Sites of Provocation and Coalescence: jails as spaces of rebellion in 1857-8

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Introduction
After mutiny erupted in the cantonment of Meerut on 9 May 1857, provoked by the fettering and imprisonment of a group of sowars and sepoys who had refused to use a new issue of cartridges allegedly greased with animal fat, one of the first acts of the rebels was the breaking open of the town’s two prisons. This fanned the flames of a pattern of revolt that was repeated over and again during the military and civil disturbances that gripped north India during 1857-8. Mutineers and rebels attacked 41 prisons, mainly in the North-West Provinces and western Bihar, and released just over 23,000 prisoners, most of whom subsequently slipped out of the grasp of the colonial state. This paper’s argument is that the 1857 rebellion was a decisive moment in the history of Indian imprisonment, for it consolidated the colonial jail as a crucial site of provocation and coalescence concerning British interventions into cultural affairs. As we will see, mutineer-rebels targeted jails during the revolt not only for practical purposes such as the acquisition of labour and supplies, but also because they saw them as one of the principal instruments of colonial rule and the multiple cultural and religious transgressions that implied.

Jails were colonial spaces in which Indian bodies were confined, controlled, and disciplined in unprecedented ways. Penal practices relating to confinement often transgressed Indian social norms, particularly with regard to religion and caste. Thus jails both embodied and symbolized the broader social fears about colonial interference in religious affairs and forced conversion to Christianity that were a feature of 1857. And yet, despite its centrality to contemporary Indian accounts of the rebellion, the relationship between confinement and revolt has remained largely unexplored. It is now well established that prisons were sites in which essential colonial social categories were reflected, institutionalized, and embedded. The paper will suggest further that during the unravelling and reconstitution of an array of apparently culturally complex practices, fears about the ritual transgressions invoked through incarceration leaked out of the jail walls and fused with ‘respectable’ community concerns about broader changes in their social, economic, and cultural lives. The colonial prison was, therefore, inextricably intertwined with the events of
1857-8. Rebellion also produced a revised agenda in the short term with regard to incarceration and changes in the longer term to the process of overseas transportation. The revolt of 1857–8 thus marked an important moment in the colonial history of incarceration both as a mode of control and as a social institution.

Materiality, Language and Symbolism through Jail-Breaking

Including Meerut, 41 jails across north India were broken open during 1857-8. In the North-West Provinces, rebels broke open 27 of the province’s 40 jails: Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Bulandshahr, Aligarh, Bijnor, Moradabad, Bareilly, Budaun, Shahjehanpur, Murta, Agra, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah, Fatehpur, Kanpur, Fatehpur, Allahabad, Banda, Hamirpur, Azimgurh, Gorakhpur, Jaunpur, Jalaun, Jhansi, Lalitpur, and Damoh. They also opened a number of jails in Bengal: Behar (in Gaya), Shahabad (Arrah), Chittagong, Hazaribagh, Lohardaga, Puruliya (in Manbhum), and Singbhum (Chaibasa). In the Panjab, the affected jails were Delhi, Gurgaon, Hissar, Rohtak, Sirsa, Ludhiana, and Sialkot. In total, just over 23,000 prisoners escaped from jail, the overwhelming majority from the North-West Provinces. Known losses from the destruction and plunder of buildings, stores, and intramural manufactures in the North-West Provinces alone amounted to a massive 220,350 rupees (£23,595).³

As in Meerut, it was usually mutinous sowars or sepoys who attacked the jails.⁴ Indeed, in an articulation of the extent to which news spread between the districts and jails during the revolt, the arrival of mutineers in towns and cities often heralded prison unrest.⁵ Jail superintendents tried with increasing desperation to quell prisoners’ growing rebellion. One tactic was confinement in solitary cells for inmates who spoke openly about the revolt.⁶ Another was the release of those imprisoned for minor offences only.⁷

