

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Industrious, truthful, upright and manly: Reforming poor young men in the borstal schools of India in the 1920s and 1930s

Catriona Ellis 

Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

## Correspondence

Catriona Ellis, Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK.

Email: [catriona.ellis@strath.ac.uk](mailto:catriona.ellis@strath.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article analyses the expansion of the borstal system for young male offenders in late colonial India. Based on legislative debates and prison administration reports, it considers the ways in which young adults were defined and treated within the context of these penal institutions. It reveals how institutionalised care for young men was used to reinforce the power of middle class coercive networks; to define and produce particular forms of masculinity among the poor youth of India and to contribute to wider, emerging discourses about the distinctive position of adolescents in Indian society.

In 1925 Lieut-Col JP Cameron, Inspector-General of Prisons in Madras, reported that during the previous year: ‘the Borstal system, which aims at the reformation and reclamation of the young offender, made good headway ... every effort was made to instil the right spirit into the boys, to improve their physique, to teach them to be truthful, upright, and manly, and to inculcate a spirit of industry and a liking for congenial labour’.<sup>1</sup> As this quotation suggests, the borstal schools were intended by the governing authorities as youth detention centres with the aim of reforming young male offenders and preventing them from pursuing a life of crime. This paper considers the ways in which young adults were defined and treated within the context of these penal institutions in late colonial India, and how the functioning of power within borstal schools contributed to wider, emerging discourses about the distinctive position of adolescents in Indian society at a time when the boundaries between adulthood and childhood were particularly contested and politically sensitive. It offers an insight into the use of progressive penology as a means of regulating the behaviours of young men and into wider emergent debates in India about the nature, definition and treatment of adolescence as a conflicted space, not quite child, but not yet adult. The article also reveals how institutionalised care for young men deemed to be reformable was used to reinforce the power of middle-class coercive networks and to define and produce particular forms of masculinity among the poor youth of India, ideas which had resonance beyond the confines of the institutions themselves. At a time when the child marriage controversies of the 1920s meant that India received global attention over the defining of upper caste girlhood, an

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Indian elite used their discussions over the carceral care of young men engaged in petty crime to define different categories of population, including the poor, the masculine, the citizen and the youth.

Taking the Madras Presidency in the south of India as a case study, the paper analyses the perceived purpose of borstal schools set out in legislation and then the ways that this legislation was implemented at a number of borstal schools. In particular, it considers the debates surrounding the formulation and implementation of the Madras Borstal Schools Act of 1926, and then analyses how the ideas enshrined in it were implemented, particularly in the borstals at Tanjore/Thanjavur and Palamcottah/Palayamkottai which came under the direct jurisdiction of the Act. The additional evidence from Dharwad and Bankura, the first borstals to be established in the provinces of Bombay and Bengal respectively, shows that the Madras case was representative of British India more generally. Implementation was described in annual jails administration reports, colonial documents intended to showcase the reformatory schemes of elite adults, but without reference to the opinions or experiences of the young men held in these institutions.

This paper sits at the intersection of three distinct fields of historical inquiry, building on a rich historiography of colonial incarceration as a means regulating whole populations; of middle-class masculinity as a form of nationalist self-identity and of age as a category of analysis. While carceral regimes were central to the racialised colonial governmentalities of the nineteenth century and the maintenance of British power, this paper shows that the emphasis on progressive penology, and a belief that the individual was reformable, was intimately linked to the increased devolution of power to Indians under the 1919 Government of India Act.<sup>2</sup> More importantly for this special issue, this research reveals that borstal schools were a particularly critical site where new ideas about lower-class masculinity were constructed. Ideas about indigenous masculinity were not only formed in the schools, consumer habits, reading material and sporting prowess of the middle-class nationalist elite, determined to prove they were not effeminate as is established in the existing literature.<sup>3</sup> Rather, a different form of lower-class masculinity, defined by hard work, cleanliness and honesty, was constructed by middle-class reformers as they grappled with the theoretical and practical implications of carceral care for young men. And while the age of consent controversies of the late 1920s and bitter public debates over the legal, biological and cultural boundaries of childhood and child sexuality in upper caste marriage practices have dominated both contemporary and historiographical analysis of childhood and adolescence, seen for example in the works of Ishita Pande and Ashwini Tambe, this paper shows that policy makers, social reformers and officials concerned with the prevention of repeat offending and institutional care for young offenders also played a significant role in establishing the relevance of adolescence as an age category to South Asian society more generally.<sup>4</sup> Central to these arguments is the wider context of an increasingly articulate and self-confident nationalist movement, the growing confidence that India would ultimately be self-governing and the belief that these young men were therefore future citizens.

