintenance costs of imprisonment, thus transforming a prisoner 'from an unproductive consumer ... into a profitable self-supporter'.⁵¹

He claimed that 'industrial training' helped reform prisoners, certainly from becoming repeat offenders. '[V]ery few of the convicts who became skilled artisans or had served as prison subordinate,' he reported in 1891, 'ever returned to the jails in which they were trained, or committed fresh crimes.' As he put it, the principal aim of prison discipline was to make a convict 'self-reliant, and to furnish him with the means of working out his own redemption when he has regained his freedom, so as to prevent his relapse into crime'.⁵²

Mouat's interests and objectives were evident from the very outset of his tenure as the head of jails in Bengal. In the wake of his first tour of his presidency's prisons and in preparation for his administrative report of 1856–1857, the new inspector-general asked for additional details from his officials about manufacturing, including an accounting of 'receipts' and 'charges' to gauge the profitability of each venture. He also requested specifics about the work assigned to convicts and the types of manufacture they were engaged in, the latter identified in accordance with a list he provided. The appendix to his inspection report also announced that he proposed to convene a second annual exhibition of jail manufactures in October 1857, an event that never materialized because of the Mutiny/Rebellion that erupted in May of that year or indeed in subsequent years.⁵³

According to Mouat's report of 1856–1857, the 47 jails under his jurisdiction together housed a population of 19,356 offenders (566 or 2.9 per cent were women), 16,364 of them with sentences that included labour (84.5 per cent). Of the latter number, 5,974 (or 36 per cent) were involved in handicrafts of one sort or another, primarily in weaving gunny bags, blankets, and cotton, and in paper and brick manufacture. In addition, 2,028 (or 12 per cent) worked as jail servants; 3,538 (or 21 per cent) on the roads; 1,778 (or 11 per cent) in miscellaneous jobs; 3,005 (or 18 per cent) did not work because of 'age and sickness'; and the rest laboured in one or another government department.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Mouat, *Report for 1856–57*, p. xlvii; Mouat, 'Prison Labour', p. 268.

⁵⁰Mouat, *Report for 1856–57*, pp. 25–26, xlvii. In the wake of the 1857 Uprising, he was also cautious about not making prisons 'a terror to evil-doers' for fear of converting jails 'into another greased cartridge, to be followed by another serious explosion', as happened in 1857 and was borne out by uprisings in jails in the 1840s and 1850s in response to changes made in the way food was allocated and distributed to prisoners. See Mouat, 'Prison Labour', p. 368 and Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion* (London: Anthem Press, 2007).

⁵¹Mouat, 'On Prison Discipline', p. 46.

⁵²Mouat, 'On Prison Ethics', p. 240; Mouat, 'On Prison Discipline', p. 47.

⁵³Mouat, *Reports on Jails Visited*, pp. lxii, xviii. See also J. W. Sherer, 'Jail Discipline in the N.W.P.', *Calcutta Review*, vol. 53, 1856, p. 39, for one official's account that Mouat planned to do away with outdoor labour.

⁵⁴Mouat, *Report for 1856–57*, pp. 2–8.

His jail industries, he lamented, produced goods whose value was far less than what the authorities had spent: 443,818 rupees versus the 823,659 rupees expended on the maintenance of prisoners. In part, he blamed the 'inefficient subordinate agency' in jails for the deficit, a shortcoming he attributed to Indian subordinates who, he claimed, did not enforce 'a strict system of task work'. Only three jails—those at Hughli, Jessore, and Alipore—met with his approval, not surprisingly all facilities managed by European jailors. Alipore was especially effective because it had acquired a printing press that employed large numbers of convicts. Mouat's message to jail officials was to do away with labour that was 'neither penal nor profitable'.⁵⁵

Over the next decade-and-a-half, the indefatigable Inspector-General Mouat continued to advance his agenda of transforming Bengal jails into 'schools of industry'. He compiled a massive data set to make that point. His *Report on the Statistics of the Prisons of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency* for the five-year period between 1861 and 1865 highlighted his achievements, especially in enhancing the labour productivity and health of his inmates. The former point was conveyed in a dazzling array of statistics profiling the number of convicts involved in handicrafts production, the different kinds of crafts they pursued, and the cost effectiveness of their labour.

