

*Arrested for conspiracy in May 1908, Sri Aurobindo spent one full year in jail while the British Government, in a protracted trial, tried to implicate him in various revolutionary activities. Acquitted and released in May 1909, he wrote a series of articles in Bengali in the journal "Suprabhat" describing his life in prison and the courtroom.*

## **Tales of Prison Life (excerpt)**

Sri Aurobindo

*Translated from the Bengali by Sisir Kumar Ghosh*

On Friday, May 1, 1908, I was sitting in the *Bande Mataram* office, when Shrijit Shyamsundar Chakravarty handed over a telegram from Muzaffarpur. On reading it I learned of a bomb outrage in which two European ladies had been killed. In that day's issue of the *Empire* I read another news item that the Police Commissioner had said that he knew the people involved in the murder and that they would soon be put under arrest. At that time I had no idea that I happened to be the main target of suspicion and that according to the police I was the chief killer, the instigator and secret leader of the young terrorists and revolutionaries. I did not know that that day would mean the end of a chapter of my life, and that there stretched before me a year's imprisonment during which period all my human relations would cease, that for a whole year I would have to live, beyond the pale of society, like an animal in a cage. And when I would re-enter the world of activity it would not be the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose. Rather it would be a new being, a new character, intellect, life, mind, embarking upon a new course of action that would come out of the ashram at Alipore. I have spoken of a year's imprisonment. It would have been more appropriate to speak of a year's living in a forest, in an ashram or hermitage. For long I had made great efforts for a direct vision (*sakshat darshan*) of the Lord of my Heart; had entertained the immense hope of knowing the Preserver of the world, the Supreme Person (*Purushottam*) as friend and master. But due to the pull of a thousand worldly desires, attachment towards numerous activities and the deep darkness of ignorance I did not succeed in that effort. At long last the most merciful all-good Lord (*Shiv Hari*) destroyed all these enemies at one stroke and helped me in my path, pointed to the *yogashram*, Himself staying as guru and companion in my little abode of retirement and spiritual discipline. The British prison was that ashram. I have also watched this strange contradiction in my life that however much good my well-intentioned friends might do for me, it is those who have harmed me — whom shall I call an enemy, since enemy I have none? — my opponents have helped me even more. They wanted to do me an ill turn, the result was I got what I wanted. The only result of the wrath of the British Government was that I found God. It is not the aim of these essays to provide an intimate journal of my life in the prison. I wish to mention only a few external details, but I have thought it better to mention, at least once, in the beginning, the main theme of the prison life. Else readers may think that suffering is the only fact of prison life. I can't say there were no inconveniences, but on the whole the time passed quite happily.

On Friday night I was sleeping without a worry. At about five in the morning my sister rushed to my room in an agitated manner and called me out by name. I got up. The next moment the small room was filled with armed policemen; Superintendent Cregan, Mr. Clark of 24-Parganas, the charming and delightful visage of familiar Sriman Benod Kumar Gupta, a few Inspectors, red turbans, spies and search witnesses. They all came running like heroes, pistols in hand, as though they were besieging, with guns and cannon, a well-armed

fort. I heard that the white hero had aimed a pistol at my sister's breast, but I did not see it. I was sitting on my bed, still half asleep, when Cregan inquired, "Who is Aurobindo Ghose, is that you?" I answered, "Yes, I am Aurobindo Ghose." Immediately he ordered a policeman to put me under arrest. Then, because of an extremely objectionable expression used by Cregan, there was a little exchange of words between the two of us. I asked for the search warrant, read and signed it. Finding a mention of bombs in the warrant I understood that the presence of these soldiers and policemen was connected with the Muzaffarpur killing. The one thing I did not understand was why, even before any bombs or explosives had been discovered in my house, I was arrested in absence of a body warrant. But I did not raise any useless objections. Afterwards, under instructions from Cregan, my arms were handcuffed, and a rope tied round my middle. An upcountry constable stood behind me holding the rope end. Just then the police brought in Srijut Abinash Bhattacharya and Srijut Sailen Bose, handcuffed and roped round the midriff. From Cregan's words it seemed as if he had entered into the lair of some ferocious animal, as if we were a lot of uneducated, wild lawbreakers, and it was unnecessary to speak or behave courteously towards us. But after the sharp exchange the sahib grew a little milder. Benodbabu tried to explain something about me to him. After which Cregan asked me: "It seems you are a B.A. Is it not a matter of shame for an educated person like you to be sleeping on the floor of an unfurnished room and in a house like this?" "I am a poor man, and I live like one," I said. "Then have you worked up all this mischief with the idea of becoming a rich man?" Cregan replied in a loud voice. Knowing how impossible it was to explain the love of motherland, sacrifice or the sublimity of a vow of poverty to this thick-skulled Briton I did not make the attempt.