## UNDERSTANDING THE LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

The Madras Borstal Schools Act of 1926 set the tone for youth justice in India throughout the twentieth century, emphasising that young men who had committed crimes had the capacity to change when under good management. It was followed by similar acts in Punjab (1926), Bengal (1928) and Bombay (1929). Although part of a wider network of carceral care, borstal schools were intended to be reformatory and not penal establishments, institutions where rational scientific methodologies could be applied to the reclamation of young people who had committed petty crimes but were not irredeemably flawed. AJ Nicholas, Superintendent of the Tanjore borstal school, emphasised 'I firmly believe that a more rational treatment of the fallen will be productive of more good than any other method'.<sup>5</sup> This belief built on the all-India Reformatory Schools Act of 1897, which provided for the establishment of reformatory schools for the detention of juvenile offenders under the age of fifteen years, and then the Madras Children Act (MCA) of 1920 which set out a system of juvenile justice

based on the recognition that children were less responsible for crime than adults, and also had greater capacity for rehabilitation. The 1926 Act regularised the position of the borstal schools, also drawing on previous legislation in Britain, in particular the Prevention of Crime Act of 1908. Within this penal framework, the borstal school became 'a link in the chain of programs for the prevention of crime', a crucial bridge between rowdy and ungovernable, if misguided, boys and responsible manhood.<sup>6</sup>

That new legislation centred on more progressive penological ideas was passed in the 1920s is significant. The Madras Borstal Schools Act of 1926 was not merely a colonial imposition, a further institution within a wider carceral apparatus centred round the collection of colonial knowledge about the colonised people and intended to discipline subject peoples into particular ways of doing and thinking, being and acting.<sup>7</sup> Nor was it an uncomfortable compromise between British social policy and local social and cultural attitudes as in the case of colonial Kenya.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the Act was one manifestation of the local impact of the constitutional reforms under the Government of India Act of 1919. While the British government in Delhi retained overall control, authority for the non-important departments (such as justice, agriculture or education) was devolved to the provinces and governed by a legislative assembly elected on a limited franchise. The legislation was proposed to the Madras Legislative Assembly by Khan Bahadur Sir Mohammad Usman (1884–1960), the elected Home Minister for the Justice Party, a south Indian party comprised of non-Brahmin landowners and professionals who sought to challenge the hegemony of the Indian National Congress. The constitutional reforms meant that the Select Committee introducing and scrutinising the legislation was overwhelmingly composed of upper caste Indian men. Of the twenty-two members, only two were British, and the Advocate-General was himself a prominent Tamil lawyer. These elite Indians were keen to use legislation such as the Borstal Schools Act to contest colonial rule, not through highlighting difference but by demonstrating their modern credentials through its similarity to the British iteration and their commitment to science, education and modern governance.

The formation of new legislation was a creative process, not a reaction to Western ideas but a conversation in which Indian experts – men but increasingly also women – participated as equals in global discourses of child saving, for example, at the League of Nations. These men were keen to demonstrate their knowledge of progressive penology through a discussion of global standards in the International Prisons Conference and mention of the application of the social and psychological sciences to juvenile rehabilitation.<sup>9</sup> As Satadru Sen has so convincingly argued, signalling their own modernity gave Indian adults the opportunity to contest the infantilising rhetoric of late colonial rule.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, giving Indian children the same opportunities for reformation as British children both emphasised the universality of childhood as a life stage and also contested British stereotypes of Indian incorrigibility, the widespread British perception that Indian children would never fully outgrow their supposed backwardness because of their inability to change.<sup>11</sup> These ideas undercut British claims to racial or civilisational superiority, thereby undermining the intellectual basis of British rule in India. That said, Helen Johnston has emphasised how borstals, similar to other carceral institutions, were developed to control and regulate populations, not only of inmates but also of those on the outside who recognised that incarceration of themselves or their children was a potential threat.<sup>12</sup> That state power could be used by an educated, modern colonial elite, albeit one that subscribed to the cause of political and economic independence, rather than by the British themselves, does not undermine its institutional or discursive power.

## THE YOUNG: ADOLESCENCE AS A STAGE OF LIFE

One of the most controversial aspects of the Act was the attempt to define adolescence in terms of age. The MCA defined children as under fourteen years of age and young persons as aged fourteen to sixteen years, based on date of conviction. Under this Act, the older group could be sent to Senior Certified Schools, with the potential to stay longer to complete their training. By contrast, the borstal schools were designed for young men aged between sixteen and twenty-one years, largely on the basis

that they would still be sufficiently impressionable to be 'brought under some kind of reformatory influence'.<sup>13</sup> If convicted at the age of twenty-one years, they could remain in the borstal school for a further two years.<sup>14</sup> Young women, aged between twelve and seventeen years, were to be housed within women's prisons and were only mentioned in passing in the debates, a female from age twelve years was treated as legally an adult.<sup>15</sup> The age definition varied across India; for example, in Punjab, the age of majority was twenty-three years.<sup>16</sup> It was made clear too that this was a limited window of opportunity, and that after twenty-one years, the offender has 'reached a stage of manhood ... when the reformatory influence of a Borstal school will fall flat on him and the object with which an institution of this sort is run will not be gained'.<sup>17</sup> The Act can be read in the context of the growing fascination with numerical definitions in the 1920s, as boundaries of childhood became increasingly defined by numbers in line with international trends.<sup>18</sup> In Madras, the Elementary Education Act of 1920 set the boundaries for elementary education between five and twelve years of age, after which a child should become economically independent. The All-India Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 fixed the age of marriage for girls at fourteen years and boys at eighteen years. The incompatibility of these age boundaries was never referenced, even as new constructions of youth and maturity emerged and the age of criminal responsibility was set at the age of twenty-one years. Additionally, the widely recognised difficulty of magistrates and/or parents in determining precise age, given the lack of birth certificates or official records, was never mentioned by legislators or officials in the context of criminal responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Yet as the boundaries between childhood and adulthood became more rigid and more numerically defined in terms of both education and sexual maturity, the justice system increasingly favoured a new, liminal category – the youth or adolescent.

