



Indian Prison Narratives and the Politics of Life Writing

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Abstract

This research paper highlights the nature of prison writing in the Indian context. The discussion initially focuses on the historical development of Indian prison writings. The paper contends with the definition of prison writing and highlights how the genre of prison literature in India has evolved. An attempt will be made to arrive at an answer for why such a generic classification is required in the Indian context and its significance in the literary and cultural history of India. The paper will further analyze the narrative elements used by different authors and how these elements have changed with the passage of time. Emphasis will be laid on how Indian prison narratives have mediated the rigid borders of life writing. The paper will then proceed to shed light on how Indian prison writing adheres to and deviates from the rules and characteristics of (auto) biography. The proposed paper at this point will take up Arun Ferreira's *Colours of the Cage: A Prison Memoir* in the light of how it follows the rules of memoir writing. The multimodal qualities of Ferreira's narrative will be clinically analyzed and their significance will be highlighted. The paper will then proceed to study Shashi Warriar's *Hangman's Journal* and will go on to explicate how fiction is used in prison narratives. This attempt will eventually open up the discussion to wider politics relating to the literary tussle between autobiography and auto-fiction. At this point, the paper will highlight how Indian prison writing mediates between the boundaries of fact and fiction thereby giving rise to a subgenre of prison narratives called informed prison fiction.

Keywords: Prison, Life-writing, Autobiography, Memoir, Auto-fiction

Introduction

Although methodical in its approach and clinical in its evaluation, Western theories of penal analysis and literature do not consider various layers of the Indian carceral experience. For a working definition of prison writing from an Indian source, C.D. Narasimhaiah remarks, in his introduction to *Prison Writing in India*, are useful: "Prison writing, that is, writing done not by prisoners but on imprisonment by creative

writers on others' prison life" (7). The emphasis must be given to the word 'other' since, in the process of writing, the prison-writer does not just narrate his own ordeal and travails, but also narrates the experiences of other prisoners with whom he interacts and shares the damned space. So, within the scope of prison writing, both told and collaborative narratives need be taken into critical account. Narasimhaiah's definition thus enables us to understand the collective nature of prison writing.

Ancient and Medieval Prison Accounts

One of the earliest examples of prison narratives in India can be found in Sangam literature. The most striking example of a prison narrative from Sangam literature is a poem from the *Puranānūru*, a collection of poems on war and politics that glorifies ancient kings who ruled Tamil Nadu (Hart 17). This poem titled *Puranānūru* 74 was composed by King Chēramān Kanaikkāl Irumporai after he was defeated by King Chōlan Chenkanān at Kazhumalam: "... I'm sitting here suffering like a dog in chains, not cut up like a hero, without any mental strength, and having to plead for water to enemies without generosity" (Herbert). Another significant ancient text in this context is a Sanskrit love poem by the Kashmiri poet Bilhana (1020 to 1094 CE) entitled *Chaura Panchashika* (The Collection of Fifty Verses by a Love Thief) (Kawthekar 16-19). Bilhana was imprisoned and sentenced to hanging by King Madanabhirama for having a secretive love affair with a princess. The poem was composed during his period of imprisonment and is said to have been recited by him at the place of his hanging (16).

During the medieval phase of Indian history, a large part of the subcontinent was ruled by Muslims, the most powerful of them being the Mughals (1526–1857). Two narratives provide us with details regarding life inside prisons during this phase. The first is a set of prison *bhajans* composed by Bhadrachala Ramadas (1620–1688) and the second is references from a travelogue by a Portuguese missionary Fray Sebastien Manrique (1629–1643). After a series of spiritual events, Gopanna decided to use the money he collected to build a temple for Lord Rama