After jails were broken open, frequently prisoners joined mutineers and rebels in stripping them of everything of value. They took wood, iron bars, doors, locks, and windows, together with intramural manufactures, tools, and stores. Jail buildings and contents were of enormous value to poverty-stricken inmates, as well as a good source of rebel supplies. In a symbolic subversion of the disciplinary regime, mutineer-rebels even transformed fetters taken from Gorakhpur jail into weapons.⁸ Many escaped prisoners went on to join the revolt outside the jails. In Kanpur rebels and prisoners together robbed the treasury.⁹ In Hazaribagh they looted the bazaar.¹⁰ Rebels and prisoners also attacked government institutions and European property, acts that went
beyond those provoked by the material needs of revolt or the opportunities disorder presented for personal gain more generally. As is well established, such destruction was an important expression of hostility to Company rule and its Indian associates. Rebels destroyed all the records of the inspector-general of prisons in the North-West Provinces. In Kanpur they set European residences on fire. In Puruliya, Arrah, and Lohardaga they plundered and destroyed government offices and official records. What marked escaped prisoners out as different from ordinary rebels was their potential appeal as popular symbols of the possibility of a more general freedom from the colonial yoke. They played out that role with what Pankaj Rag has described as the ‘glee, vitality and … sense of legitimacy’ that characterized subaltern rebellion more broadly.

In one of the first mutiny histories, Charles Ball described the scene in Meerut using what Ranajit Guha has famously described as ‘the prose of counter-insurgency’, a linguistic representation that masked the political motivation for revolt. When the liberated sepoys were taken back to the lines, he wrote, they were followed ‘by a tumultuous rabble from the gaol, yelling and shouting, and vociferating savage denunciations of vengeance upon all Europeans.’ He went on: ‘The prisoners and rabble of the town continued their ravages almost without check.’ Derivative nineteenth-century accounts followed the same linguistic pattern, as in T.R.E. Rice’s later 1885 account. He wrote: ‘The convicts, let loose from the gaols, and fraternising with the native police and the increasing swarm of budmashes, joined in the bloody work. Gangs of these marauders, armed with swords and clubs, roamed about the station, hurled showers of bricks upon every stray European who crossed their path, burst into peaceful dwellings, murdered the inmates, and poured forth again laden with plunder.’ Contemporary officials described ‘marauding’ liberated prisoners and ‘bad characters’ in the same way. Typically, nineteenth-century British accounts stressed the unity forged between sepoys, rebels, and escaped prisoners.

Mark Thornhill, magistrate of Mathura (Mutra), produced the most famous contemporary British narrative account of jail-breaking, some thirty years later describing his encounter with several groups of escaped prisoners from neighbouring Agra. In rather fanciful prose, he claimed that the sound of their clanking fetters both heralded their arrival and portended British disaster. ‘They made no attempt to molest us,’ he recalled, ‘they did not appear to see us; they neither turned their heads nor quickened their pace. They moved on with the same slow, silent steps and vanished in
the darkness … at each step their chains rattled.’ For Thornhill, the escaped prisoners were a ghostly apparition like ‘phantoms from another world’. Alex Padamsee has interpreted these ‘uncanny figures’ as a literary metaphor for British dispossession in the revolt. But there were religious connotations in play too, which took on particular significance in the context of 1857-8. Indeed, Thornhill wrote that as fatigue washed over him he thought of himself as having gone to hell, with the escaped prisoners the ‘condemned souls’ of ‘the infernal regions’.