This idea of the 'adolescent' as not-quite child and not-quite adult and thus less criminally responsible and more amenable to reform was a relatively new one. The terms adolescent and adolescent offender were widely used in the debates about the borstal school to describe a recognisable stage between childhood and adulthood, a different category to the term 'juvenile offenders' used by the Indian Jails Committee, although the exact distinction between the categories was never stated explicitly. While the obsession with numbers suggests it was a biological category, the term 'adolescence' contributed to a broader cultural and social discourse around youth. Adolescence was regarded by legislators as a specific time in life when 'the increasing amount of freedom enjoyed, the gradual weakening of home restraints and the development of the sexual instinct combine to make this the most critical period of life, when the mind is specially susceptible to fresh impressions and when it is peculiarity important to prevent habits of immorality and crime from being formed'.<sup>20</sup> This was distinctly gendered, the inmates were referred to in the debates as 'young men of impressionable age'.<sup>21</sup> When amendments were debated in 1936, there was some recognition that there was a certain amount of arbitrariness in fixing the age, but 'the general impression is that the adolescent state really ceases in a young man at the age of 21' when adults become less amenable to 'reformatory influences' and in turn 'might prove a bad example and be a source of bad influence' on the other inmates.<sup>22</sup> The youth might be more amenable to change, but that meant that they were also more vulnerable to outside pressures and more likely to be led astray. Incarceration was also the result of a recognition by those managing the borstal schools that between ages sixteen and twenty-one years was the 'dangerous age', when 'the majority of habitual criminals are made'.<sup>23</sup>

This notion of what constituted a youth/boy or an adult/man was particularly tested in December 1925 when legislators debated whether an adolescent should be tried in an adult or a children's court.<sup>24</sup> The Madras Presidency was among the first regions in India to establish a system of juvenile courts, and there was widespread support by legislators that trials should be 'as far as practicable, by way of conference for the good of the child, instead of contest about and over the child'. However, while this viewpoint was widely accepted among the political elites for children, in theory at least, the adolescent was viewed as a different category. Though focused on the specifics of trials of adolescents, the debate which ensued was really about the age of criminal responsibility. The Home Minister argued that 'the offenders dealt with in this Bill are all grown up men' who had committed crimes, although the Opposition argued that if borstal was a 'school' then 'the offenders must be treated as children,

and considerations of age do not matter. We must try to treat them as children at school and keep from their minds all ideas about crime, jails and trials'. The public nature of the trial was also questioned by the Opposition, given that a child's right to a private trial before a mixed panel of judges was so central to the MCA. There was a recognition that 'adolescent offenders can be distinguished of course from children though they stand on a category very near that of children', but a lot of confusion about the legal and practical implications of this. This lack of clarity reflected broader confusion and ambiguity, because adolescence was not a formal legal category, and while young men remained under the jurisdiction of the Minors Act until the age of twenty-one years, they could finish formal education at the age of twelve years, could legally become fathers at sixteen (later eighteen) years but could remain in borstal school until the age of twenty-three years. While these ambiguities were not uncommon across the globe as political elites struggled to reconcile new ideas about adolescence with pre-existing legislative and social norms regarding marriage, education and work, they were particularly stark in India where the theoretical concepts of adolescence had much less popular resonance than in America, and even the educated middle classes remained staunch defenders of conservative religious and social values. Ultimately, the amendment fell and young adults were tried in adult courts, but this reveals the consistently mixed theorisation, the inability of legislators to think through the consequences of this new life stage and the instability of the boundary between adulthood and childhood.

The term adolescence as a distinctive life stage was becoming more popular across the globe by 1926. It was associated first with G. Stanley Hall of the American Psychological Association in 1904. Adolescence became seen as a time of physical and psychological change, a time of particular misbehaviour, indiscipline and independence, often associated in the Western press with hooliganism or rebellion, a precursor to the moral panics associated with youth culture in the post-Second World War era.<sup>25</sup> The idea of the 'maladjusted adolescent' became a significant colonial stereotype, helping to explain unrest among young people in Kenya and in India, when the powers of the Borstal Schools Act were used in 1931 to incarcerate youthful political dissidents, known locally as *satyagrahis*, seen to be particularly susceptible to political manipulation.<sup>26</sup> Slightly later, in 1934, S. Barman reflected on his 'first-hand experience of the Borstal system as worked in England' with the aim of making the same principles applicable in the Indian setting.<sup>27</sup> Barman devoted a whole chapter of his work to the 'problem of adolescence' or the 'perils of youth', showing the impact of the home and school environment, but also arguing that adolescence is a time of physical and emotional changes which means that 'the young person suffers from intense maddening restlessness'.<sup>28</sup> This is mirrored by mental conflict as the young person tries to negotiate between 'infantile desire and the demands of society', reconciling both the need for self-expression, excessive self-criticism and an 'exuberance of energy'. Negotiating this personal tension often leads to pressure, bad habits and even criminality, although with state intervention 'the individual can be reclaimed as a useful citizen'.<sup>29</sup> Barman wrote with an Indian audience in mind, and by the 1940s, these ideas were increasingly theorised by Indian academics such as Katayun Cama or Kumarappa, interested in social work.<sup>30</sup> However, it is significant that policy makers and civil society activists were engaging with these ideas much earlier, and that the contested boundaries of childhood and adulthood was formulated in conversations over the youthful indiscretions of the poor. While the activities of middle class and upper caste revolutionaries, such as Bhagat Singh and the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, caught the headlines during the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930–32, part of their opposition was that they were not treated with the rights of political prisoners, but were instead integrated into a system designed around the reformation of poor young men.<sup>31</sup>

