

# South Asia: Prison writing sheds harsh light on our states and societies

Thursday 25 January 2024, by [PURKAYASTHA Sharmila](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2024).

**‘For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit’, an anthology of prison poems, testifies to the coercive nature of the state and society - yet its under-representation of regional poets speaks of wider exclusions**

*My dangerous personality  
That you do not understand:  
The secret is poetry.*

**- ‘Poetry’ by Varavara Rao, 30 December 1987. Translated by N Venugopal**

What is it about poetry that states and governments in power find difficult to accept? Varavara Rao, a well-known revolutionary poet and long-time detainee of the Indian government, writes in ‘Poetry’ about the enduring resilience and power of verse to voice people’s concerns in the face of surveillance and propaganda. He expands on the poet’s “dangerous personality”:

*You go on about surveillance  
Poetry gets ignited and continues to fire.  
You go on about governance  
Poetry talks about people even in sleep.*

...

*Poetry is an open secret-the state ceases to exist  
As poetry takes shape in my heart.  
It reaches those it has to ...  
Even as it rises in my imagination  
It inspires people to act in unison.  
The secret is that  
My poetry took birth  
With the first signs of people’s struggles.*

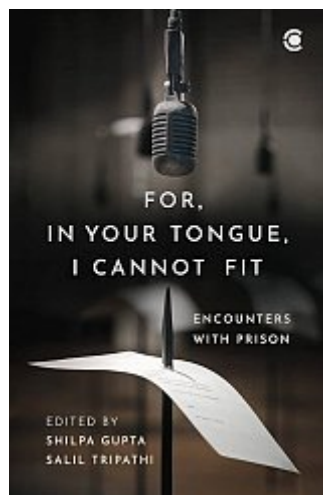
According to Carlos Liscano, a dissident Uruguayan novelist who spent over a decade behind bars, “words” are the most “forbidden object in prison”. And yet, “Given a human being’s pig headedness, which a prisoner shares by definition or he wouldn’t be there, having broken some rule – not being able to speak makes speaking his only desire”. Rao, seeming to build on Liscano’s view, writes: “Like the blood which journeys from the heart back to the heart, all my words flow back into my silence. There they sustain and nourish the health of my body.”

The relationship between words and silence, between the power of poetry and the stillness of life behind bars, concerns imprisoned poets and political detainees everywhere, across multiple times and places. *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit: Encounters with Prison*, an anthology of words and

images from writers who have experienced incarceration as well as writers who have defended artists facing persecution around the world, offers a multifaceted and nuanced glimpse of the realities and concerns that unite incarcerated individuals.

Edited by the artist Shilpa Gupta and the writer Salil Tripathi, the anthology borrows its haunting title from a medieval Azeribaijani poet, Imadeddin Nesimi, invoking the many dimensions of the incarcerated imagination. At the same time, the book's stark subtitle – "Encounters with Prison" – suggests the brutality of imprisonment. Traversing diverse mediums and genres – poetry, illustrations, sculptures, installation photographs, self-accounts, interviews, reports – the book offers a multi-sensory window into prison experience. It includes short profiles and the works of over 60 poets and writers who cover many aspects of imprisonment, as well as of exile.

The anthology is timely, including in Southasia, as the presence of the "barred" artistic imagination is a stark reality of recent years – Rao, for instance, after earlier periods of incarceration, was controversially imprisoned by the current Indian government from 2018 to 2022, charged under draconian anti-terrorism laws in the infamous Elgar Parishad case. Yet that imagination is hardly understood, particularly since prisons continue to remain opaque or even invisible institutions in the public eye.



For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit : Encounters with Prison. Edited by Shilpa Gupta and Salil Tripathi.  
*Westland Books, Context (November 2022)*

The book's genesis lies in Shilpa Gupta's sound-art installation of the same title, which displayed a hundred "voices" of incarceration. It was first exhibited at the 2018 Edinburgh Art Festival, after which it travelled to many places, including the Kochi and Venice Biennales. In his excellent essay accompanying the anthology, Salil Tripathi describes "Gupta's profoundly moving installation" as a journey which helps "imagine the terror, isolation and powerlessness that imprisonment imposes on a poet, simply for thinking, reflecting, expressing and writing. And how those experiences, so difficult to describe, get transformed into words of enormous power and inspiration."