In contrast to the accounts of Ball and Rice, Thornhill offered a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between sepoys, rebels, and escaped prisoners, suggesting that far from constituting a united force violent disorder broke out between them over the sharing out of looted treasury money. Many were killed, wounded or badly burnt. This renders more complex the way in which we perceive the relationship between mutineers and rebels who were sometimes in competition rather than in collusion, and brings us to a further dimension to the opening of jails that challenges the notion that there was always natural sympathy or unity between them. Prisoners, especially ordinary labourers, were a useful source of labour for sepoys and rebels, and in this sense jail-breaks were driven by practical needs. According to the *Bengal Hurkaru*, some of the Hazaribagh prisoners were made to carry looted chattels from the treasury for the rebels on their march to Chota Nagpur. This also happened in Barackpur. In Chittagong, prisoners were released especially for the purpose of carrying mutinous sepoys’ loads. Inspector-General of Prisons F.J. Mouat described later how the sepoys of the treasury guard had mutinied and plundered their charge. They then broke open the jail gate with muskets and bayonets, and demanded the keys from the daroga (jailer). The jemadar (overseer of the guard) and burkundazes (guards) were ordered by threat to bring out the prisoners, while the sepoys guarded the jail and nearby roads in order to prevent them from escaping. They then loaded the prisoners with money from the government treasury together with goods taken from the jail. These included bedding and blankets, tools, cloth, clothing, and jewellery. The judge of Tripura believed that the sepoys had made a prior arrangement with the prisoners, with the latter agreeing to act as guides in exchange for their release. Otherwise, he wrote, the sepoys would not have been able to find their way through uncharted hill country. However, many prisoners escaped from the party because the rebels gave them inadequate rations, leaving them ‘half starved’. In a couple of cases, sepoys even bayoneted prisoners for lingering with their loads. A number of prisoners
surrendered voluntarily to the British, so distancing themselves from the sepoys’ actions. The district judge took them to the jail and in a bid to deter others from following their example made them tell the remaining prisoners what had happened.\textsuperscript{26} In Allahabad too sepoys used prisoners to push wheelbarrows full of loot. The \textit{Bengal Hurkaru} reported that the sepoys allowed prisoners and others to divide anything they did not want amongst themselves, though ‘more powerful parties’ later robbed them.\textsuperscript{27}

Escaped prisoners were important sources of information about the progress of the rebellion,\textsuperscript{28} and their arrival in the districts even heralded its spread. Indeed, they were involved in the transmission of the rumours that assumed such a central place in the revolt.\textsuperscript{29} The conduit of information was all the more pronounced because long-term prisoners were often imprisoned in jails some distance from their districts, and after their release they made for home. Because so many Allahabad prisoners were from neighbouring districts, once they escaped they became an important source of intelligence. When they arrived back home, they were a sort of signal to revolt, as Tapti Roy shows, for instance, in the villages around Banda.\textsuperscript{30} Local rebellion was sparked off when prisoners carried news suggesting that the British were vulnerable. Escaped prisoners from Hazaribagh spread rumours about the imminent end of British rule. British spies in the villages in Sambalpur stated that these rumours were widely believed, and so villagers aided them.\textsuperscript{31} Escaped prisoners from Moradabad also told stories of a general massacre of government officials at the time of the jail-break.\textsuperscript{32} The British partly ascribed revolt in the Panjab to the widespread belief, spread by liberated prisoners from Agra, that Company rule had come to an end. The secretary to the chief commissioner wrote: ‘These men told their kindred of our emptied treasuries and our vacant gaols; our deserted cantonments and our slaughtered countrymen.’\textsuperscript{33} Or, as another British official put it, the prisoners carried news of ‘the Englishman’s disgrace’.\textsuperscript{34}

Beyond the desire to create disorder, acquire property, release sepoys and men of rank, or harness labour to assist the rebel caravan, there was a further dimension to jail-breaking. This related to popular feeling about the prison, for jails were places in which cultural interference was pronounced and around which resistance to the Company regime coalesced. Historians have explained the 1857-8 uprising at least in part as a local response to British infringements against ‘native tradition’, more particularly caste and religion. Nineteenth-century writer J.W. Kaye wrote that \textit{Brahmin pandits} waited for an appropriate moment to convince the general
population of a government plot to defile the entire Hindu community. That moment came with the introduction of the ritually intrusive practice of common messing in prisons in the 1840s for, as he put it, prisoners’ ‘bodies and souls were in the immediate keeping of the State’. Jail inmates and the inhabitants of the towns came to believe that because the government had made no provision for the appointment of Brahmin cooks, it intended to destroy prisoners’ caste and to convert them forcibly to Christianity. This was, he said, the beginning of a belief in a more widespread assault on Indian religions that continued in 1855 with the removal of prisoners’ lotas (brass drinking vessels that could be purified ritually), and culminated in the controversy over the use of greased cartridges in the army.  

