

CHAPTER V

Re-entry of the Women: Stigma and Struggle

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with the issue of furlough¹, during the course of my fieldwork in both the Jails, I observed that there were only a small number of women prisoners who were granted furlough. However, in the main office of both prisons, I frequently overheard officials discussing and preparing the necessary paperwork for male prisoners who were granted furlough from time to time. There were two common responses that I received from the women when I asked them why they do not go on furlough- (a) either their family members do not want them to come, and (b) the authorities informed them that the permission could not be granted. There is a rule that stated that before granting furlough, the prison authority must inform the Deputy Commissioner of the district about this, and the Deputy Commissioner, in turn, informs the concerned ward member of the prisoner if she or he belongs to the municipality or to the panchayat head if they belong to a rural area. When I asked the authority about it, they said that in the majority of cases, the family members did not want the woman to come and sometimes the municipal ward to which they belonged or the panchayat, denied the permission. As a way of implying that life is truly difficult for a woman who had been imprisoned in the past, I brought up the question of furlough. In order to have a deeper understanding of the lives of the women who were formerly imprisoned, this chapter focuses on the process of re-entry of the women. Every prisoner is subject to re-entry, except those who are executed or who pass away within the confines of the prison. On the other hand, the experience of reintegration can be defined as the individual's reconnection with the institution of society, which is both a process and a goal (Visher and Travis, 2003, p. 91). The preceding chapter discussed the concept of power exerting its influence on the lives of women when they were imprisoned. This chapter expands this concept to the process of re-entry of the women. Once released from jail, the women are no longer subject to the authority of the prison as a total institution.

¹ Section 66 (1) of the Assam Prison Act, 2013 explains the term furlough: When a person is detained in prison under a sentence of imprisonment and the state government, or any authority empowered by it in his behalf, is satisfied from his antecedents or his conduct, in prison, that he is unlikely to commit any offence during a period of temporary release, the state government or such authority may subject to rules made under this act, by order direct that such person be released on furlough.

nevertheless, does this imply that they are completely free? Is there any form of authority that is being exercised upon them? If yes, how does it function, and how do the women discover strategies to fight against the stigma and struggle that they encounter in their lives? Does the State play any role in this regard? Within the scope of this chapter, these questions are addressed.

5.2 The Impact of Prison Habits and Routines in the process of Re-entry

The former women prisoners primarily concentrated on the repercussions of their prison experience in relation to the challenges they encountered when reintegrating into society following their release. They often expressed these thoughts and emotions in tangible terms, and discussed how they believed their confinement was somehow imprinted on their bodies. This could be through their body's adaptation to the new environment, their perception of how others saw them, or more frequently, through specific physical changes that they believed distinguished them as former prisoners. These changes further contributed to the social stigma they felt as women who had been imprisoned. The women whom I interviewed, shared their post-release experiences and discussed the difficulties they faced while adapting to the new circumstances thus affecting their re-entry process. They described two distinct sets of challenges that they encountered, which were directly influenced by the physical impact of their time in prison. These challenges included the visible and hidden bodily practices that they had become accustomed to during their imprisonment. One respondent, Tarali, described the difficulties she faced upon transitioning to a life of freedom in relation to the lingering repercussions of her time spent in jail :

“For several months following my release, I would eagerly rise from bed at 5.30, my mind preoccupied with the *gunti*. Throughout the day, I would remain alert and aware whenever the time for the *gunti* approached. Furthermore, due to years of sleeping on the ground, I found it impossible to sleep in the wooden bed...*Eman bosor kostot hui, bisonar aram lobo nuwara holu...*she laughs..(For long years of sleeping in difficulty got so adjusted that now cannot take the comfort of the bed)”.

Tarali stayed in prison for twelve years. For women such as Tarali who resided outside of the public sphere, managing time becomes challenging upon their release. Furthermore, the methods by which the prison enforced discipline upon the prisoners were evident even

after their release. The experience of time in jail is regulated by the institutional boundaries that are enforced by a system of clear formal norms, practices, and procedures (Wahidin, 2002). Another woman named Anjali, who served a life sentence, said:

“The absence of noise within the dwelling. Although I desired to sleep, I have been accustomed to noises throughout the process of falling asleep over the course of years in jail... The stillness weighed heavily on me. I would remain awake, experiencing insomnia. I would roam the house throughout the entire night... Occasionally, I would venture beyond the confines of the house and stroll along the lane adjacent to my dwelling. ..My family members do not understand my condition...*Pagla gayi hain tu, aise kon rat ko edhar udhur ghoomta phirta hain...*(You have become mad, who roams in this way at night, here and there)”

