In Britain and North America in the early 19th century the new penitentiary system had sought to disaggregate prison populations, favouring solitary confinement and reducing prison violence against their exploitation that other prisoners had to defend and violence that occurred within India’s jails, and it was often officials, they did use convicts as warders: prisoners 
Piled elaborate prison regulation manuals. But prisoners were 

Evaporation and non-compliance were widespread. Feigning ill-

Escape 
Right from the start, prisoners exploited opportunities to escape. Early jails were old buildings converted from other use. When they had to work – as at the Calcutta Alipur jail – prisoners could escape by growing or overpowering their guards, by setting fire to the jail and fleeing in the ensuing confusion, or by smuggling in chisels and saws to help them make their escape. The use of convicts to repair roads far from the jails and with lax or inadequate supervision created further opportunities. In Bengal alone in the mid-

Messing with caste 
The colonial authorities attempted another reform in the 

Confined by caste and gender, convicts knew that they were 

Note 
1. For the protests of political prisoners and the colonial response to them, see Singh, Ujjwal Kumar. 1998. Political Prisoners in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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India: the prisoners’ revolt

British India operated one of the largest prison systems in the world. During the 1860s the inmate population averaged 70,000, rising to 100,000 by the 1900s and 130,000 by the 1930s. Two to three times those numbers passed through the prisons in a single year owing to short-term sentences, numbers matched or exceeded only by the United States and Russia. The prison – an institution lacking extensive pre-colonial precedents – exemplified the British determination to control India.

Partly in response to such defiant episodes, from the mid-19th century the colonial authorities embarked on a jail construc-

First, it shows the importance of the prison to wider histories of Indian resistance, the relative permeability of the prison to outside influences, the continuing connectedness – through rumour and riot – between the jail and society at large, and how an oppressive social hierarchy could be replicated within. The birth of the prison helped to generate (and to symbolize) resistance to colonial power.

Do these acts of evasion, protest and occasional outright resist-

Extramural labour was scaled down and emphasis given to file works. This reduced but did not eliminate prisoners’ opportunities for escape. In fact, jail industries gave rise to new forms of resistance. In the 1840s, the British the need to accommodate what they saw as pris-

Extramural labour was scaled down and emphasis given to file works. This reduced but did not eliminate prisoners’ opportunities for escape. In fact, jail industries gave rise to new forms of resistance. In the 1840s, the British saw little alternative to using the colonial prison system or even modify the brutality and degra-

dation that characterized much of its operation. Nevertheless, the prison – an institution with a long history of violence and suffering – was a national and international symbol of the alien, intrusive and oppressive nature of colonial rule.

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