All the while the search continued. Beginning at five-thirty, it was over at about eleven-thirty. Inside or outside the boxes, all the exercise books, letters, papers, scraps, poems, plays, prose, essays, translations, nothing escaped the clutches of the all-engrossing search. Among the witnesses to the search Mr. Rakshit seemed a little put out; later, bemoaning his lot, he informed me that the police had dragged him along, and that he had no idea that he would have to be a party to such a nefarious activity. He described, most pathetically, how he had been kidnapped for the purpose. The attitude of the other witness, Samarnath, was of quite another kind; he discharged his part of the job with considerable gusto, like a true loyalist and to the manner born. Nothing remarkable transpired in the course of the search. But I recollect Mr. Clark looking long and suspiciously at the sacred earth from Dakshineswar that had been kept in a small cardboard box; he suspected it might be some new and terribly powerful explosive. In a sense Mr. Clark's suspicions were not unfounded. In the end the decision was reached that it was a piece of earth which was unnecessary to send to the chemical analyst. I did not join in the search except to open a few boxes. No papers or letters were shown or read out to me. Mr. Cregan, for his own delectation, read out loudly a letter from Alakdhari. The friendly Benod Gupta in his natural and delightful style marched round the room, raising echoes everywhere and brought out from the shelf or some other corner papers or letters, and now and then, muttering "Very important, very important," handed these over to Cregan. I was never told what these important documents might be. Nor was I at all curious, since I knew it was impossible that there might be in my house any formula for the manufacture of explosives or documents relating to conspiracy.

After rummaging through my room the police led us to the adjoining room. Cregan opened a box belonging to my youngest aunt; he once or twice glanced at the letters, then saying that it was no use carrying these women's correspondence, left them behind. Then the police *mahatmas* appeared on the ground floor. Cregan had his tea there. I had a cup of cocoa and toast. During this period Cregan tried to argue and convince me about his political views — this mental torture I had to suffer coolly. But may I ask, one knows physical tortures to be part of the traditional police strategy, but does such inhuman mental torture also fall within the purview of its unwritten law? I hope our highly respectable, friend-of-the-country Srijut Jogeshchandra Ghose will raise this question in the Legislative

Assembly.

After searching the rooms on the ground floor and the office of *Navashakti* the police again came up to the first floor to open an iron safe belonging to *Navashakti*. Unable to open it after a half-hour battle, they decided to remove it bodily to the police station. This time a police officer discovered a bicycle, with a railway label bearing the mark of Kushtia. Immediately they took it as an important proof that the vehicle belonged to the man who had earlier shot a sahib there and they gladly took it away with them.

At about eleven-thirty we left our house. Outside the gates, in a car, I found my maternal uncle and Srijut Bhupendranath Basu. "On what charges have you been arrested?" asked uncle. "I know nothing," I answered, "they arrested and handcuffed me soon after getting into my room; they didn't show any body warrant." When uncle inquired why the handcuffs were thought necessary, Benodbabu said, "Sir, it's not my fault. Ask Aurobindababu, I told the sahib and had the handcuffs removed." On Bhupenbabu's asking about my offence, Mr. Gupta mentioned the I.P.C. article on murder. Later on I came to know that my solicitor, Sri Hirendranath Datta, had expressed a desire to be present on my behalf during the search. The police had turned down the request.