at Bhadrachalam. This infuriated the Sultan who imprisoned Gopanna in a cell at Golconda fort which is now a famous tourist site. The prison served as a functional space through which he could earn the grace of Lord Rama (Ram and Ram 84). This space enabled him to compose versified songs (*keertanas*) called *bandikhana bhajanagalu* (87). In the case of Ramadas, there seems to have been a certain method in how spiritual narratives were incorporated into the songs. In Ramadas's case using the spiritual element elevates him from the position of a criminal to that of a saint by conveying to the reader that his incarceration was due to a clash between the laws of the state and divine law. Eventually, he is released when his debts are paid through some unknown mythical external assistance. This aspect validates C.D. Narasimhaiah's statement that Indian prison writing possesses characteristics of mythical antiquity (7). It becomes clear that Ramadas was successful in his narrative persuasion since the sage composer Thyagaraja the doyen of South Indian classical music compares him to Bhakta Prahalada (Ram and Ram 87). Fray Sebastien Manrique, a Portuguese missionary and traveller was imprisoned along with his party in Midnapore on suspicions of piracy (Saran 393). He recounts the prison experiences and his eventual release in his travelogue. Manrique elaborates how he befriended a wealthy merchant who influenced the judge and managed to get him good accommodation, food (prepared from the merchant's house) and various other comforts in the jail (Saran 393-4).

The Colonial Phase and the Rise of Veracity

The transition that can be observed between the prison narratives of the colonial phase and those from the preceding phase is the former's preference for improved veracity. A change in narrative style was the shift from verse to prose since narratives from the previous age were usually poetic compositions. Interactions with Western styles and ideas enabled the development of Indian prison writing by privileging forms like diaries and journals which could be clearly observed during the end of this particular phase. The element of fiction that is so rampant in the narratives of the ancient phase,

becomes less pronounced in the narratives of this phase. Similar to Manrique's experiences, many narratives from the initial years of this phase were written by Westerners who had been imprisoned by indigenous rulers. Some examples of these narratives are Henry Oakes's *An Authentic Narrative of the Treatment of the English, Who Were Taken Prisoners on the Reduction of Bednore, by Tippoo Saib* (1785), *A Narrative of the Sufferings of James Bristow, Belonging to the Bengal Artillery, During Ten Years Captivity with Hyder Ally and Tippoo Saheb* (1793) by James Bristow and *The Captivity, Sufferings, and Escape of James Scurry* (1824) by James Scurry among others. These narratives and their socio-historical dimensions have been compiled by Pramod K. Nayar in *English Siege and Prison Writings: From the 'Black Hole' to the 'Mutiny'* (2017).

Ironically, it was during this age which saw the rise of veracity in Indian prison narratives that a narrative following the ancient aspects of verse and fiction was written. Kerala Varma Valiya Koil Thampuram also known as Kerala Varma or Kalidasa of Kerala is a Malayalam language poet and translator who was proficient in English and Sanskrit. He is said to represent the confluence of Eastern and Western traditions in Malayalam literature. His greatest work is *Mayurasandesam* (Peacock Message) which was written in 1884 (Paniker 54). This work combines the styles of *Manipravala* poetry and the pure Malayalam of Venmani poets in order to narrate personal and carceral experiences (Paniker 54). He was part of the royal family of erstwhile Parappanad, Malabar. Later, due to personal disaffection with the Maharaja he was forcefully confined to the palace at Haripad from where he wrote *Mayurasandesam* (haripad.in). In the poem, he uses the peacocks he happened to observe from the confines of Haripad palace as messengers to convey his feeling to his wife who was separated from him (haripad.in). Therefore, one of the greatest poems in Malayalam literature was a product of not only personal but also carceral experiences. The poem is filled with lines of romantic lyricism and natural imagery a quality that draws commonalities with Western aesthetics of prison poetry (Paniker 54). G.B.

Chevigny in his introduction to *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* states that “the prisoner values nature because of its absence inside the space of confinement” (28). He later opines that this imagery is used to depict the prisoner’s hunger for transcendence from the space of confinement (28). This aspect found in *Mayurasandesam* helps us understand how Kalidasa’s *Meghadūta* influenced this work in a very unique way. *Meghadūta* is a fictional poem that narrates the feelings of a *yaksha*, exiled by the god Kubera, who transcends his confinement by convincing a passing cloud to take a message to his wife (Wilson XXI). Similarly, Kerala Varma transcends his confinement with the assistance of a peacock which takes his message to his wife, thus imbuing the narrative with elements of fiction. Therefore, fictional elements assist the narrator to transcend the limitations imposed on him/her by imprisonment. It becomes clear at this point that throughout these phases, Indian prison writings, up to an extent, did retain elements of fiction.