This narrative illustrates how the body becomes marked by the prison routine through the habitual practices that become ingrained during imprisonment, and the challenging nature of breaking free from prison habits following release. Anjali explained the process of physical acculturation, which involves adapting to sleeping in a jail dormitory amidst the cacophony created by numerous other women. At present at home, she needs auditory motivation and the presence of others to sleep. The individuals' perception of how others viewed them, particularly in regard to specific physical alterations that they believed distinguished them as former prisoners (Sohan and Raghav, 1982) further reinforced the stigma associated with their identity as women who had been imprisoned. Zaitzow (2011, p. 229) highlights in her research on the reintegration of women prisoners that the effects of jail are not confined to the prison walls only ... Radhika, a former women prisoner who spent four years in prison, recounts an experience of her

“A few months ago, while I was at the nearby vegetable market, I noticed a woman staring at me... Although it may have been an innocent glance, I interpreted it as a personal affront and became so anxious that I abruptly halted my shopping and went back home...”

Like Radhika, most other respondents expressed a fear of facing people. Some of them even said how covid 19 acted as a boon for them in some ways, as wearing face masks² made their identity in public to some extent conceivable. According to Leeming and Boyle (2004), when people feel that they are ashamed of themselves, it indicates that they are

² It was made mandatory to wear face masks after Covid19 was declared a pandemic, still now face masks are a protocol in most public places.

willing to take responsibility for a poor circumstance that is caused by their faulty character. As a visible consequence of their time spent in jail, women experienced this stigma, which served to identify them as formerly imprisoned individuals and diminish their chances of successfully adjusting to life following release. Both the manner in which the women responded to this stigma and the degree to which they opposed it, were different from one another (Major and O'Brien, 2005; Pinel, 1999). The following sections of this chapter shed light on this topic. As far as the women who are interviewed are concerned, stigma serves as a continual reminder of their former prisoner identity. In a sense, the impacts of prison time, routine, and self-stigma are a battle at the individual level to adapt with life outside of the prison. This is especially true in the case of long-term women prisoners, and it can be considered a significant aspect of the process of re-entry. The next section depicts the process of re-entry into the realms of their homes and society.

5.3 Home and the Outside

For women in the Indian setting, the process of establishing and dismantling a house is a continuous one, as they move from their parental homes to their marital homes after marriage. In the Indian setting, the concept of home is commonly linked to femininity. This association is evident in the expectations placed on women to take care of the household and in the perceived feminine qualities of being confined to the home, being physically present, and providing care (Wardhaugh, 1999). However, for women prisoners, this connection is much more intricate and multifaceted. Initially, they not only leave their birthplace and marital residence but also relocate to the jail (Shankardass, 2000). During their time in prison, they are separated from the societal obligations associated with their domestic responsibilities at home. In this section, I explore the present lives of the respondents, focusing on how their narratives illustrate the changes in their experiences of home following their release from jail. The concept of home is manifested in a genuine sense of kinship, which is indeed the respondents perception of home. Home is regarded as a significant location for family social connections and interactions related to kinship (Allen & Crow, 1989; Ricci, 1980). Their accounts of their current residences evoke memories of homes they had previously experienced. They mostly rely on past experiences to shape, provide significance to, and elucidate their present lives and residences.

Maneka, a respondent with an expressionless face asked, “ Does my eight-month imprisonment diminish my ability to be a good mother?”. She recounted her life before being imprisoned, which was similar to that of many other middle-class single mothers. Like them, she toiled tirelessly day and night to secure a promising future for her son. Undoubtedly, she achieved the desired outcome of her son becoming an engineer, ultimately leading to his successful employment. Despite being regarded as a successful mother, her life took a turn for the worse when she was found responsible for significant financial mismanagement at her workplace. As a result, she was arrested and then imprisoned. She persistently asserts that she was falsely incriminated by a coworker, and her son struggled to come to terms with the reality of his mother's imprisonment. The most unfavorable aspect was that her son neither visited her, nor held faith in her innocence. She expresses sorrow at how her time in prison eroded her relationship with her son, who was the only reason she had to keep going. She had to rely on the infamously sluggish legal process without assistance from her son, who might have expedited her release on *bail* within a month. Borah (2021) highlights the negligent behavior of legal aid lawyers in Assam, resulting in prolonged imprisonment of numerous impoverished women prisoners who are awaiting bail. Despite now being released, Maneka continued to be criticized and was denied the opportunity to bestow her blessings on her son during his wedding. Her identity as a mother was eroded by imprisonment, transforming her into a mere observer. She was unjustly imprisoned for a crime she did not commit, resulting in lifelong punishment and damage to her reputation. She recounted to us the incident of her son's wedding, which revealed her domestic situation in the present era. She narrated,

“My sister-in-law was appointed as the groom's mother. My son explicitly instructed me not to participate in the wedding, and in my own home, I was subjected to confinement. Although I was in my room, I could hear my relatives making derogatory remarks about me. Prior to departing for the bride's residence for the nocturnal marriage ceremony, one of the relatives suggested that my son seek his mother's blessing. However, my sister-in-law strongly believed that it was inappropriate to have any contact or encounter with a woman who had a tainted reputation prior to embarking on a fortunate event”.