During that quinquennium, approximately 60 per cent of the region's convicts were engaged in handicrafts or garden cultivation, with the rest mainly employed as jail servants (over 11 per cent) or in the service of one or another government department, and an insignificant number on the roads. Indoor labour mostly involved cloth weaving, blanket and gunny sack manufacture, carpentry, smiths' work, brickmaking, pottery, paper making, oil making, printing, lithography, and bookbinding. In endless detail the report also specified the value of the manufactured articles produced by jails and the costs of their production in rupees. The bottom line, as it increasingly was and became in jail administration in the late nineteenth century, was his conclusion that an outlay of '£120,000 in raw materials, workshops, and tools of all kinds, realized a net profit of £203,000 in five years'.⁵⁶

As in the first reports he produced in the 1850s, he singled out certain jails for their productivity, Alipore and Hughli in particular, but others as well. What made these two stand out in his eyes was that they were 'continuously self-supporting', the former producing 'an actual profit of £74,232 and the latter ... an actual profit of £3,028' over a five-year period in the early 1860s. He boasted that this record was unmatched 'in any country or in any prison of the whole world'.⁵⁷

Both jails, he noted, owed their success to the 'weaving of gunny', that is, in making jute gunny bags that were widely sold in India and abroad. Alipore, furthermore, at Mouat's instigation, had capitalized on its printing press to develop both typographic and lithographic printing and produce all government forms and reports, including his voluminous 1868 *Report on Statistics*.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 6–8. Mouat believed that European prison officers were critical in running jails efficiently. 'Native Jailors', on the other hand, were 'a mistake' and as long as they were still employed, as they were in most jails, he believed that 'penal and profitable industry, reformation, efficacy of punishment, and strict discipline' were almost 'impossible' (p. 7).

⁵⁶F. J. Mouat, *Report on the Statistics of the Prisons of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency* (Calcutta: Alipore Jail Press, 1868), pp. 16–24.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 26.

Not everyone shared Mouat's faith in 'industrial training' as a punishment that fit the crime. No wonder his 1868 report seems partly aimed at deflecting critics who believed that his prisons subordinated punishment 'to reformation, and ... both ... to profit from the labour of the prisons'. In his defence, he likened punishment and reformation to the 'curative and preventive measures in medicine' where the former was directed at the individual and the latter at the community at large. Furthermore, he noted that the imposition of 'mere physical pain and personal suffering' was no longer in vogue even 'in the taming of animals', let alone in 'the treatment of the moral disorders which render prisons a necessity of civilization'. Moreover, he insisted that gunny-weaving, press-work, and 'other remunerative *hard* labour' were demanding: they made for 'a long day's work ... [and] caused as much muscular wear and tear as the treadmill and the crank'.⁵⁸

In part Mouat went to some lengths to make a case for his disciplinary system because of a report authored by Dr C. G. Wiehe, the inspector-general of prisons of the Bombay presidency. Based on the latter's 1862–1863 tour of several prisons in the Bengal and Madras presidencies, Wiehe's account, published in 1865, acknowledged the Alipore and Hughli jails as 'self-supporting' 'models of financial management', but attributed their success to government support and patronage. As his review acerbically noted, the Alipore jail benefitted from having the government as its best customer, and the proximity of the government and Calcutta ensured that it had a reliable market for its gunny bags. He was also critical of the lucrative incentive the Alipore jailor enjoyed, which stimulated him 'to exertions', and the ways in which prisoners, both Europeans and Indians, dressed (no required prison garb), ate (privileges in food and drink), and slept (together in one cell without classification). In addition, he found fault with the lack of effort made to educate inmates, a point he underlined by snidely citing Mouat's own words about not believing in education 'as a moral agent of reformation'.

Not surprisingly, Dr Wiehe's report concluded that Alipore's success resulted from a favourable mix of 'advantages' that no other jail in India, or perhaps even the world, could ever expect to have and had very little to do with a 'new system of prison management', a 'new branch of prison industry', or a 'new discovery in trade, arts, or handicrafts'. On the contrary, its 'system'—and by that he implied the Mouat prison disciplinary system in Bengal—was 'more indulgent, less tentative in respect of moral reformation, and better calculated to promote the comfort of the convicts' than he could sum up 'in a few words'.⁵⁹

Mouat's rejoinder to that remark was that, had Wiehe investigated further, he would have discovered that gunny work 'exercises every muscle in the body' and entails 'physical exertion' equivalent 'to lifting a weight of eight pounds one foot from the ground. The daily labour of each weaver is thus equal to lifting a weight of rather more than 21 tons a foot from the earth.' Convicts in Hughli were so exhausted from weaving gunny, he added, that 'all singing and talking in the wards at night has entirely ceased.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁹C. G. Wiehe, *Journal of a Tour of Inspection of the Principal Jails in India Made by the Inspector General of Prisons, Bombay Presidency, in December 1862 and January and February 1863* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1865), pp. 16–23.