Freedom Struggle and Preference for Veracity

From 1890s to 1940s – during freedom movement – incarceration of freedom fighters resulted in a plethora of prison narratives. It is necessary to point out that there was no standard format that prison writers followed during this age. The prison narratives followed different styles ranging from jail diaries (that were not intended to be published) through polemical narratives (intended for publication like newspaper articles) to autobiographical writings that focused on the prison experiences of the individual (Arnold 29). As mentioned earlier, this was because most prison narrators during this age were literate and familiar with Western narrative styles. It was during this period that prisons were taken up as a subject of discussion (as a metaphor) in various other literary forms like the novel and the play since the prison came to symbolize the oppressive nature of colonial rule in India (29). Therefore, prison and the experiences associated with it began to influence literatures that do not come under the generic classification called prison writing.

Although the prose form was rising in popularity prison poetry was also composed during this phase. The Ghadar movement (1913-1920), that has its origins in the sepoy mutiny of 1857, was an international political movement that was involved in armed revolution to overthrow British rule in India. Prison poetry was composed by Ghadarites like Sant Vishaka Singh and it resonated more with the non-literate masses than other forms of propaganda. These poems possess an inter-textual connection with Guru Gobind Singh's poetry, sufi *kissa* poetry and other folk and classical texts. The movement inspired other revolutionary freedom fighters and prison writers like Bhagat Singh who also wrote his *Jail Diary* in 1929.

During this phase, poetry was also written by political prisoners like M. K. Gandhi's *Songs from Prison* (1934) and Gurmukh Singh Musafir's *Musafirian* and *Toote Khand* (Punjabi) (1999). The poetry of Gurmukh Singh Musafir and Hira Singh Dard led to the emergence of '*bandi-kavya*' a native equivalent of prison poetry in Punjabi. A significant contribution to prison literature in Hindi was by S. H. Vatsyayan (Agyeya) who was imprisoned for assisting Bhagat Singh. He had written prison poetry in *Prison Days* (1946, English 2018) and his magnum opus titled *Shekhar: Ek Jeevanil Shekhar: A Life* (Part 1: 1940, Part 2: 1944, English 2018) was an autobiographical prison novel (Malinar 1762-76). This novel is one of the first examples of creative fiction written using the lived experience of prison life, a narrative quality this paper contends with.

Narratives written during this time that adhered to the autobiographical tradition received a lot of popularity. The prison soon became the birthplace for many narratives like Nehru's *Autobiography* (1936), Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Yervada Mandir (1932), Barindra Kumar Ghose's *The Tale of My Exile* (1922) Rajaji's *Jail Diary* (1941), Aurobindo Ghose's *Tales from Prison* (1909), Lala Lajpat Rai's *In the Story of My Deportation* (1908), Urmila Shastri's *My Days in Prison* (1930), Ullaskar Dutt's *Twelve Years of My Prison Life* (1924) and B.K. Sinha's *In Andamans: The Indian Bastille* (1939). Prison narratives like

Upendranath Bandyopadhyay's *Nirbaster Atmakatha* which were written in vernacular languages enjoyed popularity among the general public (Arnold 30). Prison became a holy site where those incarcerated could redefine themselves and also inform and inspire the general population outside through their writings. This aspect is best observed in the Gandhian idea of prison as *swarajashrama*. He asked Indians to consider prison as 'a holy and happy place' where conscientious men had achieved great things (Arnold 35). Gandhi's prison experiences also influenced the organization and working of his *ashrams* (37). Therefore, the ideas and writings of Gandhi had a significant influence on the emergence of Indian prison writing as a literature for social change.