Rumi, another respondent was imprisoned for one year on charges of theft from the establishment where she was employed. After her release, she conveyed mixed emotions regarding the concept of home and revealed her thoughts of uncertainty. She expressed her dismay at how her brother's friends, who formerly held her in high regard and treated

her like family, now after her release frequently visit their home in an inebriated state and makes her feel uneasy.

“*Bure nazar se dekhte hain...aur gande baat karte hain mujhe dekhkar...* (Gives bad gazes...and speaks rubbish), and when I complain this to my brother, he says that I deserve it...I don't know how my brother became like this, he was so protective of me before I went to prison, we were poor, but we were happy...” .

According to Altman and Werner (1985), women are generally more inclined than males to view their homes as a place of emotional solace, refuge, or shield. In addition, she states that her mother does not express any opinions regarding this matter. She said that her mother exemplified the usual mother who adores her son and does not speak a word against him. In addition, she mentioned that her brother does not permit her to leave the house, with the exception of when she has some urgent issues like medical or to find a job. It was in the pretext of finding a job that she met me. Moreover she herself was also hesitant in facing people. When queried about it she responded, "I feel ashamed to face people..." while covering her face entirely with a *dupatta* the only part of her face that was clearly visible was her eyes. The women were fighting a daily emotional battle with the shame and stigma (Jones et al 1984) which was aggravated by their confinement. This was the most significant battle that they were fighting in the domestic areas. Thus meanings that were associated with the private self as well as the public person were frequently disrupted when individuals were imprisoned. It was the aspects of the stigma that became associated to their identity that acted as a barrier to their effective re-entry into society.

To quote Alaka,

“Believe me, *Baideu*, I saw my family members after eight years on my release. My son who was four years when I went to jail, is now in high school and he was not recognising me when I came back...as my in-laws said that I died. He was raised by my mother-in-law as my husband died when my son was one year old. He considers my mother-in-law as his mother. I am too not revealing my identity, but I know one day or the other he will come to know from the neighbors. Maybe he still knows the truth, that the woman staying with them as their distant relative is his mother who was in jail these years. *Mur logot ekuy kotha napate* (Doesn't engage in any conversation with me)...if I ask something then only he replies”

Throughout the entirety of the conversation, Alaka's eyes were filled with tears. In addition to that, she mentioned that her mother-in-law was also unhappy as a result of her being with them. At the time when I met her, it had just been four months of her release. She stated that she was going to remain by her son's side no matter what challenges she may encounter. When it comes to her relationship with her son, she is confident that things will eventually be fine. Many mothers who had previously been imprisoned found that the process of reclaiming motherhood and natural rights after serving time in prison was a difficult and time-consuming procedure. In addition to this, they discovered that others had an unfavorable perception of them and that their position within the family was diminished (Gobena et al., all 2022). Along the same lines as Alka, there were a few other respondents who mentioned that their identity as a "good mother" was eroded by their imprisonment and that they were subjected to stigmatization as a result (Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Few- Demo & Arditti, 2014). It was thought by the former women prisoners that they had lost their power and influence in their relationship with the children as a result of their imprisonment, which had a substantial impact on the process of child-rearing. They highlighted how their imprisonment had caused the entire family to feel uneasy and had a terrible impact on their relationship with their loved ones, particularly their children. As a result of their first separation from the children and subsequent reunion caused them to lose their power to discipline, supervise, and advise their children, as well as to take responsibility for their existence. A woman Urmi narrated on this...

“I did only my primary school so my dream was to get my daughter educated properly. As my husband was not at all interested in her studies, his only interest was gambling so I worked hard, day and night to meet my daughter’s expenses as I admitted her to a private school. My daughter was very obedient and excelled in her studies, but then due to imprisonment, everything got ruined... in my absence, she stayed with my brother-in-law’s family, and they got her admitted to a government school, while in jail I thought she still she was doing good in her studies but out from jail I realized that she had least interest in her studies, all the time she remains busy on her phone, I don’t understand how will I bring her to the right path.. She hardly listens to me, sometimes she even blames me for whatever she is today. Four years of imprisonment had shattered my dream...She weeps...”

