



FROM DETENTION TO MEMORY: HIJLI JAIL AND THE LEGACIES OF COLONIAL REPRESSION IN KHARAGPUR

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Abstract

The Hijli Detention Camp at Kharagpur (present-day IIT Kharagpur campus) was among the most significant colonial carceral institutions in eastern India. Established in 1930 to warehouse “security prisoners” beyond the regular judicial process, Hijli became infamous after the 16 September 1931 firing that killed detainees Santosh Kumar Mitra and Tarakeswar Sengupta—an incident that galvanised public opinion across Bengal and India. This paper reconstructs the camp’s origins, administration, detainee experience, the 1931 firing and its political aftermath, and traces Hijli’s afterlife—from closure to its transformation into a premier institute of technology and a site of public memory. Drawing on institutional histories, archival references, and press retrospectives, it situates Hijli within broader debates on emergency detention, revolutionary nationalism, and memorialisation.

Keywords: *Hijli Detention Camp, Political turmoil, revolutionary nationalism, colonial repression*

Introduction

The late-colonial state in India increasingly used “exceptional” detention—outside ordinary trial—to contain mass politics and revolutionary networks, especially in Bengal. Hijli Detention Camp (1930–37; reopened 1940–42) functioned as a concentrated site for such carceral governance. Its reputation rests not only on the volume and profile of detainees but also on the unprecedented killing of two unarmed political prisoners within the jail precincts in 1931, provoking condemnation by leaders including Subhas Chandra Bose and Rabindranath Tagore. Today, the same structure anchors the Nehru Museum of Science & Technology at IIT Kharagpur, exemplifying a powerful spatial metamorphosis from prison to university. Overcrowding and the desire to segregate “politicals” from ordinary convicts led the colonial government to establish dedicated detention camps (Buxa Fort first, then Hijli in 1930). Hijli’s location—near Kharagpur in the then Midnapore district—offered logistical connectivity while remaining administratively controllable. The camp primarily held revolutionaries from organisations such as the Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar, and activists swept up in periodic waves of preventive detention. The Hijli complex—Byzantine-style exterior, central tower, long cell blocks—combined surveillance and segregation. Commandants oversaw internal discipline, movement, and political censorship; records from 1931 indicate attention to classification, labour, and punishment regimes typical of high-security facilities of the era. Surviving administrative papers (e.g., the Baker Papers) detail routine operations as well as crisis management surrounding the shooting incident.

The 16 September 1931 Firing

On 16 September 1931, sentries opened fire inside the camp, killing detainees Santosh Kumar Mitra and Tarakeswar Sengupta and injuring others. Multiple reconstructions converge on key facts: the victims were unarmed political prisoners; the firing occurred within the compound; and the event triggered immediate and widespread protest. Bose travelled to Hijli to collect the bodies; Tagore publicly condemned the outrage; and civic demonstrations in Calcutta amplified the scandal, placing the colonial carceral regime under scrutiny. Contemporary and retrospective accounts treat the incident as a watershed in Bengal’s militant-nationalist phase and in debates on detention without trial. Historiographically, the “Hijli firing” is read in two intersecting frames. First, as a crisis of legitimacy for preventive detention: it exposed how emergency law blurred lines between custody and extra-legal violence. Second, as a catalyst for nationalist solidarity across ideological stripes—revolutionary networks, Congress leadership, and cultural figures—in a moment when the civil-disobedience movement and militant underground often ran on parallel tracks. Press remembrances and institutional histories consistently mark 1931 as Hijli’s defining date. Testimonies and secondary literature emphasise that Hijli concentrated cadres—facilitating political education, ideological exchange, and tactical debate among revolutionaries from Anushilan and Jugantar streams. While direct prisoner lists are scattered, studies of

Bengal's political prisoners and women revolutionaries illuminate how incarceration became a site of ideological consolidation, despite surveillance.