The generic classification of prison writing in the Indian context gains significance in this age since such a classification enables the reader to understand history and culture as experienced in a carceral space. Although the prison narratives written during this phase varied in form, there was still a commonality that connected nearly all of them. One of the elements that assisted in attaining factual accuracy was the writer's systematic recollection of events from his/her memory. The concept of the 'autobiographical pact', described by Philippe Lejeune as a pact that is established between the narrator and the reader based on the identity of the author and the veracity of his/her narration (12), plays an important role here. This could be a reason why diary-writing was a form regularly used by prison writers. It is also necessary to point out that writers generally employed an archaeological model of recollecting memory which involves digging through various layers of memory to recover what he/she desires. It is said that the memory obtained through this method is mostly unchanged but would have decayed with time (Olney 19, Smith 17). This act naturally enabled the author to project a mirror image which is useful in persuading the reader, an aspect that can also be observed in the narratives of the next phase which can be terms as 'the leftist phase' of prison literature.

This phase starts from the rise of communism and trade unionism (1950s) through the period of emergency (1975-77) till the rise of Naxalism and Maoism (1970s). Although marked by a strong influence of leftist prison writings, this phase also witnessed narratives written by Individuals who were not leftists. A significant contribution to prison poetry in the Indian sub-continent during this phase was by Faiz Ahmad Faiz through his collections *Dast-e-Saba* (Urdu, 1953) and *Zindan Namah* (Urdu, 1957). A rich reservoir of Naxalite prison poetry by poets like Avtar Singh Sandhu Pash and Sant Ram 'Udasi' can be observed in Punjabi. There was also Punjabi prison poetry by non-Naxalite activist poets like Harbhajan Singh Hundal, *Kale Din* (1978), written during the Emergency (230). The other significant narratives are S. A. Dange's *From Primitive Communism to Slavery* (1949), Mahadev Desai's *Day to Day with Gandhi* in nine volumes (non-communist) (1953), Jayaprakash Narayan's *Prison Diary* (1977), Morarji Desai's *Story of My Life* (1979), celebrity and activist Snehalata Reddy's *A Prison Diary* (1970's), Comrade C.A. Balan's *In the Shadow of the Gallows* (1976) and Comrade Ramachandra Singh's *13 Years: A Naxalite's Prison Diary* (2018) among others. A post-Emergency collection of Punjabi prison poetry written under the backdrop of police atrocities towards people is Santokh Singh Dheer's *Aaun Wala Suraj* (1985). Since this phase also involved narratives being written with the purpose of social change, the emphasis on veracity continued. A development of the genre was that, along with the diary and the journal that emerged during the previous phase, the testimonial style was also given importance. This was due to the fact that testimonial writing (*testimonio*) is instrumental in narrating the struggles of a particular group against an oppressive structure (Smith and Watson 206). Unlike in the previous phases, narratives written by leftist political prisoners imprisoned on charges of Naxalism and Maoism continue to be published in the present day. Arun Ferreira's *Colours of the Cage: A Prison Memoir* (2014), the first text taken up for analysis, is a work that falls under this category.

Prison Narratives and Life Writing

Modern Indian prison narratives tend to fall within and move across the genre boundaries of memoir, testimony, diary, journal and collaborative narratives. The need to improve veracity and strengthen the autobiographical pact makes the narrators incorporate multimodal elements (photos, letters, cartoons, legal documents etc.) in the text. The memoir is privileged since it is more inclusive of the different types of representational media like portraiture (painted, sculpted, or photographic) and new technologies like the Internet, which hosts YouTube, social media like Facebook, and the blog (Couser 27). Memoir also emphasizes the memory of the author since the word 'memoir' in French means memory (Couser 19). The genre is not rigid and effectively uses narrative techniques from autobiography, biography and testimony, adding to its popularity (Couser 17-21, Beverly 13). Therefore, it becomes clear why Arun Ferreira chooses to write a memoir since it is an effective genre to maintain the truthfulness of the text while also engaging with social issues. One aspect of fiction that is systematically used in modern Indian prison narratives is the fictionalization of names. This is done for legal rather than literary reasons and also to prevent harassment of individuals.