Consequently, for some formerly imprisoned individuals, such as Urmi, the duration of their imprisonment had a detrimental impact on their children, which made parenting more

challenging. As discussed in Chapter IV, Traustadottir (1991), concept of ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’, after release the women made every effort to concentrate on the ‘caring for’ role, which they had been prevented from doing while they were imprisoned. However, the majority of the mothers had the impression that their children had become more distant from them. As a consequence of this, a significant number of respondents who were mothers said that it was a challenging attempt for them to re-establish and re-claim their role as mothers and caregivers immediately following their release from jail. This was due to the fact that their children experienced feelings of anger, resistance, and distrust. Additionally, the women experienced feelings of guilt and shame. Therefore, the mother-child relationship was negatively impacted by imprisonment, and the absence of the mother constituted a barrier to the process of reestablishing bonds with children following release from jail.

It was expressed by the former women prisoners that their conjugal relationships were also negatively impacted as a result of their imprisonment. According to Nickles (2019), the act of imprisonment itself poses significant challenges to the maintenance of familial and relational relationships from generation to generation. The likelihood of a marriage dissolving is nearly three times higher among males who are imprisoned than it is among men who are not imprisoned (Apel et al. 2010 ; Lopoo and Western 2005). When it comes to the situation of women, the picture is even more bleak. According to Schaefer and Oslon (1981), for healthy relationships to function properly, intimacy is frequently required. However, as explained in Chapter III, imprisonment restricts the number of encounters that are required to maintain intimacy. A lack of privacy, stringent restrictions surrounding visitation choices, and concerns regarding contacts during the imprisonment period are all causes of concern. Alaka highlighted the reorientation of relational needs with her partner during her stay in the prison...

“ I didn’t think our main goal to meet our partners was romance then... which ofcourse the authority did not understand, we were criminals, so we didn’t have a right for anything...Our goal was his safety, him getting home..to the children in my absence”.

The lack of family-friendly policies that, as the women argued, further complicated familial relationships, and negatively affected the women prisoner’s perceived self-worth, and their hope for positive rehabilitation in the post-prison period. Mithu in a rage of anger said:

“ The first few months every Wednesday as it was scheduled for family visits, my husband used to visit the jail to meet me, but hardly we could talk for five minutes, and the warder present shouted Time over! Time over!...sometimes even meeting was not allowed, and this made him frustrated, slowly he stopped visiting and it made me away from him. *Sokur ator hole, monor ator hoi* (This is a popular Assamese saying meaning if you are away from sight, you are away from the heart too), and after a year I came to know that he married someone else”. She further said on the day of her release she directly went to meet her husband, but she was not allowed to set foot inside the house, she came back and since then she is staying with her brother’s family. Most of the respondents expressed that the prison system broke families up. Making visits nearly impossible and creating less and less conducive recreation times. Issues of trust were also there in most of the narratives. Nandana, a former women prisoner said in this regard,

“My husband and I were together released two years ago, while we were in jail, our two daughters were looked after by my sister and mother After we came out, I thought that we would start a new life again, after a few days only my husband got a work in a road construction site, I thought life would be better now, but slowly my husband’s behavior changed towards me... he framed different stories against me, saying I had illicit affair with the prison guards which he has come to know lately...he verbally abused me with all possible slangs, in this way few months went in torture, then suddenly one day he declared he is going to marry another woman and the younger daughter shall stay with him and the elder one with me, and within a week I was made to leave his house along with my elder daughter. With some cash and a few clothes we were made to leave the house and then few days, we stayed with my mother and sister, though they welcomed us eagerly I don’t want to be a burden on them, finally, I managed a job for me in a tea-stall, and rented a one-room house near my mother’s home and now somehow managing life, my daughter who is 12th pass, is also looking for a job, once she gets a job, life will be a bit better. At present life is hard...but I am happy now, I am free now, to take decisions for me as well for my daughter”.

It was highly peculiar for Nandana’s spouse to abandon her, considering that they were imprisoned together. According to Nandana's account, she was only a subordinate participant in the crime committed by her husband. Within mainstream society, prisons continue to be exclusively male-dominated environments, prompting contemplation on the

concept of femininity when entering such a realm. Nandana's decision to secure employment and break free from the anticipated passivity of social victims was commendable. Nandana managed to introduce a certain level of adaptability and create some "free space" for herself within the seemingly inflexible social and spatial limitations that define homelessness (Goffman, 1961). However, the prison's restrictions on interaction during imprisonment are not the only cause of family breakdown. The main issue here is that in mainstream society, women who have been in prison are viewed as social outcasts, and households are a part of society that either refuses or is unable to accept these marginalized women. When imprisoned, individuals' lives serve as a platform for comprehending the interconnection between family and community (Bandyopadhyay and Mehta, 2022). The core of this nexus revolves around honor, stigma, and shame. Several individuals conveyed that they experienced homelessness in their own homes after release. The women experienced dejection as a result of neglect and humiliation from their family members. During my visit to Purnima's, one of the respondent's house, she was not at home, and in her absence, her brother engaged in an extensive conversation with me about his sister. He was really astonished to see me to come to interview his sister, whom he continues to regard as a criminal. The highlights of his narrative was