Benodbabu was entrusted with taking us to the police station. There he behaved with us in a remarkably decent manner. We had our bath and lunch there and then proceeded towards Lal Bazar. After being made to wait there for a couple of hours we were removed to Royd Street, in which auspicious locality we stayed all evening. It was there that I first came to know the sly detective Maulvi Samsul-Alam and had the pleasure of entering with him into a cordial relation. Till then the great Maulvi had not acquired either enough influence or energy, he was not yet the chief researcher in the bomb outrage or functioning as Mr. Norton's prompter and unfailing *aide-memoire*. Till that time Ramsadayababu was acting as the chief protagonist. The Maulvi made me listen to a most entertaining sermon on religion. That Hinduism and Islam have the same basic principles: in the Omkara of the Hindus we have the three syllables, A, U, M; the first three letters of the Holy Koran are A, L, M. According to philological laws, U is used for L; *ergo*, Hindus and Musulmans have the same mantra or sacred syllables. Yet one has to maintain the uniqueness of one's faith, so a Hindu considers it wrong to eat with Musulmans. To be truthful is part of the religious life. The Sahibs says Aurobindo Ghose is the leader of the terrorist party, this is a matter of shame and sorrow for India. But by keeping to the path of rectitude the situation can yet be saved. The Maulvi was fully convinced that distinguished persons, men of high character, like Bipin Pal and Aurobindo Ghose, whatever they might have done, they would openly confess these. Srijut Purnachandra Shastri, who happened to be present there, expressed his doubt in this respect. But the Maulvi did not give up his views. I was charmed and delighted with his knowledge, intelligence and religious fervour. Thinking that it would be impertinent to speak much I listened politely to his priceless sermon and cherished it in my heart. But in spite of so much religious enthusiasm the Maulvi did not give up his profession of a 'tec'. Once he said: "You made a great mistake in handing over the garden to your younger brother to manufacture bombs. It was not very intelligent on your part." Understanding the implication of his words I smiled a little, and said: "Sir, the garden is as much mine as my brother's. Where did you learn that I had given it up to him, or given it up to him for the purpose of manufacturing bombs?" A little abashed, the Maulvi answered: "No, no, I was saying in case you have done it." Then the great-souled Maulvi opened an autobiographical chapter before me, and said, "All the moral or economic progress that I have made in life can be traced back to a single sufficing moral adage of my father. He would always say, 'Never give up an immediate gain'. This great word is the sacred formula of my life, all this advancement is owing to the fact that I have always remembered that sage advice." At the time of this pronouncement the Maulvi stared at me so closely that it seemed as though I was his meat and food, which, following the parental advice, he would be loath to give up. In the evening, the redoubtable Ramasaday Mukhopadhyaya appeared on

the scene. He expressed words of unusual kindness and sympathy, told everyone present to be careful about my food and bed. Immediately afterwards some fellows came and took Sailendra and me, through rain and storm, to the lock-up at Lal Bazar. This was the only occasion when I met Ramasadaya. I could see the man was both intelligent and active, but his words and demeanour, his tone, his gait, all seemed fake and unnatural, as if he was forever acting on a stage. There are men like that whose words, bodies, efforts are an embodiment of untruth. They are expert in imposing on immature minds, but those who know men and their ways, find them out at once.

At Lal Bazar on the ground floor in a spacious room we two were kept together. Some snacks were served. After a while two Englishmen entered the room, later I was told that one of them was the Police Commissioner, Mr. Halliday himself. Finding us both together Halliday was wrathful with the sergeant, and pointing towards me he said, "Take care that nobody stays or speaks with this man." Sailen was at once removed and locked up in another room. When others had left, Halliday asked me: "Aren't you ashamed for being involved in this cowardly, dastardly activity?" "What right have you to assume that I was involved?" To this Halliday replied: "I am not assuming, I know everything." At this I said: "What you know or do not know is your concern. I wholly deny having any connection with these murderous acts."

That night I had other visitors, all members of the police force. There was a mystery behind the visit, which till now I have failed to fathom. A month and a half before my arrest an unknown gentleman came to see me. He said: "Sir, we have not met, but since I have great respect for you I have come to warn you of an impending danger, I would also like to know if you are familiar with anyone at Konnagar. Did you ever visit the place, and do you have a house there?" "No, I do not have any house there," I said. "But I have been there once and am known to some people there." "I will say nothing more," said the stranger, "but now on you should not meet anyone from there. Some wicked people are conspiring against you and your brother, Barindra. Soon they will put you into trouble. Don't ask me anything more." I told him: "Gentleman, I am unable to understand how this incomplete information will help me, but since you came with friendly intentions, thank you for coming. I do not wish to know anything more. I have complete faith in God, He will always protect me, and it is for me needless to make any attempt or be careful." I heard nothing about this afterward. That this stranger and well-wisher did not imagine things, I had proof the same night. An inspector and a few police officers came to pump out my connection with Konnagar. "Is your original home at Konnagar?" they asked. "Did you ever visit the place? When? And why? Has Barindra any properties there?" — and other questions. I answered these questions in order to get at the root of these. The attempt was not a success, but from the questions as well as the manner of the police inquiry it appeared that they had come by some information which they were trying to verify. I guessed just as in the Tai-Maharaj case there had been an attempt to prove Tilak as a hypocrite, liar, cheat and tyrant in which the Bombay Government had joined hands and wasted public money,— similarly there were people interested in putting me into trouble.