Arun Ferreira's *Colours of the Cage: A Prison Memoir* narrates the prison experiences of the author who had been incarcerated inside Nagpur Central Jail for nearly five years on charges of being a Naxalite. Ferreira attempts to project a mirror image in order to adhere to the veracity of life writing. Ferreira uses a first-person narrative style and structures the writing like a conversation. The narrative employs an archeological model of recollecting memory through the use of forty-four letters he had sent to his family during the time of his incarceration. The author systematically recollects events from his memory using the letters as reference points. This strategy further solidifies the veracity of the narrative which is useful in persuading the reader. The narrative can be split into two parts: the letters that were written during his incarceration, and the narrative that follows these letters written after his incarceration. It becomes

clear that the letters were not meant to be published but the narratives that follow the letters were meant for publication. The letters are filled with personal elements while the narratives are more political in nature. The author starts numbering his letters from the fifth one and reveals to the reader how the prison censors the letters of the inmates. This act systematically validates and politicizes the oppressive nature of the prison system. The narrative also possesses an intertextual aspect since it employs references from other narratives written by Foucault and Russell in order to strengthen the authority of textual identity by presenting experiences lived and learned (Summers 29, Ferreira 90).



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

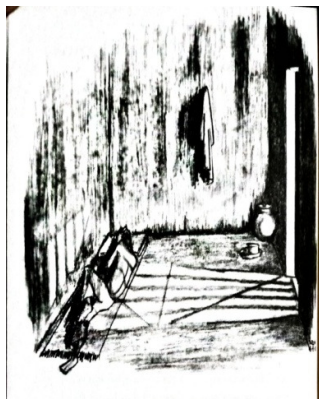


Figure 3.



Figure 4.

The author also uses illustrations (see figures 1,2,3 and 4) that he drew during his incarceration to depict life inside prison. The author provides the reader with a total of seven illustrations that are placed at the start of each chapter in the book. These illustrations are essential for understanding the narrative since they depict various aspects of prison like the terror of the police, the isolation of a prison cell, the structure of a prison compound and the exuberance of release. These narratives contribute to humanizing the experiences of the prison writer and enable the reader to visually experience the realities of prison (Nayar 14). This aspect of merging narrative and illustrations assists in cementing the position of the narrator as a witness in the minds of the reader. Awareness of the narrator's position as a witness is useful in making the reader understand the social, political and individual dimensions to the larger historical process of incarceration (Nayar 14). The use of a medium similar to that of a graphic narrative with a mix of visual and verbal elements allows the writer to shed light on the many loopholes, storylines, black holes, dead ends and labyrinths of history (Nayar 14). The narrative of the book also goes through a wide range of topics like tribal predicaments (Ferreira 146), Israel Palestinian

problem (131), transgender individuals (137), prison economy (111) and sexual relationships (100) within prison. The narrative not only adheres to the guidelines of prison writing but also follows the essence of a memoir. Therefore, it is clear that Ferreira's text not only adheres to the guidelines of prison writing but also to those of memoir and solidifies the veracity behind the experiences it wishes to convey. It augments the narrative style of prison writing by combining the visual and the verbal through the use of illustrations in its narrative.

The effectiveness of Ferreira's narrative lies in the use of the mirror image by the author in developing the autobiographical pact with the reader. Recent theories on autobiography point to the aspect that this mirror image might not be as sincere as it is projected by the writer (Summers 17). Such a criticism of the mirror image is possible through a deeper understanding of memory and how it is invoked by a writer. Giambattista Vico an enlightenment philosopher from Italy in his work *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (1725) provides a clear description of memory: "Memory has three different aspects: memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship" (280). Such an understanding opens up the discussion to consider memory as a form of narrative that incorporates fiction, naturally enabling one to problematize the veracity of memory and call in to question the truthfulness of the life writer

The Aspect of Fiction

Shashi Warriar's *The Hangman's Journal* (2000) as a prison narrative narrates the story of Janardhanan Pillai who for thirty years worked as the *aratchar* (hangman) in the kingdom of Travancore and, after Independence, the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The text and Pillai's life revolve around the executions he had performed in the central jail at Thiruvananthapuram. Although not a prisoner himself it becomes clear from the narrative that the prison was an inescapable place of physical and mental agony for Pillai. Through the process of revealing the repeated torture of the