Tripathi joins the many dots of Gupta's installation by introducing known and unknown poets who have spoken out against political powers and have suffered backlash in return. The book seeks to bring together poets and writers from diverse nations in an experimental and innovative manner. In its arrangement, it reproduces elements of the installation by letting the component pieces speak for themselves as tracts on oppression and resistance. The book's imaginative sweep offers thought-provoking content for readers, and the wide swathe of historical time and geographical space it ranges over stimulates multiple conceptual questions.

Besides the book's 60-odd poetic pieces, presented in a middle section, the volume also contains a section with six varied kinds of writing from India pertaining to protest and incarceration. Among these are an essay on free speech and the law by the legal scholar Gautam Bhatia, and a visual lexicon and a "toolkit" on authoritarianism imagined by the French-Indian poet Karthika Nair. There is also a reflective piece by the journalist and author Nilanjana Roy on the protests that took place across India in 2019 after the ruling Narendra Modi government passed the divisive Citizenship (Amendment) Bill paired with the National Register of Citizens; the prison poem by Varavara Rao alluded to earlier; a testimonial account on the lives of women prisoners and their children by Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, both activists of the Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage) women's collective that has struggled against various forms of oppression; and a self-account by the activist Umar Khalid, long a whipping boy of the Modi government, who is still controversially incarcerated today on charges of instigating the anti-Muslim riots in Delhi in 2020. The inclusion here of Rao, Kalita, Narwal and Khalid is important as all four have been incarcerated by the present Indian government for their political activities and protests. (All but Khalid are now out on bail.)

The final section of the book is especially eclectic as it includes the work of poets, incarcerated or otherwise, self-accounts of exile by varied writers, and two editorial "conversations": one with the poet Malay Roychoudhury, part of the Hungryalist movement in Bengali poetry, and another with the Bangladeshi lawyer Sara Hossain, who speaks about what keeps her going in her tireless support of writers, journalists and poets.

All this diversity adds richness to the compilation, but, as is evident, there is a willing looseness to the book. The constituent pieces are threaded together by the editors' rather wide-ranging interpretation of the theme of incarceration, which is made wider still by the inclusion in the book of their artistic and writerly collaborators and associates. But even while the book's intensity suffers as a result, it remains a fascinating anthology that deserves debate of its thematic concerns.

### **Carceral identities**

Imadeddin Nesimi's 'Both Worlds Can Fit Within Me' is extraordinary as it shows the societal neglect of the poet's imagination and the impossibility of encasing the poet within the signs of the world. In the context of the anthology, lines such as "The Universe is my verse; my instance is your life./ Recognize me by these signs; know that in signs I cannot fit" are relevant for also addressing the seldom discussed experiences of women prisoners, invoking the inadequate general understanding of women's imagination behind bars. The book corrects this absence through its inclusion of well over 20 women poets, writers, essayists and translators. It asserts that not only have women in the modern day been imprisoned and suffered diverse forms of captivity, including house arrest, but also that women poets have been incarcerated in the past – as demonstrated by the 10<sup>th</sup>-century writings of Rabi'a Balkhi, the first woman poet in the history of Persian poetry, and also the work of Zeb-un-Nissa, the poet-daughter of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

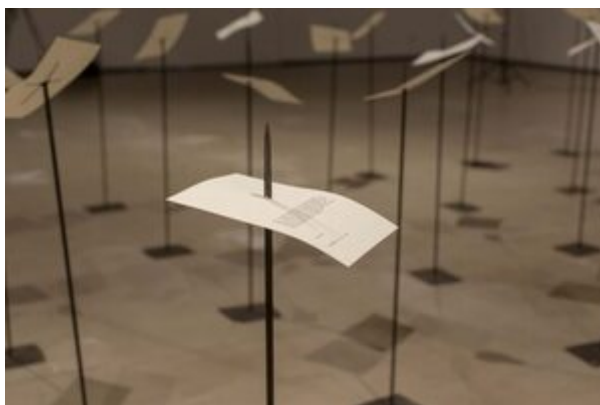
More than these sporadic voices from the past, which remind us of the *longue durée* of female incarceration, it is the book's contemporary pieces on captivity that hold attention. The prose writings on imprisonment by the Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour and the Burmese surgeon, human rights activist and writer Ma Thida – sentenced to 20 years in prison for "endangering public peace, having contact with illegal organisations, and distributing unlawful literature" – make for powerful reading. Tatour's impassioned poem 'Resist, My People, Resist Them' resulted in her arrest by Israeli authorities in 2015 on charges of inciting terrorism. After serving three months in detention, she was placed under house arrest for three years. She was convicted in 2018, sentenced to five months of imprisonment, and was released thereafter. Besides her poem, the book also includes a prose piece by Tatour focused on her incarceration in a "bleak cell" where she was denied pen and paper. But her intense desire to write compelled her to find an alternative to writing materials: she

