

(Un)Free Writings.

Practices of Writing in/about Incarceration in Indian Prisons

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Abstract

Prison writings are written artefacts that are produced by incarcerated persons about their lived experiences of incarceration. Often these writings take the forms of letters, essays, poetry, prison diaries, book manuscripts, etc. This paper studies prison writings from Indian prisons using three distinct lenses: as a genre, as a practice, and as material objects or artefacts. Methodologically, this paper combines interpretive analysis of over a dozen texts, which largely include published, but also few unpublished prison writings, along with in-depth interviews with four prison writers about their experiences of producing written narratives of their life in incarceration. Ultimately, the paper shows that unlike their imprisoned writers, prison writings have relatively freer lives of their own. Prison writings become the medium through which incarcerated persons can voice their resistance, protest their repression, proclaim their innocence, and engage with the world outside, even as their writers remain unfree.



Écrits (non) libres. Pratiques d'écriture sur l'incarcération dans les prisons indiennes

Résumé

Les écrits de prison sont des artefacts écrits, produits par des personnes incarcérées qui relatent leur expérience d'emprisonnement. Ces écrits prennent souvent la forme de lettres, d'essais, de poèmes, de journaux de prison, de manuscrits de livres, etc. Cet article étudie les écrits issus de prisons indiennes sous trois angles distincts : en tant que genre, en tant que pratique et en tant qu'objets matériels ou artefacts. Sur le plan méthodologique, cet article combine l'analyse interprétative de plus d'une douzaine de textes, dont la plupart sont des écrits de prison publiés, mais aussi quelques inédits, et des entretiens approfondis avec quatre écrivains sur leurs expériences de production d'écrits sur leur vie en prison. En fin de compte, l'article montre que, contrairement à leurs auteurs emprisonnés, les écrits de prison ont leur propre vie, relativement libre. Les écrits de prison deviennent le moyen par lequel les personnes incarcérées peuvent exprimer leur résistance, protester contre la répression qu'ils subissent, proclamer leur innocence et s'engager dans le monde extérieur, même si leurs auteurs ne sont pas libres.



Keywords

Everyday carceral life; Global South; Incarceration; India; Prison writing.



Mots-clés

Écriture carcérale ; incarcération ; Inde ; Sud global ; vie quotidienne carcérale.

There was another detainee in the block I am in. He was illiterate. But he would squat on the steps of the block with a heap of newspapers by his side. He would then hold each and every newspaper in his hands, one after another, and stare blankly at the pages for a long time. When asked what he was staring at he would reply, 'Just looking at the pictures.' I have my own suspicions. By touching the printed words with his fingers, by looking at photographs, by smelling the ink, by feeling the density of the paper, he was certainly extracting some news. Like him, I browse through all the pages whenever I get the paper for the news that is not there.¹

Do keep writing the letters of love, they mean the world to us. You know, in one of the books I was reading, there was this petition by indentured Indian labourers of Ba district in Fiji to the Colonial Secretary in 1914. The workers wanted a "Hindustani" to be appointed at the post office, who could write correct addresses on postcards [...] how letters have mattered through history, so much and so dearly [...]
Love and rage,
Devangana".²

INTRODUCTION

The two quotes above evoke the significance of the written word and of textual artefacts in connection with carceral contexts. This essay explores prison writings as practices and objects which facilitate sociality and social relations between incarcerated persons and the world outside. To this end, I view and analyse prison writings through three distinct lenses: as a genre, as a practice, and as material objects or artefacts, and in the following sections of the paper I elaborate on each of these three attributes of prison writings. Eventually I argue that prison writings are a medium through which incarcerated persons can voice their resistance, protest their repression, proclaim their innocence, and engage with the world outside, even if their writers remain unfree.