The whole of Sunday was passed in the lock-up. There was a staircase in front of my room. In the morning I found a few young lads coming down the stairs. Their faces were unfamiliar, but I guessed that they too had been arrested in the same case. Later I came to know that these were the lads from the Manicktola Gardens. A month after in the jail I came to know them. A little later I too was taken downstairs for a wash — since there was no arrangement for a bath, I went without it. For lunch I grabbed, with some effort, a few morsels of pulse and boiled rice; the effort proved too much and had to be given up. In the afternoon we had fried rice. For three days this was our diet. But I must also add that on Monday the sergeant, of himself, gave me tea and toast.

Later I came to learn that my lawyer had sought permission from the Commissioner to have my food sent from home, but to this, Mr. Halliday did not agree. I also heard that the

accused were forbidden to consult their lawyer or attorney. I don't know if this restriction is valid or not. It is true that though a lawyer's advice would have been of help to me, I didn't quite need it; it has however, harmed some others involved in the case. On Monday we were presented before the Commissioner. Abinash and Sailen were with me. We were taken in different batches. Thanks to our good deeds in a past incarnation we three had been arrested earlier, and, since we had already some experience of legal quibblings, all of us refused to make any declarations before the Commissioner. Next day we were taken to the court of the magistrate, Mr. Thornhill. It was then that I met for the first time Shrijit Kumar Krishna Datta, Mr. Manuel, and one of my relations. Mr. Manuel asked me, "According to the police a good deal of suspicious literature has been recovered from your house. Were these papers or letters really there?" "I can say without a shadow of doubt," I told him, "that there were no such things, it is quite impossible." Of course then I did not know of the "sweets letter" or of the "scribblings". I told my relative: "Tell the people at home not to fear or worry, my innocence will be fully vindicated." From that period I had a firm belief that it would be so. In the beginning, during solitary imprisonment, the mind was a little uneasy. But after three days of prayer and meditation an unshakable peace and faith again overwhelmed the being.

From Mr. Thornhill's court we were taken in a carriage to Alipore. The group included Nirapada, Dindayal, Hemchandra Das, and others. Of these I knew Hemchandra Das; once I put up at his place in Midnapore. Who could have known then that I would meet him like this, as a prisoner on the way to the jail? We were detained for a little while at the Alipore magistrate's court, but we were not presented before the magistrate; they went in only to get an order signed. We again got into the carriage, when a gentleman came near me and said, "I have heard that they are planning solitary confinement for you and orders are being passed to that effect. Probably they will not allow anyone to see or meet you. If you wish to convey any information to your people, I shall do that." I thanked him, but since what I wished to convey I had already done through my relative, I did not tell him anything more. I am mentioning this fact as an example of my countrymen's sympathy and unsought kindness towards me. Thereafter from the court we went to the jail, and were surrendered to its officers. Before entering the jail precincts we were given a bath, put into prison uniform, while our clothes, shirts, *dhotis* and *kurtas* were taken away for laundry. The bath, after four days, was a heavenly bliss. After that they took us to our respective cells. I went into mine and the doors were closed as soon as I got in. My prison life at Alipore began on May 5. Next year, on May 6, I was released.