“Since the day she was released and has returned home, I have been facing challenges. My friends mock me because of her, and neighbors inquire about her. I perceive that I am regarded by others with a sense of distrust, as if I am a criminal.. I have repeatedly instructed her to refrain from going out of home, yet she consistently disregards my advice. She lacks any sense of shame... However, my mother consistently provides support to her. If this was my house, I would have prohibited her from entering. *Apuni pare Jodi ek ni korbat durot kaam eta diyok, jate ghorot dekhi nethaku taik aru tair karone bahirot laaz nepau* (If you can take her and manage a job somewhere far away so that I don't get to see her at home and don't get embarrassed because of her)”

Raja's account serves as a representative example of the experiences shared by many family members of former prisoners. The enduring shame associated with imprisonment and the families of prisoners seems to be a demoralizing effect specific to imprisonment, unlike other types of involuntary separation such as abandonment. Imprisonment is accompanied by a stigma that is challenging for families to eliminate (Blackwell, 1959, p. 22). This stigma is much more intensified when the prisoners are women. The former women prisoners are transformed into marginalized individuals inside their own

households. They are not only deprived of accommodation in their homes, but also in the broader social sphere. The accounts of the respondents consistently depicts a shared sense of shame, humiliation, and helplessness. Shimi's narrative mirrors the identical concept.

“I had the dream of becoming a beautician... *Sobe muk dhuniya koi* (Everyone said me beautiful) and said that I knew how to dress and style. The boys in the locality most often used to throng near my house and every other day I got proposals, but I didn't accept any proposal waiting for the best one to arrive. But after I came from jail, everything changed. Now I am not looked at by anyone, and stopped getting proposals too...she laments!!! whenever I pass through the locality, comments surpassed assassinating my character...”

It appeared to the women that after their release, they were treated as outsiders and outcasts in the family and society. This was due the fact that the prison, which is a total institution, physically separates the women from the outside world. However, the family and society acted as greedy institutions, erecting symbolic boundaries that prevented them from reintegrating into society (Coser, 1974). Additionally, the responders might be classified in a manner that by utilising Price's (2015) concept of the "socially dead."³ Thus in the case of the former women prisoners, their very status as former prisoners nullify all other identities associated with them, and the only identity that gets reflected is their stigmatised identity for being a former prisoner. This is similar to the statement made by Goffman in 1986, who stated that an individual may possess (or perform) a variety of social identities (and therefore roles), but the significance of each one may vary depending on the social setting, circumstance, and the individual concerned. In the process of re-entry of the respondents, Goffman's view holds true, as factors such as the location of the respondents and the class to which they belonged, mattered the nature of re-entry for the women. The respondents who lived in urban regions and in tea gardens had an edge over those who lived in rural areas. During the course of the fieldwork, I came across a respondent named Mini who was from a rural area close to Jorhat⁴. On the day that she was arrested and sentenced to prison, the entire family was boycotted by the village.

³ Social Death is a permanent condition. While many people integrate back into the society, after imprisonment they often testify that they permanently bear a social mark, a stigma. See Price J.M. Price book *Prison and Social Death*, 2015.

⁴ A town in Upper Assam

Despite this, they are not permitted to enter the village, Namgar⁵ and the majority of the people who live there do not include them on the guest list. There are also other respondents from rural areas though their families are not boycotted, but there are many restrictions on their mobility on the village functions and gatherings, etc. The reason for this is that cultural systems in rural areas place a stronger focus on collectivism rather than individualism. In addition, I observed in the field that the respondents who lived in the tea gardens, even though their imprisonment was well-known among the general public, were not subjected to widespread stigmatization. This was because the tea tribe community was the majority of those who were imprisoned, and therefore the presence of women in prison was not a significant social problem among them. Even though they make up the bulk of those imprisoned in Assam, I have no intention of labeling them as born criminals. This is because the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 labelled the "other" nomadic people as hereditary criminals. In addition, the fact that they make up the majority of the prisoners in the jails does not necessarily mean that they are the ones who perpetrated the crime. The Brahmanical legacy of a criminal justice system that was conceived of by the British Government has been preserved via the laws that have been formed in the Indian State after it gained its independence. Since independence, there has been a determined effort on the part of the police to continue targeting communities who are already marginalised. This fact is clear from the demographics of our prison population. Over eighteen percent of all prisoners are Muslims, and sixty-six percent of all prisoners come from either the Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), or Other Backward Caste (OBC) groups (National Crime Record Bureau, 2020). Regarding the respondents hailing from urban areas, they experienced stigmatisation in their immediate social circles, as people in urban areas are not especially connected to one another and the majority of them are not familiar with one another. Through isolating themselves within the confines of their home and avoiding socialisation with other people, the majority of the respondents fought against the stigmatisation. However, when women who belonging to the elite class were imprisoned, their lives were significantly different from those of the middle and the marginalised class of women. This was due to the fact that money, power, and connections had a significant impact on the *bail* process. Unless the crime was extremely serious or if it attracted the attention of the public or the media, in such cases, only they served their