Closure, Reopening, and Final Shutdown (1937–42): A Colonial Calculus of Control

The period between 1937 and 1942 represents a critical phase in the history of colonial detention camps, revealing the ways in which the British administration oscillated between containment, repression, and strategic withdrawal in response to political developments. The closure of the camp in 1937 initially suggested a momentary relaxation of colonial controls, but the subsequent reopening in 1940, followed by a final shutdown in 1942, underscores the cyclical and reactive nature of colonial governance, particularly under conditions of perceived political threat. These administrative decisions were far from arbitrary; they were embedded in the broader dynamics of imperial statecraft, the global upheavals of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and the intensifying nationalist movements across India. The 1937 closure of the camp occurred against a backdrop of relative political stabilization in certain parts of India, following the Government of India Act of 1935 and the establishment of provincial legislatures under the new constitutional framework. The British administration, seeking to project an image of liberal governance, intermittently relaxed the harsh measures of preventive detention that had characterized earlier periods of political unrest. Yet, this closure did not signify a permanent relinquishment of authority; rather, it reflected a strategic recalibration. The colonial state was acutely aware of the underlying currents of anti-colonial sentiment, and the cessation of camp operations can be understood as a temporary, tactical response, designed to give the appearance of normalcy while retaining the capacity for coercion should circumstances demand. By 1940, the global and domestic political landscapes had shifted dramatically. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 intensified the British state's sense of vulnerability, particularly in colonies like India, where nationalist movements were gaining momentum. The decision to reopen the camp during this period must be read in the context of wartime exigencies. Wartime repression provided the colonial administration with both justification and urgency to detain political activists, trade union leaders, and individuals suspected of anti-imperial agitation without recourse to judicial oversight. In this sense, the reopening of the camp illustrates the elasticity of colonial legal and administrative frameworks, wherein the suspension of ordinary legal protections could be normalized under the guise of emergency.

The operationalization of the camp during 1940–42 reveals the dual nature of colonial detention: it was both punitive and preventive. The detainees were often not criminals in the conventional sense but were instead political actors whose activities threatened the legitimacy of colonial rule. Their detention served multiple purposes: it neutralized immediate political opposition, deterred collective mobilization, and reinforced the omnipresence of the colonial state. The selection of detainees was strategic, targeting individuals who could influence public opinion, organize mass movements, or facilitate anti-war activities. In many ways, the camp became a microcosm of colonial anxieties, a space where the boundaries of law, order, and political control were deliberately blurred. It is also significant that the camp's reopening coincided with the intensification of the Quit India movement and other anti-colonial campaigns, which sought to leverage the wartime context to demand accelerated political rights. The British administration, cognizant of the heightened stakes, relied on detention as a flexible instrument of governance. Unlike conventional imprisonment, which required trials and sentencing, these camps allowed the colonial state to act swiftly and without procedural hindrance. The discretionary use of preventive detention reflected a deeper structural feature of imperial rule: the capacity to circumvent normative legalities when political survival was at stake.

The final shutdown of the camp in 1942 must be understood as part of a broader administrative reorganization during a period of acute wartime pressures. By this stage, the colonial state was balancing multiple crises: the Japanese threat in Southeast Asia, the Bengal famine of 1943 on the horizon, and intensifying nationalist mobilizations at home. The closure was accompanied by the transfer of detainees to other facilities, suggesting a continuity of control rather than a genuine liberalization. The decision underscores the performative aspect of administrative closures: while the camp as a physical site ceased operations, the apparatus of detention and surveillance remained active elsewhere. This demonstrates the adaptability of colonial governance, wherein the spatial and institutional forms of repression could be reconfigured in response to changing exigencies. The cyclical pattern of closure, reopening, and final shutdown also highlights the relationship between state power and perceived threat. In each instance, the colonial administration calibrated its response according to an assessment of risk, whether real or imagined. The suspension of ordinary legal protections was not constant but conditional, deployed in moments when the state believed its authority was jeopardized. This conditionality reflects a key insight into colonial statecraft: coercion was not merely punitive but strategic, aimed at preserving legitimacy while preemptively neutralizing dissent. The camps, therefore, functioned as instruments of both fear and regulation, embedding the imperatives of empire into everyday political life.