With the introduction of common messing from the 1840s, jails spurred wider social protests in several north Indian towns and cities. Indian communities, including sepoys, sympathized with prison populations, notably kin of ‘respectable’ status. Fears about the potentially wider significance of jail messing can be viewed through the lens of the rumours that began to circulate around the towns during riots. Whispers in the streets and bazaars propagated the belief that common messing was the beginning of new cultural arrangements in which hundreds of children would be kidnapped and sacrificed, circumcision would be abolished, and all people made to eat together and forced to become Christians.

The Bhojpuri speaking areas of Bihar were traditional recruiting grounds for the Bengal army and many prisoners had community connections to sepoys. Moreover, by the 1840s there were important parallels between military and penal discipline with regard to the lodging, mustering, superintendence, and punishment of soldiers and prisoners. Sepoys apparently believed that it was a matter of time before they too were forced into mealtime messes and converted forcibly to Christianity. A letter written by sepoys to a group of Shahabad prison rebels during the 1840s is strongly suggestive of military solidarity with high-caste prisoners. ‘[T]he day on which the English shall attempt to destroy our religion’, they wrote, ‘every Regiment will revolt.’ The letter ended with a show of support from ‘Brahmins’ and ‘Rajpoots’. In a vehement critique of colonial policy on messing in jails, in 1846 the Calcutta Review claimed that even the most educated Indians were at a total loss to understand the reasoning behind the measure. The Review lamented: ‘[A]re we to run the risk of corrupting the fidelity of our Native Army – are we to cause ourselves to be looked upon as a set of tyrants – as the poor man’s persecutor?’ ‘The Messing
system,’ it went on, ‘is a perpetual blister, an irritating ulcer, which time will not heal, nor years serve to assuage.’ These were to be strangely prophetic words.

There were further jail riots in Bihar in 1855 after prisoners’ lotas were removed for ‘disciplinary’ reasons. There were outbreaks in two districts, Arrah and Tirhut (Muzzaffarpur). Just as they had supported prisoners during the messing riots of the 1840s, townspeople came out in sympathy against the lota order. In Muzzaffarpur, thousands of opium raiyats (cultivators) in town for the weighing season arrived at the jail bearing lathis (sticks) and pieces of wood. If the district magistrate is to be believed, unrest was fanned by ‘rich natives’ and ‘mulahs’ who feared forcible conversion to Christianity. Rioting became enmeshed in former unrest about common messing. The leader of the prisoners in Muzzaffarpur jail sought reassurance from the magistrate that low-caste prisoners would be kept out of his cooking place. District Magistrate J.B. Drummond lamented that he could not understand the request as this was already the case, but it becomes comprehensible when it is seen in the context of the wider rumours about forced conversion by then circulating. In Arrah, the outbreak was so serious that the magistrate and the surgeon were forced out of the jail when the prisoners pelted them with tiles, earth, and bricks. They asked several influential local landowners, including Kuer Sing who later became an important leader of the 1857 revolt in Bihar, to plead with the prisoners on their behalf. Apparently, the prisoners shared a belief with the townspeople that they would all be made Christians. Rumours to this effect flew around the district. One army captain informed Magistrate Drummond that his munshi (clerk, translator) had even received a letter from his son in Bareilly claiming that the magistrate of that district had issued such an order.