The stillness of silence and sleep prevail—the prisoners are too thoroughly tired even for the gossip which is so dear to every Bengali in his normal state.⁶⁰

As for ‘moral reformation’, Mouat pointed out that it was rarely successful, even in Christian countries. A few prison chaplains in Britain had ‘permanently reclaimed’ criminals through Christian teachings, but not in any numbers. Criminals in India, furthermore, he contended were ‘a peculiar class, upon whom it is impossible, in existing circumstances, to bring any of the agencies for “moral reformation” in use in Europe to bear’. Therefore, the only recourse was ‘industrial training’ that prepared a prisoner to pursue ‘an honest course of life when he is restored to freedom, should he be so disposed, or should the prejudices of caste admit of his habits and those of his caste generally’. As supporting evidence, he referred to what he had observed first-hand in the British colony of the Straits Settlements in Southeast Asia: ‘industrious’ convicts who very rarely became repeat offenders, ‘earn an honest livelihood, and are regarded as respectable members of the community to which they belong’.⁶¹

Wiehe was not alone in criticizing Mouat’s disciplinary system as being more focused on profitability than reformation and not on severity at all. When the Government of India’s assessment of the latter’s Bengal jail report of 1867 made a similar charge, Mouat countered with his usual justification about treadwheels and cranks being outdated and ‘industrial labour’ in fact involving strenuous work because it required ‘strictness of discipline’. Working in a press, he insisted, was arduous because it involved ‘careful removal and adjustment of each printed sheet’. In his defence, the Bengal government added, in words that the inspector-general must have found comforting and familiar, that it was a mistake to think that penal labour had to be arduous and ‘irksome, profitless and degrading’, and that the Bengal system was proficient in inculcating work habits that could benefit ex-convicts in developing ‘an honest livelihood’. It acknowledged that its system did not always function effectively, but it offered more promise for ‘reformation than any other system’.⁶²

For as long as Mouat remained in office, his ideas about the centrality of hand-crafts production in jails shaped penal practice, especially in Bengal. His views were persuasive enough that Governor-General Lawrence appointed him to a ten-person committee convened in 1864 to investigate the ‘state of jail discipline’ in India and propose refinements. Not surprisingly, parts of this Committee’s report read as if he had had a hand in drafting it, particularly its vote of confidence in intramural penal labour because it imposed ‘order, punctuality, and ... clock-work distribution of time’ on ‘lawless and irregular’ people. Mouat-like too, was its assertion that ‘stringently imposed labour’ had a ‘moral effect on men of depraved lives’ and was ‘peculiarly repugnant to them’.⁶³

⁶⁰Mouat, *Report on Statistics*, p. 20. To support his argument, he also cited Jessore’s ‘financial success’ despite not having a local market at which to sell its wares.

⁶¹Ibid. Also see Mouat, ‘Prison Ethics’, p. 232, regarding his 1851 visit to the Straits; and Yang, *Empire of Convicts* for a detailed account of the convict worker system in the Straits.

⁶²A. Mackenzie, Offg. Junior Secty., GOB, to Secty., GOI, no. 2125, 25 March 1869; F. J. Mouat to Secty., GOI, no. 1637, 6 March 1869, IJC, May–Aug. 1870, 16 July, nos. 55 and 56.

⁶³Government of India, *Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department, no 52, Measures Taken to Give Effect to the Recommendations of a Committee Appointed to Report on the State of Jail Discipline and to Suggest Improvements* (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1867), p. 17.

But the 1864 Committee also sought to modify Mouat's disciplinary system by reviving an issue that loomed large in the thinking of the Prison-Discipline Committee in the 1830s. Much more so than the Bengal inspector-general ever did, its report emphasized making imprisonment 'a matter of dread, apprehension, and avoidance'. Everything was to be secondary to that guiding principle, including making penal labour profitable or enabling a prisoner with prior knowledge to strengthen his handicrafts skills or a 'useless' convict to learn a trade that could be of service to him upon his release. The 1864 Committee also made a point of sorting out different kinds of labour by degree of difficulty into three categories of hard, medium, and light work apportioned in relation to the length of an offender's sentence. Sentences were to commence with hard labour; for instance, an offender with a four-year term was to serve the first two years with hard labour followed by 18 months of medium and six months of light labour.⁶⁴

Hard labour included 18 kinds of work, medium 17, and light ten. Oil pressing and lime grinding headed the first category, masonry and stone-cutting the second, and tailoring and dyeing the third. Gunny weaving and printing, the two most productive manufactures in Bengal, were ranked in different classes, the former in the first and the latter in the second. Carpet production, in which some jails specialized, was also in the second category, itemized as 'durree [cotton carpet], rug, and carpet-weaving', and increasingly the target of critics troubled by the competition their production posed to the private sector.⁶⁵

The Government of India also weighed in on Mouat's long-established system of penal labour by dispatching A. P. Howell, a senior administrator, to investigate jail management and its variations across India. The report he penned in 1869 clearly took aim at Mouat's penal principles and practices. To Howell, penal labour meant 'an aggravation of the term of imprisonment' and not a way to provide an inmate 'with an occupation more or less reformatory during his incarceration, and not with the primary object of reimbursing the state for the charge of maintenance'. In other words, he did not share Mouat's attachment to what he termed 'the remunerative theory of labour' even though he acknowledged the latter's claim that the earnings of the Alipore Jail had increased a hundredfold over a 32-year period, from 2,500 rupees in 1835 to 250,000 in 1867, and recognized that the 'enforcement of pleasant and remunerative labour' had spread to the North-Western Provinces and Punjab. He was also troubled by the fact that the products of such work enjoyed an 'advantageous competition with free labour'.⁶⁶

Even more concerning to Howell was the Mouat system's apparent single-minded pursuit of 'useful trades and manufactures' and 'remunerative results' at the expense of the punitive aspect of imprisonment that he believed had to be the primary burden of any sentence. He buttressed his argument by harking back to the principles laid down by the Prison-Discipline Committee of the 1830s and referencing the practices

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 17–18.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 80–82. The Committee also emphasized that extramural labour was to be deployed only in working gardens adjoining jails and as a substitute for handicrafts manufacturing for health reasons.