tore off the zipper from her jacket and used it to scrawl on the walls. “Success. My name, my date and time were the first things I wrote. Then my hand inscribed my prison poem.”

Just as poignant, if in a different way, is the account by the activists Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, which deals in part with captive children. This focus on jail children underlines a heartbreaking complication of women’s imprisonment, in that it very often leads to children being born or reared, at least up to a certain age, in captivity. Kalita and Narwal write:

These children had committed no “crime”, but found themselves in prison because their mothers, often abandoned by their families, had no one in the outside world to whom they could entrust the responsibility of caring for their children while they served prison time. Their mothers were very young, primarily coming from the most marginalised communities in the country, as much prisoners of various forms of structural oppression and exploitation as of situations that may or may not have led them to commit the “crimes” they stood accused of. They, with other women prisoners, collectively brought up the children, slogging for hours doing various odd jobs inside the prison that did not even pay the basic minimum wage. The money they earned was used for buying a few clothes, milk, food and other supplies for their children from the jail shop.

The piece allows the reader to appreciate that Kalita and Narwal are part of what one might call a legacy: several other ex-prisoners in India have written on jail children, including Mary Tyler, who spent five years in Hazaribagh Central Jail in Bihar as a “Naxalite” prisoner; Meenakshi Sen, a writer and political prisoner during the Naxalite movement; Joya Mitra, the author of a prison memoir titled *Killing Days*; the writer Seema Azad, who wrote about 26 women doing time in Naini Central Jail in Allahabad during her incarceration; as well as the activist B Anuradha and the lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj, who in their respective recent writings from jail have presented memorable portraits of women prisoners and their children. This is just one example of the wider resonance of the books’ contents, and there are many similarly rich resonances which deserve greater thematic consideration and treatment.



A photograph of ‘For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit’, a sound-art installation by the artist Shilpa Gupta. For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit, an anthology borne out of Gupta’s original work, collates images and words from prisoners around the world, offering a multifaceted and nuanced glimpse of the realities and concerns that unite incarcerated individuals.

*Photo : Shilpa Gupta / Westland Books*

As one absorbs the book, what becomes startlingly obvious is the overwhelming presence of Muslim poets and writers. Umar Khalid’s powerful jail account, reprinted from *Outlook* magazine, is testimony to the ways in which the Indian state criminalises politics based on identity. Describing his loneliness in jail, Khalid writes, “certain experiences leave me lonelier even amidst prisoners – I am talking about the internalised prejudice and bigotry against Muslims. In jail, I have come face to face with bigotry and prejudice against Muslims unlike anything I have faced before.” Beyond Khalid’s

imprisonment, the book focuses on the suffering of Muslim dissident poets elsewhere. Dia'a al-Abdullah, a Syrian blogger and poet, was first arrested in 2011 and rearrested in 2012 after posting an open letter on Facebook to his country's authoritarian president, Bashar al-Assad, titled 'As a Syrian Citizen, I Denounce'. His poem 'Crypt', written in 2011 while he was in prison, where he allegedly suffered torture and beatings in solitary confinement, powerfully expresses how he became an enemy to his "homeland" for speaking out:

*So, this is my homeland;  
I became its enemy  
by speaking out  
Speaking out brings pain -  
but how can we not?*

As of now, al-Abdullah's fate remains unknown.

### **Prison poetics**

*For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* includes the poetry of Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni environmentalist and human rights activist executed by the Nigerian military in 1995. His execution, along with eight others, underlines the horrors of the new economic order against which he and his fellow activists crusaded. Saro-Wiwa had vehemently opposed multinational petroleum companies' exploitation of oil fields on the lands of the Ogoni people. His poem included in the anthology is short but immensely effective as it uses the trope of dance to urge the Ogoni to resist the military regime ruling Nigeria at the time and to reclaim a new tomorrow under an "Ogoni Star". One wishes that there was more space devoted to cases of execution in the book within the theme of incarceration, as this deserves greater space and thought.