During 1857 British officials recalled with some anxiety the ties forged between prisoners and disaffected communities after the introduction of common messing in the 1840s. Yet nineteenth-century British writers did not in general reflect Kaye’s representation of the significance of jail messing as a cause of the mutiny-rebellion. The impact of jail messing was more central to contemporary Indian accounts of events. In an important indication of the extent of cultural fusion and syncretic practice, Indians wrote that common messing and the religious threat it represented more generally affected both Hindus and Muslims. In his account of the revolt, transported rebel Fazl-i-Haq described the Company’s motives for propagating Christianity, writing that the British ‘laboured under the conviction that the
persistence of religious differences between the conqueror and the conquered, would prove to be a stumbling stone, in their way of the consolidation of the empire and would ultimately breed revolution. Letters written by rebel leaders in Patna two years before revolt erupted revealed specifically Muslim concerns about common messing, which they described as ‘regulations injurious to the Mahomedan religion’. Indeed, in 1845 when the magistrate of Saran decided to introduce common messing among Muslim prisoners first, believing that they would have no caste objections to it, he was sorely mistaken for the prisoners refused to comply. British loyalist Sayyid Ahmed Khan noted later on that all communities perceived common messing as a general signal that the British wished to do away with religion. The proclamation of Khan Bahadur Khan, a rebel leader in Rohilkhand, also described the British as ‘people who overthrow all religions’. ‘[T]hey resolved on compelling prisoners, with the forcible exercise of their authority, to eat their bread,’ he wrote. ‘Numbers died of starvation, but did not eat it; others ate it, and sacrificed their faith’. The cultural fate of prisoners became bound up with fears about Indian society more generally. Khan Bahadur Khan went on to repeat rumours about the general adulteration of flour, rice, and sugar current at the time: ‘[The British] now perceived that this expedient did not succeed well, and accordingly determined on having bones ground and mixed with flour and sugar, so that people might unsuspectingly eat them in this way. They had, moreover, bones and flesh broken small and mixed with rice, which they caused to be placed in the markets for sale’.

In February 1858 the commandant of the Bengal police battalion, Thomas Rattray, forwarded a pamphlet to Secretary to Government A.R. Young. It had been written by Shaik Hidayat Ali, an officer in the Sikh Police Battalion (otherwise known as Rattray’s Sikhs), on the subject of the Indian revolt. He requested that if Rattray found it of sufficient interest he should translate and publish it. A few words relative to the late Mutiny of the Bengal Army, and the Rebellion in the Bengal Presidency provides a fascinating insight into the perspective of an officer allied to the British. At least in part he put the mutiny-rebellion part down to public outrage at the treatment of prisoners in jail, though unlike his contemporaries he argued that Muslims were unaffected by common messing. Rattray’s translation of his officer’s communications with ‘influential people’ is worth quoting at length. He claimed that they had told him:
If any of our brothers commit any offence against the state, according to the nature of the offence and by the laws of the land they get punished; this is all very right and proper; and we have nothing to say against it, that law must be bad which by its infliction ruins our religion, - for instance, when any one is sentenced to imprisonment, immediately on his reaching the prison, his beard and moustache are cut; this to us is a great insult. In jail it is ordered that the prisoners should eat in messes, the Mahomedans by themselves and the Hindoos by themselves; this is no outrage to a Mahomedan, but it is a great one to the feelings and religion of a Hindoo. One Hindoo won’t eat from the hand of another unless they happen to be brothers or cousins … On account of these prison arrangements; it was the general opinion that the Government wished to do away with all caste. When any Hindoo is released from prison, he is always tabooed by his family and looked upon as having lost caste: on this account both the prisoner and his relative[s] become disaffected towards the Government. The above strictness was carried out in many jails, in consequence of which, disturbances broke out in the Gyah, Arrah, Benares and many other jails.

Hidayat Ali was not sympathetic to the rebels; his pamphlet was an attempt to understand the causes of the revolt in order to court favour with the British, for he ended with the offer of his services to government in England. Indeed, in a perspective springing from his elite status he went on to describe the ‘bigotry’ of the uneducated masses, who thought that if they wore European style clothing they would be converted into Christians: ‘[T]hey think anything new or anything they don’t understand must be meant in some way or other to affect their religion. From this foolishness on their part, all the late anarchy and ruin has come to pass.’

Unrest over common messing and the withdrawal of lotas continued in the months leading up to the outbreak of the 1857 revolt. Inspector-General of Prisons Mouat made two tours of the Bengal presidency, the first during 1855. With his arrival in and movement between so many jails, prisoners’ fears about the purpose of his visits and the potentially new forms of intervention that they might herald were surely rife, particularly as the tour coincided with a series of innovative disciplinary measures and the drawing up of new jail rules. In November 1855, for instance, Hughli prisoners petitioned against a series of measures, including the jailer’s destruction of old clothing, the withdrawal of pillows, restrictions in receiving visitors, and the removal of walls around the cooking sheds. A year later prisoners in Dhaka claimed that their ‘holy books’ were removed, and that they were no longer allowed fruits or tulsee (basil) with which to perform their puja (prayer). This meant that they were unable to satisfy ‘all the requirements of the pure Hindoo Religion’. Further, they were concerned about rumours of the imminent introduction of earthen vessels into the jail. At the end of 1856, there was an outbreak in Lakhnao jail in the
newly annexed district of Awadh. Though the prisoners were not subject to messing, their firewood ration was so inadequate that they were unable to cook their food. Ominously, the sepoy guard did nothing to prevent the escape of 150 prisoners.\textsuperscript{55}