⁶⁶A. P. Howell, *Note on Jails and Jail Discipline in India, 1867–68. Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department, no. 72* (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1869), pp. 42–48. In Madras and Bombay prisoners were more involved in extramural labour but were increasingly employed in handicrafts production.

enacted in the English Prisons Act of 1865. This Act prescribed two classes of hard labour: the first involving 'the tread-wheel, shot-drill, crank, capstan, stone-breaking, and such like' and the second 'generally of a dull, monotonous and irksome nature' to be 'performed in solitude' and not a form of labour that offered 'room for art, contrivance, ingenuity, and superior skill', which is what Howell believed prevailed in Bengal. Moreover, with prisoners generally well-cared-for in terms of food and clothing, in his opinion, and their accommodations and mortality rates much improved, he considered the overemphasis on the 'remunerative' possibilities of prison labour an impediment to the development of an effective disciplinary system that he believed had to have an element of 'terror' attached to it. Absent that, especially in Bengal, he worried that crime would increase, leading to many more people behind bars.⁶⁷

Before Mouat left office in 1870, he succeeded in persuading the authorities to expand 'industrial' production in Bengal jails by introducing 'steam machinery' to step up 'the spinning of jute yarn'. This, too, intensified the ire of his critics who were concerned that machines lightened the already modest workload of prisoners and increased production to the point where jail products became overly competitive in the market.⁶⁸ Both of these concerns would increasingly define the official discourse on penal reform in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and also attract the attention of others whose primary interest was in reviving India's traditional arts and crafts and not in reforming the penal system.

A few months after Mouat's departure, the Bengal lieutenant-governor, Sir George Campbell, who assumed office at the beginning of 1871, signalled changes in the prison disciplinary system by announcing that his new inspector-general would hail from the ranks of the judicial rather than the medical service. His minute on the prison system also emphasized that judicial officials were better disposed to tackle issues of crime and punishment. While it did not identify Mouat, or the two medical officers who briefly followed him in office, by name, and conceded that manufactures and sanitary conditions in the jails had improved, it noted that mortality rates were still 'much too high'. It also added that the imperatives of, and the heavy emphasis on, manufacturing had led to 'undesirable indulgences. To make a man a useful and profitable workman you must keep him in good humor, and men are most profitable in the occupations for which they are best fitting.' As a result, some inmates were elevated to positions regardless of 'the enormity and turpitude of the[ir] offences', for instance, educated men with grievous criminal records were promoted to jail writers.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 59, 42–48. See also Victor Bailey, 'English Prisons, Penal Culture, and the Abatement of Imprisonment, 1895–1922', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1997, pp. 285–324, about the late nineteenth-century push to make imprisonment in England more punitive by enhancing its repressive aspects.

⁶⁸F. J. Mouat, *Report on the Jails of the Lower Provinces of the Bengal Presidency for the Year 1868* (Calcutta: Alipore Jail Press, 1869), pp. 40–48.

⁶⁹'Minute', by G. Campbell, 29 July 1871, IJC, Jan.–March 1872, 13 Jan., no. 33. See also George Campbell, *Memoirs of My Indian Career*, Vol. 2, (ed.) Sir Charles E. Bernard (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), p. 268, for a similar point and the additional criticism that previous reports had inflated the manufacturing values of jail products. See also W. Grey, Secty., GOB, to Secty., GOI, 6 Sept. 1855, BCJC, 30 Aug. to 6 Sept. 1855, 6 Sept., no. 24, for Mouat's appointment letter as inspector of jails, reposing trust in him and his medical background in not only addressing medical and sanitary arrangements but also ensuring 'a uniform diet' and 'some semi-irksome system of prison discipline' to make jails 'a greater terror to the evil doer'.