## MIDDLE-CLASS ADOLESCENCE AND THE JOSHI COMMITTEE

The widespread agreement that the age of twenty-one years constituted an age of criminal responsibility for males sits alongside the debates on the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. We need to take into consideration that when the Borstal Schools Act was passed in 1926, the age of sexual

maturity – defined by the age of consent for sexual intercourse – was twelve years for girls and sixteen years for boys. As Ashwini Tambe and Ishita Pande have demonstrated, the campaign to change this age definition proved to be one of the most controversial topics in the late colonial period and revealed changing ideas about the nature of upper caste Indian girlhood.<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to ascertain public opinion, the Age of Consent or Joshi committee produced a report in 1929 based on evidence from across India. The evidence to this committee suggested a widespread fear of adolescent sexuality, ‘the precocious sexual instinct in our youth’, juxtaposed with fear for the physical consequences of sex and early childbearing on the immature female body.<sup>33</sup> A related recurring theme was the fear of immorality, of sex outside marriage if the age of marriage was raised, based on anxieties that young people were unable to understand fully the consequences of their actions: sex was ‘a natural instinct. It does not wait till the maturity of the mind and understanding is reached’.<sup>34</sup> While some fathers were concerned that early marriage would end a son’s educational career, there was no recognition by the respondents that sexual maturity, marriage, the end of education or the age of criminal responsibility should be decided with reference to each other, or any indication which was most significant in defining adulthood.

The Joshi evidence also showcased an increasing fear of ‘youths’ or ‘young people’ as a distinctive group in society. While the emergence of anxieties around girlhood was significant, ‘youths’ were generally assumed to be male. One correspondent worried about the lack of control experienced by ‘giddy youths’ or ‘free and fashionable youths’, for whom the lack of parental or educational discipline was leading to ‘an intolerable spirit of unmanageable, individualist, pleasure-seeking restlessness and revolutionary rowdyism’ which would ultimately lead to anarchy, insubordination and bloodshed.<sup>35</sup> This contributed to a public discourse where all adolescent boys were potentially immoral and potentially criminal, and required the care of responsible adults to divert their energies ‘into proper channels’.<sup>36</sup> Again the respondents demonstrated considerable awareness of American views, and a number of contributors, usually judges by profession, referred to the work of the American progressive social reformer Ben B. Lindsey who along with Wainwright Evans co-authored *The Revolt of Modern Youth* published in 1925. Lindsey’s work is credited with being central to emergent ideas about adolescence in America, especially the argument that while girls were sexually mature as teenagers, they lack the emotional and intellectual maturity to make informed choices.<sup>37</sup> Many of the respondents used this argument to contest the pro-imperialist polemic of Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1928) which suggested that teenage sex was a distinctively Indian phenomenon and that the degeneration of the Indian race as a result of this justified colonial rule.<sup>38</sup> That these well-read, professional men and women, from a range of political opinions, were engaging with the idea of adolescence or youth issues in the American context in their submissions to the Joshi Committee shows both the breadth of their knowledge and expertise, and their readiness to claim that youths were the same across the globe.<sup>39</sup> Inherent within this was a radical claim to global equality and shared humanity, which contested the racial hierarchies intrinsic to colonial rule.<sup>40</sup> Yet almost all the submissions to Joshi reflected the sexual boundaries and practices of Brahmins or upper caste girls who were constructed to represent all Indian girlhoods, despite the very particular social and cultural context of their lives. Late colonial India was thus left with a juxtaposition, in which girlhood was defined according to the traditions and boundaries of upper caste femininity and respectability, while youth was defined in the public sphere predominantly through the discussions over the role and position of low caste, poor, young men, within the borstal system.