My solitary cell was nine feet long and five or six feet in width; it had no windows, in front stood strong iron bars; this cage was my appointed abode. Outside was a small courtyard, with stony grounds, a high brick wall with a small wooden door. On top of that door, at eye level, there was a small hole or opening. After the door had been bolted the sentry, from time to time, peeped through it to find out what the convict was doing. But my courtyard door remained open for most of the time. There were six contiguous rooms like that; in prison parlance these were known as the 'six decrees'. 'Decrees' stood for rooms for special punishment — those who are condemned to solitary imprisonment by the orders of either the judge or the jail superintendent have to stay in these mini-caves. Even in such solitary confinement there is the rule of caste or hierarchy. Those who are heavily punished have their courtyard doors permanently closed; deprived of contacts with the rest of the human world their only point of relation with the outside world is restricted to the vigilant eyes of the sentry and the fellow-convict who brings his food twice a day. Since Hemchandra Das was looked upon as being a greater terror for the criminal investigation department than I, he had been given this strict regimen. But in the solitary cell too there are refinements — handcuffs and iron rings round one's hand and foot. This highest punishment is meted out not only for disturbing the peace of the prison or playing rough

but also if one is found frequently slack in prison labour. To harass those convicted in cases of solitary confinement is against the spirit of law, but the Swadeshi or *Bande Mataram* convicts were beyond the pale and according as the police desired benign arrangements were made for these.

Such was the place where we were lodged. As for fittings our generous authorities had left nothing to be desired so far as our hospitable reception was concerned. One plate and bowl used to adorn the courtyard. Properly washed and cleansed my self-sufficing plate and bowl shone like silver, it was the solace of my life. In its impeccable, glowing radiance in the 'heavenly kingdom', in that symbol of immaculate British imperialism, I used to enjoy the pure bliss of loyalty to the Crown. Unfortunately the plate too shared in the bliss, and if one pressed one's fingers a little hard on its surface it would start flying in a circle, like the whirling dervishes of Arabia. And then one had to use one hand for eating while the other held the plate in position. Else, while whirling, it would attempt to slip away with the incomparable grub provided by the prison authorities. But more dear and useful than the plate was the bowl. Among inert objects it was like the British civilian. Just as the civilian, *ipso facto*, is fit and able to undertake any administrative duty, be it as judge, magistrate, police, revenue officer, chairman of municipality, professor, preacher, whatever you ask him to do he can become at your merest bidding — just as for him to be an investigator, complainant, police magistrate, even at times to be the counsel for defence, all these roles hold a friendly concourse in the same hospitable body — my dear bowl was equally multi-purpose. The bowl was free from all caste restrictions, beyond discrimination: in the prison cell it helped in the act of ablution; later with the same bowl I gargled, bathed; a little later when I had to take my food, lentil soup or vegetable was poured into the same container; I drank water out of it and washed my mouth. Such an all-purpose priceless object can be had only in a British prison. Serving all my worldly needs the bowl became an aid in my spiritual discipline too. Where else could I find such an aid and preceptor to get rid of the sense of disgust? After the first spell of solitary imprisonment was over, when we were allowed to stay together, my civilian's rights were bifurcated, and the authorities arranged for another receptacle, for the privy. But for one month I acquired an unsought lesson in controlling my disgust. The entire procedure for defecation seems to have been oriented towards the art of self-control. Solitary imprisonment, it has been said, must be counted among a special form of punishment and its guiding principle the avoidance of human company and the open sky. To arrange this ablution in the open or outside would mean a violation of the principle, hence two baskets, with tar coating, would be kept in the room itself. The sweeper (*mehtar*) would clean it up in the mornings and afternoons. In case of intense agitation and heart-warming speeches from our side the cleaning would be done at other times too. But if one went to the privy at odd hours, as penance one had to put up with the noxious and fetid smell. In the second chapter of our solitary confinement there were some reforms in this respect, but British reforms keep the old principles intact while making minor changes in administration. Needless to say, because of all this arrangement in a small room, one had throughout to undergo considerable inconvenience, especially at meal times and during the night. Attached bathrooms are, I know, oftentimes a part of western culture, but to have in a small cell a bedroom, dining room and w.c. rolled into one — that is what is called too much of a good thing! We Indians are full of regrettable customs, it is painful for us to be so highly civilised.

Among household utilities there were also a small bucket, a tin water container and two prison blankets. The small bucket would be kept in the courtyard, where I used it to have my bath. In the beginning I did not suffer from water scarcity, though that happened later on. At first the convict in the neighbouring cowshed would supply water as and when I wanted it, hence during the bathing recess amidst the austerities of prison life I enjoyed every day a few moments of the householder's luxury and love of pleasure. The other convicts were not so fortunate: the same tub or pail did for the w.c., cleaning of utensils and bath. As

undertrial prisoners this extraordinary luxury was allowed to them; the convicts had to take their bath in a bowlful or two of water. According to the British the love of God and physical well-being are almost equal and rare virtues; whether the prison regulations were made in order to prove the point of such a proverb or to prevent the unwilling austerity of the convicts spoiled by excessive bathing facilities, it was not easy to decide. This liberality of the authorities was made light of by the convicts as 'crow bathing'. Men are by nature discontented.