Thus, the disciplinary system that Mouat had painstakingly developed in Bengal over a decade-and-a-half was increasingly found wanting in the 1870s for not being sufficiently punitive. As the lieutenant-governor put it, the prevailing system focused overly on manufactures and sanitary conditions and not enough on the 'penal effect of imprisonment'. Therefore, it needed revamping to make the punishment of short-term prisoners more 'stinging', labour more penal, paid warders better disciplined, and the system of classification more effective so that Bengal jails would not be 'a complete liberty hall'. Bengal also needed additional central jails in which prisoners were segregated and better organized. The building of new central jails, furthermore, would provide work and entail arduous extramural labour, as would canal construction on the Son River near Dehri in Shahabad district in Bihar. The lieutenant-governor also pointed to the need to step up discipline in the Alipore Jail, where large numbers of dangerous criminals were housed and worked on the jute mill and other enterprises, and the importance of having district magistrates and their subordinate judicial officials assume charge of local jails.⁷⁰

Growing government concerns about the shortcomings of the prison disciplinary system, particularly in Bengal, prompted by Howell's review and the annual provincial jail administration reports, led Calcutta to convene yet another committee—a conference on prison discipline in 1877. As on previous occasions, this body, too, addressed a range of issues relating to prison reform, including law, criminal statistics, transportation, jail personnel, convict classification, and penal labour. Its findings and recommendations, however, deviated somewhat from earlier reports, not only because jail administration and conditions had changed over time but also because new ideas in penology and criminology were in circulation. The Conference, in fact, was charged with considering if any of the practices employed in English jails were applicable to India.⁷¹

The 1877 Conference devoted an entire chapter—one of 14—to the involvement of prisoners in public works, undoubtedly because its recommendation on the matter ran counter to the position of the authoritative Prison-Discipline Committee and the practice prevailing in many areas, especially Bengal, where outdoor labour had largely been abandoned by the early 1850s. In its view, however, labour on public works was productive, 'a necessary adjunct' to jail administration, and a means to alleviate overcrowding in the jails. Furthermore, it was both 'penal and profitable', more punitive in many respects than intramural labour. But its proposal was not to switch over completely to extramural labour but to use prisoners selectively in public works, especially in the construction of central jails and canals, as was already in effect in Ropar in Punjab and Dehri in Bihar.⁷²

The 1877 Conference dealt with intramural labour and manufactures in a chapter entitled 'Finance', presumably because penal labour was always tied to questions of

His appointment was also justified on the grounds that the government was having difficulty finding enough civil servants to manage other aspects of government.

⁷⁰Bengal, *Report on the Administration of Bengal 1871-72* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1872), p. 122.

⁷¹'Resolution on Report of Prison Conference of 1877', GOI, 30 April 1878, Bengal Judicial Proceedings (BJP), Jails, 1878.

⁷²Government of India, *Report of the Indian Jail Conference Assembled in Calcutta in January-March 1877* (Calcutta: Home Secretariat Press, 1877), pp. 109-112.

profitability. Its examination of provincial-level data on 'earnings or net cash profits per prisoner' revealed that Burma and Bengal were the most effective on this score, with 28 rupees 4 annas and 22 rupees 5 annas, respectively, to their credit in 1875, and the North-Western Provinces at the bottom, with only 4 rupees 8 annas. (Provincial reports replicated this format by ranking each and every district and central jail.)⁷³

H. Beverley, one of the ten 1877 Conference members and a senior Bengal administrator, facilitated the discussion of 'Manufactures' by circulating a paper on that topic. The Conference invited S. Donaldson, the superintendent of manufactures in Bengal, to join their deliberations because of his extensive knowledge of the topic. Mouat undoubtedly would have agreed with many of the points raised in the paper and have been unsurprised by others that he would have found less to his liking. To Beverley, too, what mattered most about intramural work was not the severity of its demands on prisoners but its regularity: it was to be 'methodical, capable of easy supervision, and admitting of the strictest organization'. He and several Conference members also sided with Donaldson on the latter's claim that the employment of machinery in prison production was not objectionable because machines required prisoners to perform different chores, to remain engaged and attentive, and to use 'mental powers' important 'in the training and reformation of the convict'.⁷⁴

But Donaldson also noted that machines did not help convicts learn a trade. He dismissed that 'objection', however, by stating that prisoners generally did not capitalize on the skills they acquired during their incarceration to pursue careers accordingly after their release. He also rightly added that the 'habits of industry' inculcated in prisons were not part of 'our system to organise industrial schools for the training of artisans' which were emerging in many locales in the late nineteenth century. Although the 1877 Conference was not unanimous in its decision to introduce steam and other machinery into jail production, it ultimately voted in favour of doing so. And while it rejected as 'fallacious' the objection often raised about the unfair competition between 'state capital and convict labour' and 'private capital and free labour', it agreed that jails should not take on 'multifarious manufactures' and concentrate instead on 'one or two industries carried on a large scale'. It also emphasized the importance of ensuring the competitiveness of jail manufactures, although it recognized that government agencies provided a ready market if for some reason the 'open market' was closed to them.⁷⁵

In response to the Government of India's directives to implement the recommendations of the 1877 Conference, the Bengal inspector-general of prisons, Surgeon Major A. S. Lethbridge, notified his superiors in Calcutta that he would, as per the Conference's recommendation, differentiate between first and second class labour, the former mostly pertaining to prisoners in district jails where many sentences were for a year or less and the latter primarily relevant to inmates in central jails engaged in 'trades and manufactures'. He intended to introduce oil mills into the district jails and employ convicts in central jails in 'special' industries.⁷⁶

⁷³Ibid., pp. 143–159.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 156–157.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 155–157.