death penalty and the politics associated with it, the narrative successfully depicts the monstrous nature of the State. The text opens up the discussion to problems and politics associated with the implementation and abolition of death penalty. This element enables this text to be considered as a narrative that contends with the dynamics of prison. The narrative covers Pillai's life from adolescence to the last years of his life. The book does not follow a chronological sequence and the use of memory is inconsistent. The book also has a different narrator (Janardhanan Pillai) and author (Shashi Warriar) making it a collaborative narrative. The narrative dimensions of the text are divided into two categories: the internal, involving Janardhanan Pillai's interaction with himself through the act of remembering, and external, involving his conversations with other people. It becomes clear that, as he digs further into his memory, Pillai contends with a mental entity of his repressed memories called the "faceless man". These instances within the narrative convey the internal turmoil that the narrator Janardhanan Pillai undergoes through the act of remembering. The author Shashi Warriar employs the processual model of memory in order to show how the narrator Janardhanan Pillai remembers things. This model of memory is a process of unclear and fragmented remembering that is temporal and brings forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self (Smith 17, Olney 20-1). This is validated when the narrator in the opening segments says "My memory is unpredictable, for sometimes the smallest of incidents lingers on in my mind far longer than it should" (Warriar 11). Therefore, the author through the narrator problematizes the authenticity and sequence of memory and opens up the discussion to the politics of life writing mentioned earlier.

The title of the book is *The Hangman's Journal* but the book at no point adheres to the conventions of journal writing. A journal is an intimate record of experiences and thoughts written frequently over a period (Smith and Watson 196). This means that the authorial 'I' specifically refers to the author of the text. Instead, the author/biographer Shashi Warriar employs a

narrative style that mixes elements of autobiography and biography thereby recording the experiences of both himself and Janardhanan Pillai. Therefore, the authorial 'I' frequently oscillates between Shashi Warriar and Janardhanan Pillai in this text. To further problematize the narrative, the author intentionally incorporates elements of fiction into a narrative subject which is factual thereby enabling one to infer its classification as an 'autofiction' which is defined by Sergei Doubrovsky as a 'fiction of strictly real events' (Dix 2). Since the text is a semi-fictional work its position as a valid prison narrative can be called into question since it does not completely conform to the guidelines (especially authenticity) of prison writing in a Western sense. This aspect highlights the spectrum between factual and fictional narratives wherein genres like autobiography and biography belong to the factual end and rigidly resist the inclusion of fictional elements into their narrative structure. The tussle between fact (autobiography, biography, etc.) and fiction (autofiction, novel, etc.) arises out of elements of fiction in prison writing, calling into question the authenticity and truthfulness of the narrator and problematizing the autobiographical pact (Lejeune 3-13). At this point, contrary to this notion, the paper puts forward the idea that the use of a semi-fictional narrative structure to narrate real events (autofictional) expands the genre of prison writing. The resultant subgenre that can be referred to as 'informed prison fiction' consists of works that combine fictional narrative techniques with first-hand prison experiences of the author. The word 'informed' is used in this instance to denote the lived experience and first-hand knowledge possessed by the author with regards to life inside prison. This means that the author who possesses the lived experience of prison life decides to write a book based on the aforementioned experience and proceeds to incorporate fictional elements in the structure of the book without in any way affecting the veracity of the experience. One can further consider Indian prison narratives like Nandini Oza's *Wither Justice: Stories of Women in Prison* (2006), Manoranjan Byapari's *There's Gunpowder in the Air* (2013 (Bengali), 2018

(English)) and Bellapu Anuradha's *Prison Notes of a Woman Activist* (2015 (Telugu), 2021 (English)) to be representative texts of this subgenre.

Conclusion

The paper establishes that prison writings have been a part of literary culture right from ancient times, but due to political reasons, this corpus has suffered gross neglect. These writings undergo a shift of style. Ancient prison narratives are available to us in the verse form, but as realism, as a mode of literature, gains ascendancy, prison writings begin to appear in prose in the form of autobiographies, memoirs, testimonials and journals, especially during the struggle for Independence. The analysis of the primary texts has revealed Indian prison narratives presently undergoing a process of hybridization. Fictional elements enter into prison writings, thereby creating a category of Indian prison fictional writing. Finally, it can be said that the systematic inclusion of fictional elements into the fabric of prison writing will alter the genre and lead to the development of a subgenre called 'informed prison fiction'.

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