The arrangements for drinking water were even better than the bathing facilities. It was then hot summer, in my little room the wind was almost forbidden to enter. But the fierce and blazing sunlight of May had free access to it. The entire room would burn like a hot oven. While being locked thus the only way to lessen one's irresistible thirst was the tepid water in the small tin enclosure. I would drink that water often, but this would not quench the thirst, rather there would be heavy sweating and soon after the thirst would be renewed. But one or two inmates had earthen pots placed in their courtyard, for which, remembering the austerities of a past incarnation, they would count themselves lucky. This compelled even the strongest believers in personal effort to admit the role of fate; some had cold water, some remained thirsty forever, it was as the stars decreed. But in their distribution of tins or water-pots, the authorities acted with complete impartiality. Whether I was pleased or not with such erratic arrangements the generous jail doctor found my water trouble unbearable. He made efforts to get an earthen pot for my use, but since the distribution was not in his hands he did not succeed for long: at last at his bidding the head sweeper managed to discover an earthen pot from somewhere. Before that in the course of my long battle with thirst I had achieved a thirst-free state.

In this blazing room two prison blankets served for my bed. There was no pillow, I would spread one of these as mattress and fold the other as a pillow, and I slept like that. When the heat became unbearable I would roll on the ground and enjoy it. Then did I know the joy of the cool touch of Mother Earth. But the floor's contact in the prison was not always pleasing, it prevented the coming of sleep and so I had to take recourse to the blanket. The days on which it rained were particularly delightful. But there was this difficulty that during rain and thunder, thanks to the *danse macabre* of the strong wind, full of dust, leaf and grass, a small-scale flood would take place inside my little room. After which there was no alternative but to rush to a corner with a wet blanket. Even after this game of nature was over, till the earth dried one had to seek refuge in reflection leaving aside all hope of sleep. The only dry areas were near the w.c., but one did not feel like placing the blankets near that area. But in spite of such difficulties on windy days a lot of air also blew in and since that took away the furnace-like heat of the room I welcomed the storm and the shower.

This description of the Alipore government hotel which I have given here, and will give still more later, is not for the purpose of advertising my own hardship; it is only to show what strange arrangements are made for undertrial prisoners in the civilised British Raj, what prolonged agony for the innocent. The causes of hardship that I have described were no doubt there, but since my faith in divine mercy was strong I had to suffer only for the first few days; thereafter — by what means I shall mention later — the mind had transcended these sufferings and grown incapable of feeling any hardship. That is why when I recollect my prison life instead of anger or sorrow I feel like laughing. When first of all I had to go into my cage dressed in strange prison uniform, and noticed the arrangements for our stay, this is what I felt. And I laughed within myself. Having studied the history of the English people and their recent doings I had already found out their strange and mysterious character. So I was not at all astonished or unhappy at their behaviour towards me. Normally this kind of behaviour towards us would be for them extremely illiberal and blameworthy. We all came from gentlemanly stock, many were scions of landlords, some were, in terms of their family, education, quality and character,