⁷⁶A. S. Lethbridge to Secty., GOB, no. 8975, 20 Nov. 1878, BJP, Jails, 1879, March.

The Bengal government, however, objected to the 1877 Conference's endorsement of extramural labour, even though that had the backing of the Government of India. As the Bengal lieutenant-governor, Rivers Thompson, noted in 1883, his government had, over the last five years, willingly introduced many of the recommended changes, but drew the line at employing convicts on roads and public works. It couched its objection not only in terms of the risks and dangers highlighted by the Prison-Discipline Committee in its forceful condemnation of extramural labour but also in terms of the peculiarities of Bengal, namely, that it lacked public works on the scale needed to engage large numbers and that its weather rendered working outdoors hazardous in the hot months of April and May as well as in the ensuing rainy season lasting until the end of October. Moreover, more so than in other parts of India, Bengal had moved away from extramural labour in favour of 'industrial work' indoors that its jail officials, especially Mouat, had developed over four decades and in which the government had made considerable investments. Changing to outdoor work would undermine manufactures and deprive the criminal classes of a useful means of acquiring a beneficial education in trades. The lieutenant-governor was also optimistic that teaching convicts 'some occupation or handicraft' offered a way out of caste prejudices and the overreliance on agriculture in a region blighted by devastating famines.⁷⁷

As per the suggestion of the 1877 Conference, the Bengal government was, however, willing to stop 'multifarious manufactures' in jails and focus instead on specific industries. Central jails would thereafter specialize in certain industries, for instance, the Presidency Jail in printing, Alipore in gunny bags and blacksmiths' work, Bhagalpur in blankets and woollen goods, Buxar in cotton clothes, Midnapur in coir goods, Rajshahye in castor oil, and Hughli in carpets. According to the lieutenant-governor, these manufactures did not replace or compete with private enterprise. On the contrary, the production of carpets in jails had led private enterprise to pursue its production as well.⁷⁸

In September 1882 the Government of India issued a resolution retracting its earlier endorsement of the 1877 Conference's support of jail manufactures and the right of jails to utilize government capital and convict labour to produce goods for the open market in competition with private enterprise and to step up production by employing steam and other machinery. It claimed that its new stance was prompted by the report of the famine commissioners that attributed India's poverty to its overreliance on agriculture and the relative absence of other enterprises such as manufacturing. Therefore, the governor-general sought to facilitate 'the spontaneous development of manufacturing industries' and open up new employment opportunities for the country's large population. That meant restricting jail products because they supplanted and competed 'with private industry in the local markets to a very serious extent'.⁷⁹

To minimize competition, the 1882 directive urged jails to follow two principles in managing convict labour: the first was to curtail productivity and the second to manufacture products that did not interfere with the development of 'private industries'. It also enjoined jails not to use machines any more, especially steam machinery, to enhance production, and to dispose of such equipment if it had already been acquired.

⁷⁷F. B. Peacock, Offg. Secty., GOB, to Secty., GOI, no. 493P, 10 Feb. 1883, BJP, Jails, 1883, May.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹'Resolution', GOI, Home, 22 Sept. 1882, BJP, 1883, July.

Furthermore, it also insisted that extramural labour on large state or private public projects become the primary means of work for 'long-term' inmates across the entire country, a proposal that countermanded the instructions outlined in the influential Prison-Discipline Committee report of 1838 and the labour practices in place in several provinces, especially Bengal.⁸⁰

London deemed the government's 1882 directives a 'subversal' of policies and practices carefully developed at the highest level of the Government of India, namely, 'by successive Secretaries of State and Viceroy, aided by the advice of officers whose lives had been passed in an intimate acquaintance with the subject'. In the words of the secretary of state, Lord Kimberly, the new policies were at odds with the principal objectives of imprisonment that had long been effectively implemented by a carefully developed system of intramural labour. He therefore overruled Calcutta and ordered authorities in India to continue to attend to 'manufacturing industries' and to supplement those enterprises from time to time and in 'exceptional circumstances' with outdoor work. What he did not divulge was that he had formulated his response after consulting extensively with his Council members, many of whom had dealt with the issue of penal labour during their India careers, and a non-Council member, F. J. Mouat, whose opinion he had especially enlisted. Kimberly also made his case for jail industries and intramural labour by pointing to similar penal practices in England.⁸¹

The Government of India was compelled to back down in the face of instructions issued by the secretary of state. As a result, it informed provincial governments that it no longer insisted on extramural labour being the primary means of deploying 'long-term prisoners' across the country—not that it was averse to seeing large numbers engaged in public works under the right conditions. It also modified its stance on machinery, stating that it did not wish to abolish its use altogether but preferred jails not be transformed 'into steam factories'. Similarly, it revised its stance on local competition and informed jails to proceed with caution about not producing goods that threatened local trade, rather than not manufacture at all. It also recognized that many jail products had a ready market in government departments, and even those that did not, such as carpets, did not need to be stopped.⁸²