## REFORMING YOUNG MEN AND THE PRODUCTION OF NEW MASCULINITIES

The intention of the borstal school was the reformation of character: ‘the aim being to find and develop the capacity for good in the lad rather than to flog away at the bad’.<sup>41</sup> This included the production of particular forms of reformed masculinity ‘strong, capable, and self-reliant young men fit in every

respect for social freedom, who came to us, many of them, derelicts and social outcasts'.<sup>42</sup> The objective was both curative and preventative, intended to turn young offenders from the path of crime into 'paths of honesty, integrity and industry'.<sup>43</sup> By 1935, there were two borstal schools in the Presidency, one at Tanjore and one at Palamcottah holding a total of 663 inmates (623: aged sixteen–twenty-one years, 36: twenty-one–twenty-three years, 4: twenty-three years+).<sup>44</sup> These proved to be a model for the rest of British India, with borstals gradually being established across the subcontinent, for example, in Bankura, Lahore and Dharwad. In Madras Presidency, the numbers rose steadily; in 1937, there were 835 inmates at the beginning of the year, 451 admitted during the course of the year, 437 discharged and 849 remaining at the end.<sup>45</sup> At the end of the year, 88 *per cent* were aged between sixteen and twenty-one years, and around 70 *per cent* had been sentenced to the recommended two years.<sup>46</sup>

The schools were managed initially by the Law (General) department until 1933, and then by the Home Department and each borstal school was managed by a superintendent, responsible to the Inspector-General of Prisons. This caused some controversy, with some legislators feeling that it would be more appropriate if the institutions were overseen by the Director of Public Instruction (Education Dept) or Labour Commission as this would signal much more clearly that the intention was rehabilitative rather than punitive, and that the institution was 'beneficent and humane'.<sup>47</sup> The day-to-day management remained with the Prisons Department, but with the understanding that the officers employed should be 'primarily chosen for their ability to understand and sympathise with children, and should have some special knowledge of the social and psychological sciences'.<sup>48</sup> This was supplemented, for example in 1932, by official visits from the District Educational Council, the Government of Madras, the session judges of Tanjore and Tinnevely districts, the district and subdivisional magistrates, the district educational officers, along with 35 visits from non-official visitors.<sup>49</sup> In other years, official visitors included the Director of Public Health.<sup>50</sup> The visitors fitted a wider ethos of public service within the Presidency, with a number of civil society activists serving as honorary judges, as members of the District Educational Councils or on the board of the Madras Society for the Protection of Children and Madras Children's Aid Society, very few in paid positions but assuming a role as guardians and protectors of vulnerable children. The detailed involvement by the educated middle-classes in the lives of these young people was philanthropic, but was also a way to ensure their own status as experts and to establish their authority to legislate on their behalf. For women, the 'care' for the poor and vulnerable also provided an opportunity for legitimate public service outside the home.<sup>51</sup>

The central aim of the borstal schools was to transform poor, potentially rebellious, certainly mischievous, boys who had engaged in minor misdemeanours into hard working men: to ensure they 'abstain from crime and lead a useful and industrious life'.<sup>52</sup> Particular aspects of masculinity were especially prized in this endeavour and, as noted earlier, the inmates were intended to become 'industrious, truthful, upright and manly'. The focus on industry, on the ability to earn an honest wage and maintain a family – was specially emphasised.<sup>53</sup> Mrinalini Sinha and others have written about the formation of new masculinities in late colonial India, including the muscular Christian manliness of the colonisers; the hyper-masculinities of the so-called martial races, juxtaposed with new nationalist masculinities created by the middle-class elite as a means of contesting colonial ideas of Indian effeminacy.<sup>54</sup> The formation of masculinity in the borstal school was notable because of the emphasis on hard work, and the intertwining of industry with citizenship: the aim was the regulation of lower caste and lower class behaviours, the production of a distinctive form of masculinity among the poor intended to create 'useful and good citizens', aware of their position in society.<sup>55</sup> The industries taught in the borstal schools were significant for the skills provided, but even more significant because they trained young offenders into lives of economic productivity. Industrial training was intended to have a 'disciplinary and moral influence', not just providing a livelihood which meant that crime was less attractive, but producing workers, trained in and committed to time discipline, teamwork and respect for authority in accordance with the expectations of modern capitalist society.<sup>56</sup> Chopra, Osella and Osella have also argued in a contemporary context that this focus on 'steady work' was part of a wider attempt by elite legislators and prison officials to encourage low caste boys to provide for their

families, to commit to one life partner and live respectably, part of a wider attempt to curtail and control the sexuality of the lower class boys.<sup>57</sup> The two objectives were thus co-terminus, by making young men hard-working, disciplined economic contributors they became a good citizens.<sup>58</sup>

The intertwining of the morality of hard work with citizenship is demonstrated in one of the reformatory songs from the early twentieth century, translated from Tamil by JD Rees:

Before the sun has lit the skies  
with rosy light, we early rise,  
and first we supplicate the Lord  
That he may health and help afford,

When thus prepared with thankful heart  
To run on course, the day we start,  
Each to his labour to address  
Himself, nor lie in idleness.

Some, happy they, 'neath plantain shade  
Delve in the yielding earth with spade,  
While many more unceasingly  
The weaver's shuttle deftly fly.

Others the molten iron know  
To fashion with unerringly blow,  
And nimble pairs of hands are made  
To learn the useful tailor's trade.

We all are busy, all confess  
That sin begins with idleness,  
That those who work with all their might,  
At least in that, are doing right.