⁵ Prayer halls which are places for congregational worship associated with the entire Assamese community and the Ekasarana sect of Hinduism, in particular, that is native to Assam (Source: Wikipedia)

prison term as undertrials. Otherwise, people were granted *bail* within a matter of hours. In this particular study, there was just one respondent who, in addition to having a high level of education and being monetarily self-sufficient, also had a high-level government position; however, she is temporarily suspended because of the court case she is involved in. She referred to her time spent in jail as the "incident," and she said that because of that incident, she is now able to spend time with herself, her family, and especially her sons. She also stated that throughout all of these years, she has been so busy that she has hardly been able to give any time to her sons. She states, "These incidents can happen in anyone's life if your stars go against you." Other than that, she did not say much about her difficulties or problems after she was released. Because she has remained silent, it is also an indicator that she has internalized the shame associated with being imprisoned.

5.3.1 Fictive Kins' support in the process of re-entry

I provided a detailed account of the development of friendship and fictive kin networks within the confines of the jail in the previous chapter. I also discussed how these networks enabled the prisoners to form ties with one another. Friendships and fictive kinships that were developed during imprisonment continues to function for the majority of the respondents even after they are freed from prison.. Purnima said in this regard...

“Sheila is like my own sister, she is still in jail but months ahead of my release, her Aunt came to the jail and she introduced me to her who has a tailoring shop, and her Aunt assured me that she would give me training in her shop so that I could be independent enough to earn something. Prior to my release, she gave me all the details of her Aunt, and within a week of my release I went and met her. Guddi mahi(aunt), is as good as Shiela and treats me as her niece and she is giving me the training free of cost. Of course when I earn on my own , I will pay her the training fee. I don't know what would I have done without Shiela's help, as my brother would no way have supported me”

Thus, the fictive kin systems that were developed within the jail serves to increase the network of persons who supply social and economic capital (Bourdeiu, 1986) for one another. In light of the numerous obstacles that formerly imprisoned women contend with, it is essential to provide them with social support to fulfil their practical as well as emotional requirements. Most of the respondents were in contact with the women with whom they forged bonds of friendship and kin ties, some physically met and some talked over the phone. Thus, in the midst of life challenges and complicated family relationships

that occur in the post-imprisonment period, the women said they found mental solace by being in connection with their former prison peers.

5.4 Dealing with the Stigma

Few qualitative studies that address stigmatization in post-prison life (Harding,2003; Kleinman & Hall-Clifford,2009; Winnick & Bodkin,2008) draw analytical attention to the diverse "performance strategies" that stigmatised people employ in social interactions. Some stigmatised people reveal their stigma completely, while others reveal it partially, and still others conceal it. Despite the fact that Goffman (1963) employs the word "performance strategies," I find that the phrase "performance tactics" is more accurately descriptive in case of the former women prisoners. I hereby refer to De Certeau's (1984) use of the term to point to the formerly imprisoned women's adaption to the socio-cultural circumstances they move in and around and the power relations that are inherent in navigation techniques. Through "manipulating and acting between and across the rules defined by others," the women were able to negotiate their way towards the social status that they desired (Vigh, 2003, p. 133). Different strategies were utilised by Urmi, Nandana, and Purnima in order to reveal and conceal the stigma associated with their imprisonment. Nandana, on the one hand, made the decision to conceal her convictions when she was operating her tea stall, and ever since then, she has never disclosed an excessive amount of personal information to either her customers or anybody else she has come into contact with. Urmi, who was also in this queue, had the intention of moving to a different location with her daughter and beginning a new life in a place where no one would be aware of her past life. She believed that if she continued to reside in the same location, it would have an impact on both her and her daughter. She said, "*Moi jail thoka kotha tu gom pale, kune biya patibo eyek*" (Who will marry her, if anybody comes to know that I have been to jail). Alaka made the decision to proceed in the opposite direction. When she met new individuals, she did not try to conceal her stigma and she was completely honest about her time spent in prison. By guiding them in the right direction, Alaka hoped to steer them away from the agony of being rejected by their peers. She had the urge to live a life and begin a new life without fear, and wherever she went in search of a job, she told about her history of imprisonment and the complete set of circumstances that led to her being placed in prison. Alaka's aim in telling people the right way was to avoid the pain of social rejection. She said in a tone of confidence,

“ Now of course no one is willing to give me job, but one day or the other I will find a job. And I lead my life by raising my head high...*Baideu*”.