Furthermore, these shifts must be situated within the broader historiography of colonial repression. Scholars have noted that detention camps and preventive detention laws were part of a continuum of exceptional measures that colonial states worldwide adopted in times of crisis. In India, such measures were shaped by the legacies of prior insurrections, the lessons of World War I, and the ongoing challenge of managing a politically mobilized populace. The episodic nature of camp operations—closure, reopening, final shutdown—reveals a calculated pragmatism, wherein the colonial state weighed the costs and benefits of sustained repression against the imperatives of administrative efficiency and public perception. The social and psychological effects on detainees during these cycles were profound. The uncertainty surrounding the camp's operational status created a climate of anxiety among political activists. The threat of sudden detention without trial curtailed organizational activities, fractured networks of political engagement, and imposed a pervasive sense of vulnerability. Simultaneously, the reopening of the camp in 1940 reinforced the symbolic power of the colonial state: it demonstrated that political activism, even in its most

measured forms, could provoke severe consequences. These dynamics contributed to the broader culture of surveillance and control that characterized colonial governance during periods of heightened tension.

In conclusion, the history of the camp from 1937 to 1942 exemplifies the cyclical and strategic nature of colonial repression. The closure in 1937, reopening in 1940, and final shutdown in 1942 were not isolated administrative acts but part of a deliberate pattern of governance responsive to both internal and external pressures. The camp served as a site of preventive detention, a mechanism for political control, and a symbol of imperial authority. These shifts illuminate the ways in which colonial power was exercised through exceptional measures, calibrated according to perceived threats, and adapted to changing political contexts. Ultimately, the episodic operation of the camp underscores a central paradox of colonial rule: the need to maintain legitimacy while simultaneously relying on coercion, a tension that defined the administration's response to India's growing nationalist challenge during this critical wartime period.

From Prison to Polytechnic: The Post-1947 Afterlife

After Independence, the Government of India repurposed the Hijli complex for the first Indian Institute of Technology. The site's transformation embodies a deliberate nationalist narrative—turning a space of coercion into one of knowledge and nation-building. The erstwhile main jail building—now Hijli Shaheed Bhavan—houses the Nehru Museum of Science & Technology (est. 1990), with archival displays on the camp and open-air exhibits, making carceral memory part of campus heritage. Memorial plaques to Mitra and Sengupta within IIT Kharagpur materialise collective memory on site; journalistic retrospectives and museum curation keep the incident in public consciousness. Annual “this day in history” features and institutional narratives reaffirm Hijli's symbolic status as both a cautionary tale of state violence and a prehistory to IIT Kharagpur's founding. Documentaries such as *Hijli Detention Camp to IIT – An Untold Saga* further translate archival knowledge into accessible visual history.

Significance in the Historiography of Colonial Repression

The study of detention camps and preventive detention in colonial India occupies a critical place within the broader historiography of imperial governance and political repression. Historians of colonial India have long sought to understand the mechanisms through which the British state maintained authority over a politically mobilized population, particularly during periods of nationalist agitation, global conflict, and social unrest. The episodic closure, reopening, and final shutdown of camps between 1937 and 1942, as previously noted, reflects not merely administrative pragmatism but also a deeper structural logic of repression embedded in the colonial state. Examining this history through a historiographical lens illuminates the complex interplay between law, coercion, and legitimacy in British India and contributes to broader debates about the nature of colonial power. Early historical analyses of colonial repression often emphasized the coercive and militaristic dimensions of British rule. Scholars such as Ranajit Guha, in the *Subaltern Studies* series, have highlighted the ways in which the colonial state relied upon exceptional measures, including preventive detention and imprisonment without trial, to suppress popular resistance. From this perspective, camps such as the one under discussion were instruments of direct control, designed to neutralize potential leaders of anti-colonial movements before they could mobilize mass support. The cyclical pattern of camp closure and reopening is interpreted as evidence of the colonial state's constant vigilance and adaptability: repression was not static but responsive, calibrated to shifts in the political environment. Guha's analysis situates these camps within a broader continuum of what he terms “everyday forms of domination,” emphasizing the intersection of administrative policy and localized political anxieties. Other historians have approached the subject from a legal-institutional angle, examining the ways in which colonial law facilitated extraordinary measures of governance. Scholars such as Ian Copland and David Washbrook have argued that preventive detention laws, enacted in the 19th and early 20th centuries, were not merely legal anomalies but integral components of the colonial state's capacity to exercise discretionary power. The historiographical significance of the 1937–42 camps lies in their demonstration of this legal-structural logic in practice. While ordinary criminal law required evidence, trial, and sentencing, preventive detention allowed the administration to act swiftly and unilaterally, reflecting a broader principle: the maintenance of imperial authority could supersede procedural fairness when political stability was perceived to be at risk. In this sense, the camps serve as a case study in the ways law was instrumentalized to create a dual system of governance—one for ordinary civil society, and another for perceived political threats.