Thus when our sojourn here is o'er  
And we, reformed, are free once more,  
In after life we always mean  
To be good boys, and bless the Queen.<sup>59</sup>

The emphasis on hard work, particularly in the penultimate verse, was reflected in the syllabus and the young offenders were taught basic literacy in the vernacular and simple arithmetic up to Standard V, sufficient for them to live as responsible citizens, vote dutifully and pay their taxes.<sup>60</sup> At both Tanjore and Palamcottah, industry included carpentry, cotton-weaving, masonry, book-binding, agriculture, tailoring, cooking, compounding, oil-pressing, rattan work, blacksmithy and European and Indian music.<sup>61</sup> Each industry was led by a qualified trained instructor and the 'boys are selected according to their aptitude for the various trades taking into account the kind of work in which they are likely to follow on their discharge'.<sup>62</sup> This was intended to be more than cheap unskilled labour, and when the juvenile jail in Bengal became a borstal school, the prison officials decided to move the manufacture of quinine tablets, the key industry in the jail at Alipore, to the adult jail.<sup>63</sup> Unlike the Reformatory Schools where the teaching was of low quality and largely irrelevant, there appears to have been significant investment into providing quality instructors. This meant that boys could obtain employment after release, the best way to avoid a life of criminality. It also meant that the inmates were 'kept constantly busy', an effective strategy for maintaining discipline.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, the statistics suggest that 42 *per cent* of the inmates were employed in agriculture in Tanjore, and 41 *per cent* in Palamcottah, reflecting the agricultural bias of the Presidency but perhaps also suggesting



a cost-cutting method of saving money on skilled instructors and a greater emphasis on making the inmates work hard and commit to a life of labour than on gaining skills.<sup>65</sup>

Gaining industrial skills was also central to the reformation of character, and the creation of particular forms of individualist masculinity. As Abigail Wills' work on borstal training in postwar England suggests, errant boys were transformed into productive men through emphasising hard work, but also other masculine values such as self-control and fortitude.<sup>66</sup> Practical skills might be important, but the 1938 *Report on the working of the Borstal Schools* suggested that the system also:

aims to provide a positive training, mental, moral, physical and industrial based on sympathetic study of the needs of each individual and aiming at development, through trust, increasing with the individuals' progress, of personal responsibility and of self-control. The key note of this training is 'individualisation'. The duty of the staff is therefore to individualise i.e. observe closely each inmate committed to their care and training.<sup>67</sup>

All reformation was to be based on the three principles of love, freedom and self-discipline, and the aim was to produce individuals who could self-regulate, who understood the value of personal responsibility, of self-control rather than living in fear of punishment and who would become reliable and mature adults.<sup>68</sup> The 'strict discipline affecting his body, his mind and his character' was thus not intended to be punitive, but to develop self-control, a way of regulating the behaviours of the poor into patterns of economic productivity that would enable the development of India as a modern industrial nation.<sup>69</sup> The activities at the borstal schools not only made the boys 'strong, capable, self-reliant' but also encouraged 'smartness', the self-regulation of the body as well as the mind.<sup>70</sup> This repeated trope of 'smartness' in physical appearance, mirrored the 'uprightness' of the title quotation and was an important aspect of being 'manly'. It embodied cleanliness and hygiene, a transformed body being the physical manifestation of a reformed mind. It was displayed in the clean uniforms and neat marching orders for drill and was intended to become a 'mechanical habit' which would continue to inform life after release.<sup>71</sup> 'Smartness' was also linked to mental acuity, in this case, the rational choice to be obedient and improve one's life chances through hard work and to emphasise emotional stability and a positive outlook. Whatever the cause of incarceration, the boys were intended to become 'cheerful and smart'.<sup>72</sup>

The masculine traits of comradeship and loyalty were also prized and were reinforced through teamwork, either on the sporting field or in the house competitions. In Bankura, for example, the boys played football, hockey and cricket and were encouraged to compete with outside teams.<sup>73</sup> This was a focus of significant investment, by 1935, the boys were encouraged to play football, hockey, cricket, basketball and volleyball, while in Tanjore, the young men played cricket, football, hockey and badminton.<sup>74</sup> The staff were encouraged to join in, while boys were also encouraged to play their own village games during leisure hours. The intention was that 'their superfluous energy, which would otherwise be diverted into the wrong channels, is worked off, their tempers are improved, and the game introduces a manly influence into the school'.<sup>75</sup> The brass and bugle bands were another particularly effective way for musically inclined children to engage in structured work, disciplined playing and the camaraderie of a distinct team.<sup>76</sup> In Bankura, this was developed through a house system, designed to 'create a spirit of competition among the houses and a feeling of *esprit de corps* among the boys themselves'.<sup>77</sup> While this structure had the added benefit of reducing indiscipline because of house points for good behaviour, the key emphasis was to cultivate group loyalty, team spirit and comradeship combined with respect for authority.