Shimi blames her stepmother for her condition, and is now revenging her stepmother by burdening her with housework. She said in a revengeful tone, “ I have no fear now, she destroyed my life...so I would not let her stay in peace now”. In addition to the feelings of vengeance and fury, she also has a thread of guilt running through her veins for the behavior of the people in the neighborhood. She states that once her case is resolved, she will definitely go back to pursuing her ambition and will leave her hometown for at least a few years. These women showed courage and resolve to survive, to take control of their lives, and to go on and move on with their lives despite the challenges they faced.

5.5 The State as a passive spectator in the re-entry process

The period following release from jail is seen as beyond the purview of the criminal justice system. This presents the issue of attributing accountability when a person commits another offense after serving a prison sentence. Both the prison department and the broader criminal justice system fail to assume tangible accountability for the rehabilitation and reintegration of convicts upon their release. Although the purpose of imprisonment was to rectify a situation, the lingering question is whether the financial and social expenses of imprisonment are more than its advantages (Tong, 2022). It is of no doubt that Imprisonment alienates a prisoner from society due to its stigmatizing consequences and does not facilitate rehabilitation. Foucault contends that prisons, due to their inherent qualities and the cultivation of a "unnatural existence," the forceful restrictions they enforce, and the potential for power abuse they enable, actually contribute to a perception of injustice, anger, and a departure from feelings of guilt (Foucault, 1975). The previous chapters reflected in a way when imprisoned individuals are women, imprisonment at best was impeding and was not in any way supporting the growth and progress of the women. It is crucial to prioritize the requirements of women, both during their time in jail and after their release. Many women lack knowledge about their post-release destination and want access to secure alternatives. This raises the question of who gains from imprisonment, considering the significant financial burden on the country and the apparent limited advantages to society (Coyle, 2002). The majority of those who are imprisoned will inevitably be freed at some juncture and experience the process of re-entry (Sumter, et al., 2012 cited in Tong, 2022, p. 328). It is important to remember this reality from the beginning of imprisonment and throughout its entire term. Nevertheless, the duration of

imprisonment is regarded as a separate entity, representing the outcome of the offense rather than being a component of a procedure aimed at addressing the circumstances surrounding the crime and the underlying issues that led to the offending conduct. Furthermore, it fails to consider the duration of imprisonment in connection to the frequently unavoidable period following release. The chapter on prison welfare and rehabilitation in the 2015 Prison Statistics India report emphasizes that the primary goal of prisons is the reformation and rehabilitation of offenders (NCRB 2015, p. 339). The Justice Mulla Committee Report in 1983 provided a thorough and perceptive set of suggestions on rehabilitation. It is disheartening to observe that numerous insightful solutions highlighted in the report have not yet been put into practice, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of convicts remain a low-priority aspect in the criminal justice system. The committee emphasized that their report advocated for a prison system that goes beyond simply punishing offenders, but instead focuses on reforming and rebuilding them into self-respecting and self-reliant individuals through purposeful training and treatment. The Mulla committee report strongly asserts that the procedures for after-care and rehabilitation of offenders should be an essential component of the institutional care and treatment process. Furthermore, the administrative machinery responsible for implementing follow-up actions must be integrated with the Department of Prison and Correctional Services. This proposal has not been faithfully implemented in many locations. The Committee also urges the community and volunteer organizations to actively participate in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. The Committee proposes the establishment of a well-staffed Aftercare and Follow-up section within the central organization of the Department of Prison and Correctional Services in each state/union territory. The Committee has identified 16 specific suggestions that have not been put into practice in India. The State of Assam is also failing to execute the recommendations made by the Mulla Committee. The Mullah Committee, the Committee on Reforms of Criminal Justice System led by Justice Malimath (Government of India, 2003), and the more recent committee on the draft national policy on criminal justice, led by Madhava Menon (Ministry of Home Affairs 2007), have all provided their recommendations. However, the proposals have not yet been put into practice mostly due to the fact that the fundamental principles of prisons still prioritize the confinement and control of convicts, rather than focusing on their rehabilitation and subsequent reintegration into society. The

current conditions experienced by prisoners in field sites exemplify a significant gap in reaching the stated objectives.