The historiography of colonial repression also situates detention camps within the global context of emergency governance. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the transnational dimensions of state repression during periods of conflict. The reopening of the camp in 1940, coinciding with the Second World War, aligns with similar practices in other parts of the British Empire and beyond, where states deployed internment and preventive detention to manage populations deemed potentially subversive. In India, this meant targeting not only nationalist leaders but also labor organizers, students, and members of revolutionary networks. The historiographical significance, therefore, lies in how these camps reveal the interconnectedness of imperial anxieties and wartime exigencies: local administration, global geopolitics, and the imperatives of colonial rule intersected in ways that shaped policy and practice. Social historians have further contributed to the understanding of these camps by examining the lived experiences of detainees and the effects of intermittent repression on political culture. Memoirs, letters, and oral histories of detainees detained during the 1937–42 period highlight the psychological and organizational consequences of preventive detention. The uncertainty surrounding the operational status of the camps—closure, reopening, and final shutdown—produced a pervasive climate of fear and suspicion. Historiographically, this underscores the multidimensional nature of repression: it was not simply punitive but also preventive, shaping patterns of political mobilization, communication,

and strategy within nationalist movements. By foregrounding the subjective experience of detainees, historians contribute to a nuanced understanding of repression as a social process, not merely an administrative action. The historiography also interrogates the symbolic dimensions of detention camps. Scholars such as Mrinalini Sinha and Partha Chatterjee argue that the visibility of such camps served a dual purpose: deterrence and legitimization. By maintaining operational readiness, even when not constantly filled with detainees, the colonial state projected the omnipresence of authority. The temporary closure of the camp in 1937, therefore, must be read alongside its reopening in 1940 as part of a deliberate strategy of governance: repression was punctuated and episodic, making its exercise more unpredictable and, therefore, psychologically effective. Historiographically, this demonstrates how physical spaces, legal frameworks, and administrative practices converged to constitute a network of imperial power that extended beyond simple imprisonment.

An additional layer of historiographical significance emerges when examining the gendered, casteed, and regional dimensions of colonial repression. Scholars have increasingly noted that preventive detention and camp administration were not uniformly applied; certain populations—often urban, politically active men—were more likely to be targeted, while rural insurgents, women, and marginalized groups faced distinct forms of surveillance and coercion. The camp operations between 1937 and 1942, therefore, provide insight into the selective mechanisms of repression, illustrating how colonial power was both generalized and particularized according to perceived threats. This analytical lens situates the camps within broader debates about the social bases of colonial power and the unevenness of imperial authority. The historiography also engages with the interplay between administrative pragmatism and ideological imperatives. While some scholars have emphasized the bureaucratic rationality of colonial governance, others highlight its moral and civilizational rhetoric: the administration often justified preventive detention as necessary to maintain public order and protect society from radical disruption. The camps, in this sense, are not merely instruments of coercion but also sites where colonial ideology intersected with practical governance. They illustrate how notions of legality, morality, and expediency were intertwined in the construction of colonial authority, offering historians a rich terrain for exploring the conceptual underpinnings of repression.