Broadly construed, I define prison writings as written artefacts that are produced by incarcerated persons about their lived experiences of incarceration. Often these writings take the forms of letters, essays, poetry, prison diaries, book manuscripts, etc. There are several prison writing projects and publicly available collections that have emerged all around the world, several of which also result from literacy and education programs in prisons. Few prominent examples of such collections include the *Fourth City*,³ the American Prison Writing Archive,⁴ and *Women, Writing and Prison*,⁵ the last of which mainly focuses on the carceral experiences of and the writings by incarcerated women. Several scholars have researched especially on contemporary epistolary practices of incarcerated persons. For instance, through her research on letter writing practices of incarcerated youth, Wilson shows that by embellishing letters with visual markers, incarcerated youth are able to "retain a sense of social identity in an institutional world."⁶ Similarly Maybin's work with Death Row inmates who exchange regular written correspondence with volunteering penfriends shows the centrality of letter writing practices in the incarcerated persons' lives and the ways in which they facilitate the production a personal and private space within the carceral settings.⁷

Some of the most well-known prison writings that circulate among us have been written by political prisoners. Though the category of political prisoners remains legally undefined, political prisoners often refer to political actors who have been incarcerated for their dissenting views and acts of defiance against the regimes in power. Furthermore, prison writings by political prisoners have been integral to political resistance and decolonial movements around the world. Few examples of globally famous political prisoners

¹ Rao, 2010, 45.

² From Devangana Kalita's letter sent from Tihar Jail 6, New Delhi dated 16th March 2021. Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, "'Love and rage': Natasha and Devangana's letters from Tihar Jail 6", *The Caravan*, 13 June 2021.

³ Larson, 2013.

⁴ Doran Larson, "History, Process, Mission", American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College, <https://apw.dhinitiative.org/> (accessed 15 July 2020).

⁵ Jacobi and Stanford, 2014.

⁶ Wilson, 2000.

⁷ Maybin, 2000.

who wrote while being incarcerated include Gerry Adams, Angela Davis, M.K. Gandhi, Antonio Gramsci, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Bhagat Singh, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.⁸ However, not all prison writers come from political backgrounds or aim their writings towards political work. Here English novelist Jeffery Archers' three-volume prison memoir comes to mind.⁹

Prison environments are charged with disciplinary power. Therefore, any writing which emerges during and about the experiences of incarceration is political in nature. Writing about the carceral condition challenges the disciplinary power of the prison, and in doing so prison writers speak back against the prison order.¹⁰ Therefore, irrespective of whether prison writers are incarcerated for their political views and actions, or if they are incarcerated in civil cases or for personal conflicts, all writings that emerge from incarceration and which document the carceral experience, are inherently political in nature. As Larson writes about incarcerated persons writing from and about carceral life, "in writing of and against their condition, they articulate the minimum without which political life falls back into merely biological life."¹¹ In my own research on prisons writings from India, I engage with the works of both political and non-political writers who have written from and about their experiences of incarceration. Some of these prison writings vocally criticize the oppressive power structures within the prison. Others describe mundane everyday life and events that constitute the carceral experience. And yet, they all are political writings, which have the potential to challenge the prison order.

Existing body of academic literature on prison writings, though relatively small, does have some interdisciplinary resonance. Scholars of literature and creative writing have significantly contributed to conversations on prison writings, demonstrating the power of writing in carceral settings and the challenge that practices of writing in prison offer to the existing prison order.¹² Some other works especially focus on the genre of the letter and letter writing practices in incarceration, highlighting their value in redefining the carceral experience for those incarcerated.¹³ However, most of the literature on prison writings comes from prison contexts in the global North, which only partially resonates with writing experiences of incarcerated persons in the global South. As the lived experiences of incarceration differ so significantly in the overcrowded and under resourced prisons of global South countries like India, there is an urgent need for focused research on writing practices in the prisons of the global South. So far, research on Indian prison writings has largely confined itself to only analysing writings by activists and political leaders of the Indian freedom struggle in the 20th century.¹⁴ In that sense, this essay shifts focus to more contemporary writings and further extends the scope of analysis beyond a critical reading of published prison writings. Therefore, one of the aims of this essay is to unravel the everyday practices and experiences of incarcerated writers in Indian prisons. By interviewing formerly incarcerated persons who wrote and published while they were in prison, this essay captures the motivations, the challenges and the strategies through which writers write within the forbidding environments of the prison and subsequently share their writings with the world outside.