As we have seen, Hidayat Ali’s pamphlet noted the ‘great insult’ prison regulations on shaving provoked. This was a reference to new rules put in place first in the North-West Provinces and then in Bengal. The government ordered that as soon as the appeal process was over, all male prisoners sentenced to imprisonment with labour would have their hair shaved and their beard trimmed every two weeks, unless it caused ‘personal disgrace’. Muslims’ beards would be trimmed to the length of a closed fist only. It gave magistrates the discretion to exempt any prisoner from this rule where it might prove ‘offensive or degrading’. Sikhs would not be subject to the measure at all.\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless, the order caused uproar in many prisons and prisoners refused to submit to it on religious or other grounds. Some Dhaka prisoners, for instance, claimed that long hair prevented headaches.\textsuperscript{57} As during riots over common messing and the substitution of lotas, local communities became involved in the controversy. Muslims in Allahabad were said to be ‘exasperated’ by the order.\textsuperscript{58} In Bengal the Muslim Association of Calcutta contacted Mouat to express its concerns. His response was that they had misinterpreted rules that ordered the \textit{trimming} rather than the \textit{shaving} of beards. Matters were not helped when in one jail – Munger - officials mistranslated the order to the shaving of all beards to the length of one inch, which had not been the government’s intention at all.\textsuperscript{59} While he claimed to be sympathetic to prisoners’ religious practices, Mouat saw objections to the measure as ‘prejudices which I know to be unconnected with religion … in bar of the rigid discipline which I am resolved to maintain.’\textsuperscript{60} Prisoners in two of the Patna division jails much affected by earlier unrest, Arrah and Gaya, were strongly disaffected by the circular, and as during the \textit{lota} riots a couple of years previously seemed to command support from outside.\textsuperscript{61} At the beginning of 1857 prisoners in Arrah made an organized attempt to prevent their heads being shaved, though they were eventually made to submit to the disciplinary procedure.\textsuperscript{62}

The same cultural uneasiness gripped prisons in the North-West Provinces during the same period. In one ominous incident just a few days before the Meerut sepoys mutinied, a jail \textit{burkundaze} named Brindabun Tewaree was arrested in the Midnapur lines trying to incite the sepoys to break open the jail. Three sepoys and a \textit{havildar} (sergeant) said that the man had told them that the district magistrate and
other officers had been to the jail, fed the Hindu and Muslim prisoners with beef and pork, flogged them, and ‘filled their mouths with forbidden food.’ Magistrate E.H. Lushington quickly denied the allegation. Rather he explained that he had ordered Brahmins to cook and distribute food to prisoners in their wards rather than the jail yard. Forty-seven prisoners refused to eat, and because of their dogged resistance he flogged ‘three or four’, including two undertrial sepoys. The prisoners all agreed to take their meals and so he left the jail. The district magistrate found Brindabun Tewaree guilty of inciting sedition and mutiny, and he was hanged on 8 June. The magistrate claimed that he had been the leader of several hundred ‘desperate adherents’ who planned to break open the prison. The government warned Lushington to be cautious in any changes to jail management that might be misinterpreted and cause alarm. As during earlier unrest, the incident reveals both the centrality of common messing to public imaginings of the jails, especially the sympathy prisoners of rank aroused, as also the speed with which rumours about changes to the disciplinary regime spread outside their walls.