Finally, the study of these camps contributes to broader debates on the historiography of emergency powers and exceptional governance. Comparative studies across empires and within India itself show that colonial detention policies were part of a global repertoire of techniques used by states to manage crisis, whether through internment, preventive detention, or martial law. By situating the 1937–42 camps within this historiographical framework, scholars illuminate the ways in which colonial India was simultaneously a laboratory for governance, a site of political contestation, and a reflection of broader imperial strategies.

In conclusion, the historiographical significance of the 1937–42 detention camps lies in their capacity to illuminate multiple dimensions of colonial repression. They reveal the strategic use of preventive detention as both a legal and political tool, illustrate the adaptive and cyclical nature of colonial governance, and provide insight into the social, psychological, and symbolic consequences of imperial control. From Guha's subaltern perspective to legal-institutional analyses, social histories of detainees, and studies of ideological legitimation, these camps occupy a central place in the literature on British India. Their study deepens our understanding of how repression was rationalized, practiced, and experienced, offering a lens through which to interrogate the complex interplay of authority, law, and resistance in colonial contexts. By situating the camps within broader debates on emergency governance, wartime administration, and the social bases of imperial power, historians have rendered them indispensable for understanding the dynamics of state control and the enduring legacies of colonial rule in India.

Conclusion: Memory, Transition, and the Ethical Imperative of Historical Reckoning

The trajectory from a detention camp in the 1930s to the establishment of a premier post-independence institution like IIT Kharagpur represents more than a narrative of physical transformation; it embodies the complex interplay between India's colonial past and its postcolonial aspirations. On the one hand, the camp signifies a period of political repression, where the colonial state deployed preventive detention, arbitrary arrests, and even violence to suppress nationalist agitation and maintain control. On the other hand, the institution that now occupies the same space is emblematic of modern India's scientific, technological, and intellectual ambitions. This juxtaposition creates a historical tension: the site is simultaneously a locus of oppression and a beacon of progress. Recognizing this duality is essential for understanding how post-independence India negotiates its colonial legacy while asserting its aspirations for knowledge, innovation, and nation-building. The 1931 firing within the camp stands as a particularly poignant marker of this tension. Unlike administrative closures, transfers, or the cyclical operation of detention facilities, the firing produced a sudden, irreversible rupture—a moment of violence that left tangible human consequences. Those killed or injured during the event became, in effect, martyrs of colonial repression. Their deaths resist the neat closure often desired in celebratory narratives of progress and modernization. While IIT Kharagpur symbolizes the triumph of scientific achievement and the promise of an independent India, the memory of the 1931 firing interrupts this narrative, reminding us that such triumphs were preceded by coercion, surveillance, and human suffering. The act of remembrance, therefore, is not merely retrospective—it is ethical, demanding acknowledgment of injustice alongside celebration of progress. The preservation of physical markers, archives, and commemorative plaques at the site is crucial to sustaining this critical memory culture. Such artifacts are more than symbolic gestures; they constitute what scholars of memory studies call “materialized memory,” embedding historical consciousness within physical spaces. By maintaining these traces, IIT Kharagpur allows contemporary students, faculty, and visitors to engage with the past actively rather than abstractly. The plaques, archival documents, and even the architectural vestiges of the detention camp serve as pedagogical tools, mediating between historical knowledge and moral reflection. They invite inquiry, debate, and critical engagement with the legacies of colonial repression, encouraging the community to confront uncomfortable truths rather than allowing them to recede into mythologized narratives.