## DISCIPLINE AND THE HEALTHY BODY

The production of the manly body, physically fit and of sound mind, was intrinsic to the borstal experiment, but also reflect the emphasis on care and treatment. Borstals were explicitly intended by the policy makers to 'exert the same influence as institutes of preventative medicine do in the realm

of medicine'.<sup>78</sup> Medical metaphors were used throughout the discussions, as if talking about a social disease, with borstal almost playing a part in vaccinating against future crime, a worthwhile investment in future submission.<sup>79</sup> The young men were often viewed as diseased and difficult, and Barman saw the Reformatory and borstal schools as 'moral hospitals', organised around the prospect of a cure, with warders as doctors observing improvements in the 'moral health' of the young people.<sup>80</sup> The borstal schools were often discussed by prison officers and policy makers in terms of a 'healthy atmosphere' in comparison with the 'contamination' of home.<sup>81</sup> This was developed most by Superintendent AJ Nicholas at the Indian Jails Committee who argued that 'reformatory process is slow; it take time for old sores to heal, healthy tissue to form, time in which a prisoner can recuperate his energies to make good resolution and time to discover the alterations in character'.<sup>82</sup> The terminology of cure, of diagnosis, of 'dirty habits', of 'social parasites', of contagion and of 'faith in the scientific treatment of segregation' can be situated within a wider colonial use of the indigenous body as a site for the construction of colonial authority.<sup>83</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s, the Indian elite were also adept at using science and medicine as a source of authority, both to regulate the lives of the poor and to contest colonial power through the demonstration of their own modernity.<sup>84</sup> The borstal schools were part of this wider trend, in which young men were segregated 'so that proper individual treatment may be given to these'.<sup>85</sup> Discussing criminality in medical metaphors of disease and treatment meant that the contagion of adolescence could be managed and contained, without the young person becoming infected by others, or passing on what they had contracted, part of a global pathologisation of criminality.<sup>86</sup>

The borstal system was based on 'maintaining discipline' rather than punishing offenders, with an emphasis on self-control, through 'a judicious combination of severity and kindness'.<sup>87</sup> The surveillance of young adults, the monitoring and statistics, the regulation of daily life was more important in the borstal schools than a fear of physical punishment. There was broad agreement among legislators that it was not to be a penal institution, and widespread concern that the penal discipline of the Prisons Act of 1894 should not be applied.<sup>88</sup> This appears to have been implemented; in 1934, the conduct was generally assumed to be satisfactory and while there were thirty offences in the year in the school, twenty minor and ten major, the punishment was caning on the hand or temporary or permanent reduction to lower grade, with no cases of whipping.<sup>89</sup> Likewise in 1935, there were warnings, extra drill, reduction to a lower grade, caning on the hand, but again no whipping, reflecting wider concerns about corporal punishment and growing children.<sup>90</sup> The Borstal Schools Act was amended in 1936 to reflect criticism of whipping and to reduce the maximum number of caning strokes from thirty to eighteen.<sup>91</sup> Instead, steady work over a two-year sentence was intended to reflect the time needed to develop of personal responsibility for behaviour.<sup>92</sup> One particularly progressive legislator suggested that the borstal school should run like 'a small republic', without warders and jailors but where students learn to cook, and 'where a large measure of independence can be secured to the inmates'.<sup>93</sup> This idea could be abused, but in 1934, there were only four escapes recorded, perhaps because borstal schools were a life chance for food, stable shelter and employment away from families that these boys were looking for, perhaps because the rural location made success unlikely.<sup>94</sup>

The borstal schools remained one part of the state's wider coercive apparatus, a system which, suggests Taylor Sherman, was riven by tensions, local power struggles, confused loyalties and 'unpredictability'.<sup>95</sup> While the care provided was part of a wider system of regulating the behaviours of young men, it is difficult to ascertain how the young men experienced and reacted to borstal schools. The inmates generated few sources of their own, and their, possibly changing, reactions are untraceable. There is evidence that some young men tried to falsify their ages because borstal was perceived to be more lenient than adult jail.<sup>96</sup> However, as Melanie Tebutt has shown in the context of borstal in Britain, it is important not to underestimate the daily experience of humiliation and intimidation of the inmates and the short and long-term mental and emotional costs on the boys of incarceration.<sup>97</sup>

## REFORMING THE POOR

The borstal schools were ultimately designed as a means to reform the behaviours of the labouring poor, engaged in petty crime often as a result of economic hardship. This was challenged by the Home Minister in the Madras Presidency himself, who argued that ‘crime is not the exclusive monopoly of any particular community’, with criminals from Brahmin, non-Brahmins, Muslims, Christians and the Depressed classes.<sup>98</sup> However, in general, the young offenders were assumed to come from ‘the lowest communities as it were’ and there was a widespread acknowledgement that the majority came from ‘the depressed and from the backward communities’, in other words, low caste, poor communities.<sup>99</sup> Usually criminality was assumed to reflect poor parenting, and it was clear that there was a difference between ‘boys of criminal tendencies’ who were sons of responsible men who could be entrusted to observe and train their young people themselves, a tacit nod to middle class and upper caste schooling and boys with lower caste parents.<sup>100</sup> That said, there was very limited reference to the parents and parental responsibility in these debates, and no record of caste or religious statistics. While there was some reference to habitual criminals, the young men were assumed to have chosen a life of crime, either through bad associations or lack of alternatives. There was little reference to the criminal tribes whose children were often the target of institutional care, and who were not allowed into the Reformatories for fear of corruption of the other boys.<sup>101</sup> This group was assumed to be hereditary criminals, with livelihoods based on dacoity/banditry and theft, and generally they came under the purview of the 1911 Criminal Tribes Act, rather than the Borstal Schools Act. Highlighting the importance of caste and community rather than age, the Criminal Tribes Act reflected the late colonial parallels between a settled life, hard work and clean living and the assumed corruption of a nomadic existence.<sup>102</sup> The only exception to this was the aforementioned imprisonment of political dissidents such as *satyagrahis* or revolutionaries, most notably the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army members such as Bhagat Singh, but their experiences were atypical, the nature of their crimes and the protest over their conditions as political prisoners showed their reluctance to be associated with those who only had age in common with them. The intersection of gender, age and community was central to the conception and running of the borstal system.