Conclusion
During the first half of the nineteenth century, north Indian jails were spaces of colonial intervention into cultural practices relating to religion and caste, and of prisoner resistance against socially and often ritually intrusive measures. Significantly, in some places the concerns of ‘respectable’ communities outside the jail, including sepoys, became fused with those of ‘respectable’ prisoners within. This spilled over into the revolt. However, solidarity between rebels and prisoners was always potentially fragile, and it would be a mistake to assume that underlying the rebellion were widely shared grievances about innovations in jail discipline, however important they were to some communities in some places. Free communities and sepoys were concerned largely with the fate of imprisoned kin, rather than the entire jail community. Prisons were sites of cultural provocation and of rebel coalescence, not because differing communities had identical interests and concerns but because prison struggles were also metaphors for broader social fears about the compromising of the faithful. This illuminates further north Indian attitudes to colonial cultures of confinement, and in replicating both solidarity and division between communities it also reveals the potentially socially fragile basis of revolt.
The penal crisis of the 1857-8 uprising informed the aftermath of revolt also, for dozens of jails were badly damaged or destroyed and thousands of prisoners were on the run. There was only limited accommodation for recaptured prisoners, mutineers and rebels. British fears about the further spread of rebellion in territories associated with India led to the temporary abandonment of the transportation of convicts to existing penal settlements in the Straits Settlements (Pinang, Melaka, Singapore) and Burma (Arakan, Tenasserim Provinces). Many prisons were so overcrowded that the government introduced a policy of transferring prisoners to secure jails, but this had the unintended effects of both spreading instability into 1858, and of elevating already high prison mortality rates. Despite the serious impact of the mutiny-rebellion on north Indian jails, financial constraints prevented the government from sanctioning any radical innovations in jail construction. However, at least for a few years post-1858 it was anxious to avoid accusations that it was interfering in caste or religious practices, and so entered into a greater dialogue with prisoners about changes to the jail regime. Also, extant yet still vague proposals to settle the as yet unsuccessfully colonized Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal took shape, and in 1858 the British established a penal colony for the reception of mutineer-rebel convicts at the new site of Port Blair. This new British settlement was to be the most enduring spatial legacy of the penal crisis of revolt.

1 This paper is a summary of some of the themes explored in The Indian Uprising of 1857-8: prisons, prisoners and rebellion (Anthem, 2007).
5 OIOC P.234.35 (NWPJC 1 - 15 Mar. 1858): Thornhill to E.C. Bayley, Officiating Deputy Secretary to Government North-West Provinces, 4 Mar. 1858.
9 “Translation of the diary of the Nunna Nawab, a native gentleman residing in Cawnpore, containing an account of the occurrences there from June 5 to July 2 1857”, cited in PP 1857-58 (2363): Papers relative to mutinies in East Indies: Appendix B.
11 OIOC P.235.7 (NWPJP 1 – 18 Oct. 1859): Thornhill to Couper, 8 July 1859.
15 Charles Ball, A History of the Indian Mutiny: giving a detailed account of the Sepoy insurrection in India; and a concise history of the great military events which have tended to consolidate British empire in Hindostan, vol I, London, London Printing and Publishing Co., 1858, 57, 60.
21 Ibid., 86.
22 Bengal Hurkaru, 8 Sept. 1857.
24 OIOC P.146.5 (BJC 3 – 10 Dec. 1857): Magistrate Chittagong to Young, 19 Nov. 1857; OIOC P.146.7 (BJC 24 Dec. 1857): Mouat to C.J. Buckland, Junior Secretary to Government Bengal, 18 Dec. 1857, enc. list of prisoners released and captured with the value of the property carried off.
27 Bengal Hurkaru, 18 Sept. 1857.
29 On the significance of rumours see the classic account in Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983, 251-68.
31 ‘Translation of a statement made in Ooryah before the Tehseeldar of Boad on September 22 1857, by Ram Mahanty, and two other persons’, cited in PP 1857-58 (2363): Papers relative to mutinies in East Indies: Appendix B.
34 Charles Raikes, Notes on the Revolt in the North-Western Provinces of India, London, Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1858, 149.
63 E.H. Lushington, Officiating Magistrate Midnapur, to Beadon, 4, 8 June 1857; Beadon to Lushington, 6 June 1857; Young to Lushington, 11 June 1857, cited in PP 1857-58 (2302): Papers relative to mutinies in East Indies: Appendix A.