of uninterrupted progress. Memory, in this sense, functions as a bridge linking scientific modernity with moral and ethical responsibility. IIT Kharagpur, as an institute of higher learning, represents the pursuit of technical mastery, research excellence, and innovation—values often associated with rationality and empiricism. Yet, the historical consciousness embedded within the site reminds us that technical prowess is inseparable from social and ethical considerations. The juxtaposition of a former site of violence with a center of intellectual and technological advancement calls for an integrated understanding of development: true progress entails not only innovation in science and engineering but also moral attentiveness to the injustices that shaped the nation's past. The memory of the detention camp compels the academic community to recognize that knowledge and ethics are co-constitutive; scientific modernity must be situated within a framework of historical responsibility and social awareness. This ethical imperative is particularly significant in the context of postcolonial nation-building. The establishment of premier technical institutes in the early years of independent India, such as IIT Kharagpur, was driven by a vision of technological self-reliance, economic modernization, and global scientific engagement. However, this forward-looking mission should not obscure the historical antecedents of the sites themselves. Detention camps, with their association with colonial control and political violence, provide a sobering counterpoint to narratives of unbroken progress. They remind us that the infrastructural and institutional resources inherited by postcolonial India were not neutral; they were often products of coercive systems that sought to regulate, surveil, and discipline populations. Confronting this history allows us to appreciate the ethical and political dimensions of institution-building: postcolonial projects of knowledge and innovation are inseparable from their historical contexts, and ethical memory becomes integral to responsible institutional culture.

Moreover, the act of preserving and commemorating such sites contributes to broader public discourse about history, memory, and justice. In many ways, sites like IIT Kharagpur serve as a locus for what historians call “memory activism”—the practice of using historical awareness to inform contemporary civic consciousness. By foregrounding the 1931 firing and the history of the detention camp, the institution challenges narratives that sanitize colonial history or erase the suffering of those subjected to arbitrary state power. Such commemoration fosters critical literacy among citizens, equipping them to interrogate not only the past but also ongoing structures of authority, coercion, and accountability. In this sense, historical memory is not a static repository but an active, dynamic engagement with the ethical challenges of the present. The intertwining of memory and educational mission also has profound implications for institutional identity and pedagogy. For students and scholars at IIT Kharagpur, the recognition that the campus was once a site of political repression instills a nuanced understanding of history: achievements in science and technology are inseparable from the broader socio-political landscape in which they are embedded. This perspective encourages interdisciplinary thinking, bridging technical disciplines with the humanities and social sciences, fostering a culture where ethical reasoning, historical awareness, and scientific inquiry coexist. The preservation of memory thus enhances the intellectual rigor of the institution by situating knowledge production within a framework of moral and historical consciousness. Importantly, this process of memory preservation also highlights the politics of visibility and silence. Colonial histories are often fragmented, mediated through administrative records, newspaper reports, and personal testimonies. Plaques, archives, and commemorative initiatives actively counteract erasure, providing tangible evidence that resists the flattening of history into celebratory myths. In doing so, they assert that sites of suffering and resistance must be acknowledged alongside narratives of achievement. The 1931 firing, in particular, resists closure because it embodies both the brutality of colonial control and the heroism of those who resisted it. By foregrounding such moments, IIT Kharagpur situates itself not only as a center of learning but also as a custodian of historical conscience. Finally, the ethical and memorial significance of the site extends beyond national borders, resonating with global discussions about the relationship between modernity, violence, and institutional responsibility. Across the world, universities, laboratories, and scientific institutions grapple with legacies of exploitation, coercion, and colonial imposition. The preservation of the detention camp within IIT Kharagpur aligns with broader efforts to reconcile scientific and technological progress with historical accountability. It underscores a central principle: that modern institutions are most robust when they recognize and integrate the ethical dimensions of their histories, transforming spaces of past injustice into arenas for critical reflection and moral education.

In conclusion, the journey from a detention camp in the 1930s to a premier post-independence scientific institute encapsulates the complexities of India's mid-20th-century transition. The 1931 firing resists facile closure, challenging celebratory narratives and demanding engagement with the human costs of colonial repression. By preserving the site, plaques, and archives, IIT Kharagpur cultivates a critical memory culture that links the pursuit of scientific modernity with the ethical obligation to remember past injustices. This engagement with memory ensures that the institution's achievements are not divorced from their historical context, fostering a model of education in which knowledge, morality, and historical consciousness are inseparable. Ultimately, the site stands as a testament to the intertwined trajectories of oppression and progress, serving as both a reminder of the past and a guidepost for ethical engagement in the present and future.

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