Integral to the reformatory system was the after-care of discharged inmates, part of the same network of control justified as care. In Britain, Borstal Associations were established from social workers, clergy, temperance advocates and volunteers who supervised the young people after discharge, found them work and accommodation and maintained frequent contact.<sup>103</sup> In India, only the Madras Presidency had a similar scheme for borstal alumni.<sup>104</sup> After-care was run by the Discharged Prisoners Aid Society, based in Madras but with branches throughout the different districts with specific services for young men. The DPAS provided aid, money and clothing so that discharged prisoners had sufficient means to live before they found employment.<sup>105</sup> The discharged inmates were then supported by a system of paid probation officers, a reasonable financial commitment by the government but also a recognition that some guarantee of good behaviour was necessary for these young people to find employment.<sup>106</sup> The local borstal associations forged networks with employers, factory owners, landowners and municipal councils who could provide structured employment opportunities.<sup>107</sup> The Tanjore Borstal Association, for example, ‘found that there was no difficulty in finding employment for the boys, who had received an excellent training and were desired as employees by employers of labour’, though whether this was due to their skills or their attitude to work is unclear.<sup>108</sup> In 1932, for example, 53 per cent of those whose whereabouts could be traced had become coolies, general servants or agricultural labourers, with very little overt benefit from an industrial training.<sup>109</sup> One became a police constable, but significant numbers continued in tailoring, weaving, masonry and carpentry, suggesting that sufficient skills had been learned in the borstal school for them to become at least apprentices. Each year, a number – usually around sixteen from both Madras establishments – joined local police, military brass and bugle bands. The state’s carceral care for young men thus extended beyond the boundaries of the institutions themselves and into their later relationships with families and employers as a means of proving their success.

## REFORMING THE YOUNG, THE MALE, THE POOR, THE CITIZEN

In conclusion, the borstal school system, an attempt to discipline young men convicted of petty crime, became a space where new ideas about youth, masculinity and carcerality were formulated. The discussions in the 1920s and 1930s around the new borstal system contributed to the emergence of new theories about adolescence as a distinct life stage between childhood and adulthood, a time of threat but including within it the potential for reformation. These ideas reflected debates about upper caste sexuality and the boundaries of marriage circulating in public discourse, but also drew on modern definitions of youth emerging from America and new framings of carcerality which reflected global flows of information around penal reform, modern science and borstal schools as a system of care and control. Indian experts and legislators engaged in these debates as voices of authority, not merely as colonised subjects, using the claim to expertise as evidence of the capacity of Indians for self-government. By drawing global parallels, the Indian elite also used the claim to universality to undercut the racial hierarchies of colonial rule.

The new constructions of adolescence and carcerality were not merely theoretical, but were worked out in and on the bodies of poor young men in the borstal schools. Central to the project was the regulation of these youths into new, productive forms of citizenship and masculinity, able to function in a modern industrial capitalist state. The emphasis on the production of deliberately ‘manly’ values reveals how closely masculinity and future citizenship for the lower classes were intertwined. Legislators, jail inspectors and prison officers focused on the formation of particular forms of bodies and minds – manly, honest, industrious, loyal teammates. The reformation of character was embodied in their ‘smart’ and upright appearance, and the borstal system was intended to produce young men who would become manly citizens, industrious workers, good fathers and contributors to the future nation. The focus on the formation of a distinctively lower-class masculinity among young offenders, thus contributed to wider discussions about the emergence of ‘youth’ and ‘adolescence’ as a conceptual categories within wider Indian society.

It is worth remembering that there is little evidence that borstal succeeded, and even less that the young men themselves perceived their incarceration in terms of care rather than control, and for many this was undoubtedly a miserable daily experience. It is also important not to overplay the competence or hegemony of the late colonial carceral state, but also significant to recognise that the long-term impact of these new ideas lasted past political independence. Although contested, in 2023, there remains eighteen borstal schools operating across India with the capacity to house 1615 inmates although with a 2019 occupancy rate of 37 *per cent*.<sup>110</sup> In summary, in late colonial India, carceral spaces became distinctive places where new ideas about youth, masculinity and citizenship could be formulated, reformulated, tested and confirmed, not only in the abstract but on and through the bodies of poor young men being subjected to institutionalised practices of control, albeit framed as care.

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### ORCID

Catriona Ellis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7423-8335>

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Catriona Ellis** is a Teaching Fellow in Health History at the University of Strathclyde (Scotland). Her research focuses on the history of children and childhood in late colonial south India, with an emphasis on history of education, health, juvenile justice and life writing. Her monograph *Imagining Childhood, Improving Children* was published in 2023.