Nevertheless, Birdwood-like attacks on jail industries persisted, directed particularly at carpet making. As an 1886 article on 'art carpets' contended, their quality and artistry had 'degenerated into a mere money-making, trumpery machine shop trading affair' because of the handiwork of prison labour. Consequently, Indian carpets were no longer 'transcendental', the embodiment of 'dreamy imaginings' and 'poems in wool'.⁸³

Surveys of handicrafts production, conducted in many regions at the turn of the twentieth century, however, suggest a much more complex dynamic. Carpet making, in particular, was not on the wane; on the contrary, its production was expanding in some areas, including at the high end, because of the prisoners' handiwork. That is, their efforts revitalized carpet making on the outside and helped preserve—not debase—their quality. A case in point is Agra, where carpet production had fallen on hard

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Secretary of State for India to Governor General, 22 March 1883, BJP, 1884, May.

⁸²Resolution on Jail Manufactures', 7 May 1886, BJP, April–July 1886, June.

⁸³Vincent J. Robinson, 'Eastern Art Carpets', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, vol. 36, 1886, pp. 447–457.

times in the aftermath of the Mughal period when it was in its heyday. Carpet making roared back to life in the late nineteenth century because prisoners had developed its manufacture in the Central Jail. And their products, which were reputable enough to win an international clientele, prompted people on the outside to pursue similar ends. In fact, Otto Weylandt, who became the largest buyers of carpets in Agra and had carpet factories in Punjab and West Asia, recruited former prison hands to train his employees—other men and some women and boys—to manufacture carpets that his Messrs Weylandt and Company sold widely in India and abroad.⁸⁴ Similarly carpet making emerged in Amroha in the late nineteenth century as a result of a prison connection, in this case involving a former Bikaner Jail inmate named Sadik Ali whose expertise led to the establishment of a carpet industry.⁸⁵

Carpet making in some jails also led to the preservation of high standards in quality. For example, the carpets manufactured in Yeraoda (Yerawada) Jail in Poona, which were widely exhibited, were renowned for their classic designs. As H. J. R. Twigg's report on carpet production in the Bombay presidency notes, Yeraoda's products were not only as exceptional as those woven in the Bombay School of Art but also gained a more extensive domestic and international market because they were produced in larger quantities than the latter could generate. Moreover, its carpets emulated classic designs, thus demonstrating that 'jails of late have tended to conserve good taste and superior work in carpets',⁸⁶ a finding patently aimed at disputing Birdwood's claim about the baneful effects of prison handicrafts production.

In the ensuing decades, the prison-handicraft complex began unravelling, primarily because machines were increasingly utilized to manufacture goods formerly made by hand, for example, blankets, gunny sacks, woollen and cotton goods, and tents.⁸⁷ And with 'jail factories' ramping up production, the long-standing concerns about the merits of allowing prisoners access to 'power-driven machinery' and to produce goods in competition with the private sector resurfaced, as the deliberations of the Indian Jails Committee of 1919–1920 reveal. In response to the recommendation of the Indian Industrial Commission of 1916–1918 that jail manufacturing should not resort extensively to machines and make greater use of manual labour, its report emphasized the importance of training prisoners in the latest 'methods of labour' so that they would be well prepared to secure employment after their release in a country on the verge of industrial development. The Jails Committee saw no value in having prisoners spend

⁸⁴Syad Muhammad Latif, *Agra Historical and Descriptive, with an Account of Akbar and His Court and of the Modern City of Agra* (Calcutta: Calcutta Press Co., 1896), p. 298; Kunwar Jagdish Prasad, *Carpet Making in the United Provinces* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1907), pp. 37–38. See also T. N. Mukharji, *A Hand-Book of Indian Products (Art-Manufactures and Raw Materials)* (Calcutta: 'Star' Press, 1883), p. 19, about 'woolen carpets and rugs of a very superior quality' made in Agra and other jails that were 'exported to Europe and America', where they were 'greatly admired and have repeatedly won gold and silver medals at various foreign exhibitions'.

⁸⁵Prasad, *Carpet Making*, pp. 37–38.

⁸⁶H. J. R. Twigg, *A Monograph on the Art and Practice of Carpet-Making in the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1907) pp. 85–86. For a similar viewpoint, see also Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition 1902–1903* (London: John Murray, 1904), p. 443; C. Latimer, 'Carpet Making in the Punjab', *Journal of Indian Art*, vol. 34, no. 1739, 1886, pp. 447–470. See also McGowan, 'Convict Carpets'.