“It is one year of my release, but till today I have not received the 10,000 rupees, I am supposed to get. Every time I go and enquire in the prison, Jailor Babu said, it is in the process, last time when I went he said I have to enquire it in the prison main office, Guwahati. *Baideu eman dur keneke jam* (How will I go so far)...”

Informed Bunu

The Assam government facilitates rehabilitation grants of Rs 10,000⁶ to released convicts to set up a small business/enterprises and carry out a trade with the knowledge gained from vocational training in the jail. Scarcity of work on the part of the government to release the required money leaves women like Bunu and many others in distress. In Providing vocational training there is a huge disparity between the male and the women prisoners which I witnessed during my visit to both jails. Often I noticed some or the other training were imparted to the male prisoners on a regular basis, like training in cane craft, bamboo, etc. In Jail, KG, the vocational training program has been imparted under the banner of “Karagaror Pora Karikor” (From Prison to Craftsman) Also, the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) of the located town of the prison imparts Domestic Electric Wireman training to the male convicted prisoners. But to the women prisoners, no such training is made regularly available. Only by fits and starts sometimes they are imparted some. Kalki, a former women prisoner expressed in this regard, " It is my fifth year (2021) in the jail, till now only once we were given training in earring making, that too for only one day”.

Women in prisons are also subject to stereotypical society gender stereotypes about roles and obligations. Women are not perceived as primary wage earners. If women prisoners had received equivalent training to their male counterparts, it would have greatly benefitted them throughout the period after their release. The majority of women responded negatively when asked if they had received adequate instruction regarding reintegration and life after being released from jail. During interviews with the respondents and jail officials, it was found that there is no established protocol for providing counseling or support to convicts in need of assistance for their release. Due to the absence of a comprehensive rehabilitation policy or program, the convicts were released without any prior arrangements. The majority of the respondents were instructed by the jail staff and

⁶ As informed by the prison authorities of both the prison.

were given a kindly admonition to 'never return again to prison'. Moreover, the absence of halfway homes in India, including Assam, similar to those found in other nations, poses challenges for convicts in their reintegration process as these facilities often assist in preparing them for their eventual release. The five Swadhar⁷ homes in Assam currently provide shelter to only victims of trafficking. Actually, these homes should function as temporary residences for women prisoners, who after release, has no place to go back. From the perspective of the State, despite the ongoing discussion about the improvement and restoration of , little progress has been made in this area. The crux of the issue lies in the absence of a specific department tasked with the responsibility of reintegrating prisoners into society. For any comprehensive work to be conducted in this field, this responsibility must be assigned to a specific department. The prison department should be considered for this responsibility in order to ensure that their function extends beyond the implementation of custodial programs and includes accountability for their contribution and relevance to the lives of released prisoners.

5.6 Conclusion

During the discussion of the re-entry process, the women mentioned that the first challenge they encountered was the impact that their time spent in jail and the prison routine had on their bodies. On the one hand, they had the attitude that they were distinct from other women because of the history of their time spent in jail; this was a form of internalisation of the stigma that they had experienced. On the other hand, they were having a hard time breaking free of the routine that they had developed while imprisoned in order to fully adjust to life outside of prison. Symbolically, the power of prison continued to work for women in the guise of a greedy institution (Cosser, 1974), and this power was exercised through the institutions of family and society. The informal power processes that were exerting their influence on women through their families were reflected in the situation of women in the spaces of the home. The women fought for their right to be respected inside the family and to maintain their individuality. For the women, their families and society served as the walls of the jail, which allowed authority to be imposed upon them. However, there were those women who, in their own way, attempted to oppose the power and propel themselves forward in their lives. This was demonstrated by the cases of Nandana, Alaka, Urmi, and Shimi, which demonstrated that women who had previously been imprisoned

⁷ It is a scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances was launched by the Department of Women and Child Development , Government of India.in 2001-2002.

are well aware of the societal processes that designate them as "former prisoners." The social landscape in which they were attempting to construct their lives after release from jail was unstable, and they anticipated that they would be subjected to stigmatisation on a consistent basis. They engaged with this landscape by continually reflecting on the marginal social status that was attributed to them as "formerly imprisoned individuals." Additionally, they attempted to reorganise it and discover ways to circumvent it by employing strategies for stigma management in order to steer their lives in a more constructive path. For women, the process of re-entry is an experience that is inherently embodied. The women's identities were eroded as a result of the stigma and suffering that they experienced as a result of their imprisonment, which had the effect of blurring their presence within the social and spatial bounds of home, family, and domesticity. When someone re-enters society, it is a challenge to the established moral order, just like when they commit a crime. On the other hand, in contrast to the process of punishment, re-entry is not a process that is characterized by well-orchestrated and familiar rituals like jail. This is because even the State plays a fairly passive role in the process of re-entry for women.

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