the equals of the highest classes in England. The charge on which we had been arrested, that too was not ordinary murder, theft or dacoity; it was an attempt at insurrection to liberate the country from foreign rulers or conspiracy towards armed conflict. The main cause of detention was suspicion on the part of the police, though even there in many instances the proof of guilt was wholly wanting. In such cases to be herded together like ordinary thieves and dacoits — and not even as thieves and dacoits — to be kept like animals in a cage, to be given food unfit for animals, to be made to endure water scarcity, thirst and hunger, sun, rain and cold, all these do not enhance the glory of the British race and its imperial officers. This is, however, a national defect of their character. The English are possessed of the qualities of the Kshatriya, but in dealing with enemies or opponents they are cent per cent businesslike. But, at the time, I was not annoyed at this. On the contrary, I had felt a little happy that no discrimination had been made between the common uneducated masses and myself; moreover, this arrangement added fuel to the flame of my adoration of the Mother (*matribhakti*). I took it as a marvellous means and favourable condition for learning yoga and rising above conflicts. I was one of the extremists, in whose view democracy and equality between the rich and the poor formed a chief ingredient of nationalism. I remembered that, thinking it our duty to turn the theory into practice, we had travelled together, on our way to Surat, in the same third class; in the camp the leaders instead of making separate arrangements would sleep in the same room along with the others. Rich, poor, Brahmins, businessmen, Shudra, Bengali, Maratha, Punjabi, Gujarati, we all stayed, slept, ate together in a wonderful feeling of brotherhood. We slept on the ground, ate the normal fare, made of rice-pulse curd: in every way it was superlatively Swadesi. The 'foreign-returned' from Bombay and Calcutta and the Brahmin-born Madrassi with his *tilak* had become one body. During my stay in the Alipore Jail I ate, lived, went through the same hardship and enjoyed the same 'privileges' with the other convicts, my fellow nationals, the peasants, iron-monger, potter, the *doms* and the *bagdis*, and I could learn the ways of the Lord who dwells in everybody; this socialism and unity, this nation-wide brotherhood put its stamp on my life's dedication (*jivan brata*). The day when, before the sacred altar of the World-Mother in the form of the Motherland, all the orders of the country will stand with proud heads as brothers and as of the same mind: thanks to the loving kindness of my fellow convicts and prisoners as well as the impartiality of the British administrators, during the imprisonment I could feel the coming of that happy day and many a time it brought such a delight and thrill. The other day I noticed that the *Indian Social Reformer*, from Poona, has ironically commented on one of my simple easy-to-understand statements by remarking: "We find an excess of Godwardness in the prison!" Alas for the pride and littleness of men, seeking after renown, of little learning, proud of their little virtues! The manifestation of God, should it not be in prison, in huts, ashrams, in the hearts of the poor, instead of in the temples of luxury of the rich or the bed of repose of pleasure-seeking selfish worldly folk? God does not look for learning, honour, leadership, popular acclaim, outward ease and sophistication. To the poor He reveals Himself in the form of the Compassionate Mother. He who sees the Lord in all men, in all nations, in his own land, in the miserable, the poor, the fallen and the sinner and offers his life in the service of the Lord, the Lord comes to such hearts. So it is that in a fallen nation ready to rise, in the solitary prison of the servant of the nation the nearness of God grows.

After the jailor had seen to the blankets and the plates and bowl and left, I began to watch, sitting on the blanket, the scene before me. This solitary confinement seemed to me much better than the lock-up at Lal Bazar. There the silence of the commodious hall, with opportunity to extend its huge body, seemed to deepen the silence. Here the walls of the room seemed to come closer, eager to embrace one, like the all-pervading Brahman. There one cannot even look at the sky through the high windows of the second storey room; it

becomes hard to imagine that there are in this world trees and plants, men, animals, birds and houses. Here, since the door to the courtyard remains open, by sitting near the bars one could see the open spaces and the movement of the prisoners. Alongside the courtyard wall stood a tree, its green foliage a sight for sore eyes. The sentry that used to parade before the six 'six decree' rooms, his face and footsteps often appeared dear like the welcome steps of a friend. The prisoners in the neighbouring cowshed would take the cows out in front of the room for grazing. Both cow and cowherd were daily and delightful sights. The solitary confinement at Alipore was a unique lesson in love. Before coming here even in society my affections were confined to a rather narrow circle, and the closed emotions would rarely include birds and animals. I remember a poem by Rabibabu in which is described, beautifully, a village boy's deep love for a buffalo. I did not at all understand it when I read it first, I had felt a note of exaggeration and artificiality in that description. Had I read that poem now, I would have seen it with other eyes. At Alipore I could feel how deep could be the love of man for all created things, how thrilled a man could be on seeing a cow, a bird, even an ant.