The book focuses on the suffering of activists and poets under totalitarian or autocratic regimes such as those in Russia, China and Myanmar. Such global reach is welcome, but the near-absence of examples from Latin America is surprising. All through the 1970s and 1980s, Operation Condor, a US-backed campaign against leftist leaders and cadres in Latin America, resulted in large-scale arrests, disappearances, killings and torture. The rich poetry and literature that has emerged from this repression and struggle does not find place in the book, other than with the inclusion of Roque Antonio García, a Salvadoran communist poet better known by his pen name, Roque Dalton. Dalton was known for his role in his country's revolutionary movement and his work was banned in El Salvador for years. His assassination in 1975 by leftist revolutionary militants that disagreed with him is now officially acknowledged as a "terrible mistake", and he has since been recognised as the greatest Salvadoran poet.

There are other gaps and silences too. Take, for instance, the piece by Burhan Sönmez, a Kurdish human-rights activist and writer who is the current president of PEN International, a global writers' advocacy group with which Tripathi is associated. Sönmez recounts his meeting with the jailed poet İlhan Sami Çomak in Istanbul's Silivri Prison. "He was a twenty-two-year-old geography student at the University of Istanbul when he was arrested in 1994," Sönmez writes. "He was tortured for alleged ties to illegal Kurdish organisations and was sentenced to life imprisonment." Sönmez and Çomak had studied in different departments of the same university a few years apart, and the piece is intensely haunting as Çomak tells Sönmez about the corrosive effects of long incarceration: "I try to remember, I try to imagine that I was once outside walking the streets of Istanbul, but my mind does not perceive. I lost my sense of reality of my life outside. It's like I was born here in prison and what I know about the world is either what I've heard from visitors or read in books." Sönmez's piece is titled 'Poet, Good Horseman', and he believes that Çomak "looked like a horseman. If he could get through those irons, he would have jumped on his horse and gone, no matter where." The

reader shares the intensity of the writer's imagination but wonders why the editors did not include some of Çomak's own poetry.

Possibly the orientation of the book, inspired by a sound-art installation and with minimal editorial insertions, accounts for some of the unevenness of the selection. Consider the questions raised by a piece from the Australian poet Ali Cobby Eckermann. A product of Australia's "Stolen Generations" – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were systematically taken from their birth families before the 1970s to be raised by white families instead – Eckermann writes movingly about racism and the "island prison" that Australia is for Aboriginal writers and people. Her piece fits well with the anthology's pieces on exile as she recounts both captivity and an internal exile of sorts within her own country. But if Eckermann's work was included, why did the editors not consider including poetry from the Indian Northeast or Kashmir, both regions that have experienced settler colonialism in postcolonial times and whose people have often been forced to live in conditions akin to internal exile? Such absences suggest that the book largely associates exile with forceful eviction from one's homeland or with the conditions attending discrimination by race. But there can be, and is, much more to it.

### **India's wars of words**

Prison poetry proffers an intimate account of the coercive nature of the state. In the case of India, such poetry also tells us a history of changing poetic visions associated with incarceration. Forming a veritable genre of political expression, Indian prison writings have always played a role in the vanguard of change at least from the nationalist period onwards. While several well-known anticolonial poets focussed on freeing their land from foreign oppression – for instance, Ram Prasad Bismil and Kazi Nazrul Islam – postcolonial poets have voiced different political concerns and issues. In this context, the editors' choice of featuring the Indian Urdu poet and activist Majrooh Sultanpuri is particularly interesting. Few remember today that he was incarcerated for his allegedly anti-establishment writings, and that he came out in support of his friends Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer, fellow leftist poets who were accused and imprisoned by the Pakistan government in the infamous Rawalpindi conspiracy case. The inclusion of Sultanpuri and Faiz, whose poetry also features in the anthology, is a reminder of the fact that anti-communism was official policy in both India and Pakistan in the aftermath of Partition. In subtle and paradoxical ways, the Indian elite was in favour of postcolonial politics while still displaying a hegemonic hostility to communism.