⁸⁷A. S. Lethbridge, IG, Jails, to Chief Secty., GOB, no. 5226, 30 June 1886, BJP, July 1886.

time 'breaking stones, ... turning the handle of an oil-press or ... working the simple primitive mechanism of a hand-loom'.⁸⁸

However, the Jails Committee conceded, as did earlier bodies convened to reform prisons, that jail manufactures needed to be limited to restrict their challenge to private enterprise. In the words of the 1919–1920 Jails Committee, jail manufactures had to avert overwhelming 'weak and unorganized trades or ... budding industries' and 'the struggling hand-loom weaver or the village artisan'; nor was it advisable to compete with 'some new private industrial enterprise, such as chemical industries or the production of nitrates'. Vying with large industries such as jute and cotton mattered far less because jail output was tiny in comparison.⁸⁹

The Jails Committee also sought to regulate jail production by confining it to a few items and buyers, the latter consisting primarily of other government departments. A notable exception to that rule was the 'well-established' carpet industry whose products were routinely sold far and wide, including internationally. Carpets were granted a special status not only because many jails across India had been involved in their production over the course of many decades, but also because they were marketable. In addition, as many contemporary accounts of carpet making in different localities revealed, the revival and growth of that industry was partly owed to what inmates had produced and were producing and the expertise they lent to new enterprises on the outside that capitalized on the making and selling of handmade carpets.⁹⁰

As for earlier debates about the merits of intramural versus extramural labour, the 1919–1920 Jails Committee was perfectly content to observe that the bulk of convict labour across India was involved in indoor work. Nor did it take issue with the handful of prisons that deployed their inmates in outdoor labour, as long as those facilities followed certain precautions that were ostensibly designed to minimize fatalities. This pattern of mostly intramural convict labour continued to characterize jails in India well into the 1930s and 1940s.⁹¹

Conclusion

Handicrafts production increasingly became a condition of 'hard labour' behind bars, leading to the development of a prison-handicraft complex in nineteenth-century India. That form of intramural labour was taken up especially in the vast presidency of Bengal after the 1830s and early 1840s when colonial authorities first scaled back and then almost completely halted extramural labour projects. Thereafter, most

⁸⁸India, *Report of the Indian Jails Committee, 1919–20* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1921), p. 120. The Committee not only took issue with the Indian Industrial Commission's objections to the use of machines in jail production but also with the latter's condemnation of 'manual industries' that competed 'with free cottage industries' (p. 123). The aim of this Committee was to look into prison administration in India 'with special reference to recent legislation and experience in Western countries', primarily Britain and the United States (p. 398).

⁸⁹*Indian Jails Committee, 1919–20*, pp. 120–124.

⁹⁰J. G. Cumming, *Review of the Industrial Position and Prospects in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1908), p. 13; *Indian Jails Committee, 1919–20*, p. 120.

⁹¹F.A. Barker, *The Modern Prison System of India: A Report to the Department* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1944), pp. 26–30, about the continuation of intramural labour in jails across India in the 1930s and early 1940s.

convicts worked indoors on ‘trades’ or ‘manufacturing’ rather than outdoors on road construction and repair.

The shift to intramural labour in handicrafts production in colonial prisons did not stem from a commitment to reviving and revitalizing that industry, as was the impulse that led individuals and institutions to do precisely that, initially in Britain and later in India in the aftermath of the Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace in 1851. For colonial officials, the interest in establishing artisanal and hand labour in prisons was prompted primarily by their concern with developing an alternative to extramural labour and lessening the high costs of incarceration which resulted from the added expenses of employing extra guards to watch over inmates labouring outdoors. Handicrafts production, moreover, generated monetary returns—profits gained from selling convict wares in the market—an additional benefit that many colonial administrators prized, particularly F. J. Mouat, the leading prison official in Bengal in the 1850s and 1860s. In 1856 he staged what he had intended to be the first of many province-wide exhibitions showcasing the high quality and marketability of prison handicrafts.

Not everyone in the colonial government, especially prison officials in other presidencies, appreciated Mouat’s enthusiastic support of the prison-handicraft complex. To his detractors, intramural work in handicrafts production did not add up to hard labour—it was not rigorous enough, in their estimation, and therefore diminished the severity of imprisonment as a punishment, particularly in comparison to the demands of labouring outdoors on the roads or operating the treadwheels that some authorities wished to introduce to indoor labour. His opponents also questioned his emphasis on profitability, which they believed distracted prison officials from ensuring that incarceration entailed pain and deprivation.

Such concerns mounted when Bengal officials began introducing machines to step up jail production, an innovation that Mouat’s critics believed not only further reduced the severity of a prison sentence but also enhanced production, leading to unfair competition with the products of free labour. The latter charge was echoed by George Birdwood, one of the leading lights of the arts and crafts movement in India, who lambasted the ‘mongrel manufactures of the government jails’ for the destructive competition they constituted to the handiwork of ‘native’ craftsmen. By then the production of handicrafts in prisons had been in operation for almost half a century and would continue to thrive for another four decades or so. Over that extended time period, the prison-handicraft complex was critical in the development of certain ‘traditional’ arts, especially carpet making, revitalizing or even launching its making in many localities as well as ensuring its high standards of excellence in some areas.

Competing interests. None.