The first day in prison passed off peacefully. It was all so new that it was almost gay. Comparing it with the Lal Bazar lock-up I felt happy with my present circumstances, and since I had faith in God the loneliness did not weigh heavily on me. Even the strange spectacle of prison diet failed to disturb my attitude. Coarse rice, even that spiced with husk, pebbles, insects, hair, dirt and such other stuff — the tasteless lentil soup heavily watered, among vegetables and greens mixed with grass and leaves. I never knew before that food could be so tasteless and without any nutritive value. Looking at its melancholy black visage I was struck with fear, and after two mouthfuls with a respectful *salaam* I took leave of it. All prisoners receive the same diet, and once a course gets going it goes on forever. Then it was the Reign of Herbs. Days, fortnights and months pass by, but the same herbs (*shāḱ*), lentils and rice went on unchanged. What to speak of changing the menu, the preparation was not changed a jot or tittle, it was the same immutable, eternal from beginning to end, a stable, unique thing-in-itself. Within two evenings it was calculated to impress the prisoner with the fragility of this world of *maya*. But even here I was luckier than the rest, due to the doctor's kindness. He had arranged a supply of milk from the hospital, thanks to which I had been spared on certain days from the vision of *shāḱ*.

That night I went to bed early, but it was no part of the prison regulations to be allowed to enjoy undisturbed sleep, since this might encourage a love of luxury among the prisoners. Hence there is a rule that every time sentries are changed, the prisoner has to be noisily disturbed and till he responds to their cries there is no respite. Among those who were engaged in this kind of patrolling the 'six decree' cells there were a few who would be no doubt remiss in their duty in this respect — among the police there was as a rule more of kindness and sympathy than strict sense of responsibility — this was especially so with the Hindustani policemen. Some of course remained obstinate. Waking us up at odd hours they would inquire about our well-being thus: "How do you do, Sir?" This untimely humour was not always pleasant or welcome, but I could see that those who were behaving like this were but carrying out orders. For a few days in spite of the annoyance I put up with this. In the end to preserve my sleep I had to scold them. After repeating this process for a few times I noticed that this custom of seeking news about my well-being stopped of itself.

Next morning at four-fifteen the prison bell rang — this was the first bell to wake up the prisoners. There is a bell again after some time, when the prisoners have to come out in file; after washing they have to swallow the prison gruel (*lufsi*) before starting the day's work. Knowing that it was impossible to sleep with the bells ringing every now and then, I also got up. The bars were removed at five, and after washing I sat inside the room once again. A little later *lufsi* was served at my doorstep; that day I did not take it but had only a vision of what it looked like. It was after a few days that I had the first taste of the 'great dish'. *Lufsi*, boiled rice, along with water, is the prisoner's little breakfast. A trinity, it takes three forms. On the first day it was *lufsi* in its Wisdom aspect, unmixed original element, pure, white,

Shiva. On the second, it was the Hiranyagarbha aspect, boiled along with lentils, called *khichuri*, yellowish, a medley. On the third day *lufsi* appeared in its aspect of Virat, a little mixed with jaggery, grey, slightly more fit for human consumption. I had thought the Wisdom and the Hiranyagarbha aspects to be beyond the capacity of average humanity and therefore made no efforts in that direction, but once in a while I forced some of the Virat stuff within my system and marvelled, in delightful muse, about the many-splendoured virtues of British rule and the high level of western humanitarianism. It should be added that *lufsi* was the only nutritious fare for the Bengali prisoners; the rest was without any food value. But what of that? It had a taste, and one could eat this only out of sheer hunger; even then, one had to force and argue with oneself to be able to consume the stuff.

That day I took my bath at half past eleven. For the first four or five days I had to keep wearing the clothes in which I had come from home. At the time of bathing the old prisoner-warder from the cowshed, who had been appointed to look after me, managed to procure a piece of coarse cloth, a yard-and-a-half long, and until my only clothes were dry I had to keep wearing this. I did not have to wash my clothes or dishes: a prisoner in the cowshed would do that for me. Lunch was at eleven. To avoid the neighbourhood of the 'basket', and during the summer heat, I would often eat in the courtyard. The sentries did not object to this. The evening meal would be between five and five-thirty. From then on the door was not permitted to be opened. At seven rang the evening bell. The chief supervisor gathered the prisoner-warders together and loudly called out the names of the inmates, after which they would return to their respective posts. The tired prisoner then takes the refuge of sleep and in that has his only pleasure. It is the time when the weak of heart weeps over his misfortune or in anticipation of the hardships of prison life. And the lover of God feels the nearness of his deity, and has the joy of his prayer or meditation in the silent night. Then to these three thousand creatures who came from God, victims of a miserable social system, that huge instrument of torture, the Alipore Jail, is lost in a vast silence.