The 1960s and 1970s were socially and politically restless times in India. This turbulence is partially reflected in the work of Malay Roychoudhury, because the Hungryalist movement in Bengal remained iconoclastic and did not transition to more revolutionary poetry as, for instance, in the case of Telugu poetry. Unfortunately, even as it seemingly bids to be regionally representative across India, the anthology omits revolutionary poets and novelists of the Telugu language. Cherabanda Raju, whose work could provide a comparative perspective on iconoclasm and poetry, is just one strong candidate for inclusion. In the early 1960s, Telugu poetry, through the Digambara (naked) poetry movement, witnessed a similar rebellion to that which formed the Hungryalist movement in Bengal. Raju was an important contributor to this development, and one of the pioneers of the influential Virasam, or the Viplava Rachayitala Sangham (Revolutionary Writers' Association), which has been active in Telugu literature since the 1970s. He was twice detained, and lost his job as a schoolteacher because of his implication in the Secunderabad conspiracy case – which also targeted other writers and poets, including Varavara Rao. Raju died of a cancerous brain tumour in 1982 while still in prison, two years before the closure of the conspiracy case in 1984.

*For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* joins a list of well-known similar anthologies, such as the *Thema Book of Naxalite Poetry* (1987), edited by Sumanta Banerjee, and the eclectic *Voices of Emergency: An All India Anthology of Protest Poetry of the 1975-77 Emergency* (1983), compiled by the

American scholar John Oliver Perry. There are also more contemporary collections such as *Colours of the Cage* (2014), a prison memoir by Arun Ferreira, who was arrested for alleged ties to the Naxalite movement but later acquitted, and *Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?* (2022), an anthology of poetry by the university professor and activist GN Saibaba, currently behind bars in deteriorating health while serving a life sentence for alleged activism against the state and links to banned Maoist groups.

In its selection, *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* shows an under-representation of revolutionary poetry, seeming to mistake iconoclasm alone for revolutionary zeal. In today's times, the incarceration of people protesting the forcible takeover of their lands and natural resources, or demanding the right to their homeland, or challenging crackdowns on political dissent and demanding official accountability, has also brought new awareness to the question of who counts as a "political" prisoner. It has become especially necessary to give voice to marginalised prison poets since an overwhelming number of prisoners in Indian jails – over half, to be more exact – are Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims.

Such voices have found expression, as in *Sarhul: Creative Expression of Prisoners of Jharkhand* (2022), a compilation of writings by detainees lodged in various Jharkhand jails, or *Tinka Tinka Tihar* (2018), an anthology of works by women prisoners in Delhi's Tihar Jail. Also not to be overlooked are texts such as the heart-rending prison account of the Islamic scholar Abdul Qayyum Mansuri, *I am Mufti and I am not a Terrorist* (2015), Mohammad Aamir Khan's excellent co-authored memoir *Framed as a Terrorist: My 14-Year Struggle to Prove My Innocence* (2017), and Abdul Wahid Shaikh's amazing narrative of his own saga for justice, *Begunah Quadi* (2017), which has also been published in English as *Innocent Prisoner* (2022) and been made into a film. These Muslim men were all falsely accused of involvement in terrorism and later acquitted, but only after spending many years of their lives in prison.

These are important texts to expose the pattern of false charges and unfair incarceration that many Muslims have been forced to suffer at the hands of the Indian state. They recall similar texts written more than a decade ago now: *My Days in Prison* (2005) by Iftikhar Gilani, and Anjum Zamarud Habib's *Prisoner No 100: An Account of My Days and Nights in an Indian Prison* (2011). Gilani, a journalist, was accused of providing information to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and arrested under the draconian Official Secrets Act in 2002. Zamarud Habib, a young woman political activist from Kashmir, was arrested in Delhi in 2003 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and spent five years in Tihar Jail.

There are still relatively few compilations of prison poetry in India, just as across the Subcontinent, and it is still nascent as a published form. However, prison poetry itself is not new, here or elsewhere; it is an enduring and vigorous genre that documents and critiques the harsh realities of both society and the state. Because of brutal carceral conditions, which are institutional and societal in their many dimensions, the self in the cell is markedly different from the self we find in non-prison poetry. Given the manifold possibilities of prison poetics, one hopes that future anthologies will devote greater attention to the possibilities opened up by *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*.

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**P.S.**

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