Brief note on writing practices in Indian prisons

At the very outset, I must mention that in the everyday lives of most incarcerated persons in Indian prisons, writing is an anomalous practice, pursued only by very few. Several of my formerly incarcerated interlocutors testified to this. Some blamed it on the relatively low literacy levels amongst incarcerated persons and the absence of a "writing culture" among the mass of incarcerated people in Indian prisons. Close to 70% of India's prison population is illiterate or only semi-literate.¹⁵ Moreover, my interlocutors

⁸ Adams, 1990; Davis, 1971; Gandhi, 2011, 1932; Gramsci, 1992, 1994; King, 1963; Mandela, 2018; Singh, 2018a; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1981.

⁹ Archer, 2003, 2004, 2005.

¹⁰ Larson, 2017, xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2017, xii.

¹² Jacobi and Stanford, 2014; Larson, 2017; Luk, 2018.

¹³ Wilson, 2000; Maybin, 2000; Garcia, 2016.

¹⁴ Srinath, 2014.

¹⁵ National Crime Records Bureau, 2020.

also spoke of the lack of access to writing materials and the presence of heavy surveillance and censorship as significant hurdles to any writing endeavour. Among those who do have the skills to write, only few can afford to access writing and reading materials to be sent to them from outside.

In an article that carefully analyses the Supreme Court rulings which recognise Indian prisoners' right to write, Baljeet Kaur observes, that writing under incarceration in India is not a matter of right but instead, a *privilege*, that is extended selectively by the prison authorities to only some incarcerated people.¹⁶ The absence of initiative among most incarcerated persons to engage in any forms of writing is quite systematically produced. The Model Prison Manual is a testimony to this, as in it one can observe the use of abstract language for prisoners' rights to access reading and writing materials and mailing facilities, along with granting arbitrary discretion to prison authorities to stop their access to those incarcerated at any point.¹⁷ There exists seemingly arbitrary censorship of letters and other forms of writings, depending on which incarcerated persons are perceived as threats and need to be subdued. For instance, in his book *Colours of the Cage*, Arun Ferreira reveals that in case of any defiance of prison rules such as protests or hunger strikes by those incarcerated, they were punished by stripping away their rights to write letters home.¹⁸

The privileges of writing, be it letters or other forms, are extended only to those incarcerated persons who conform to the narratives that are favourable to prison authorities. Any deviance from that is censored, or has to be written and smuggled out illicitly. The degrees of surveillance on prisoners and their writings are also dependent on their social backgrounds and political dispositions. For instance, diaries maintained by two of my interlocutors who were non-political prisoners were not surveilled. Their language of writing, which was English in both their cases, also mattered, as there were barely any officials or fellow prisoners who were skilled in English to scrutinise and censor their writings. As one of my interlocutors confided during our interview, "No one ever attempted to read my notebooks. However, from time to time, they would enquire, whether I was writing anything 'wrong' about them. I would always deny politely, which was also the truth. And they let me and my writing be." However, many other prison writers whose works I engaged with in this research were not as fortunate. As we will discover in the later sections of this essay, several writers incarcerated in different parts of the country had to struggle to retain their writings in prison and could only clandestinely share them with the world outside.

Methodological notes

This paper primarily draws from the research that I conducted for my Master's thesis which was submitted in July 2020. As mentioned above, due to the absence of any organised archives or curated resources of Indian prison writings, my first task for conducting this research was to generate a corpus of contemporary prison writings from India. Thus, the first stage of my fieldwork began with the curation of a reading list of contemporary prison writings, and subsequently acquiring them in digital or physical formats. For this research, I chose to focus on published writings alone, and mainly engaged with writings produced over the last two decades. In making this choice, I wanted to acknowledge the sensitive nature of incarceration and prison writings that emerge from carceral experiences. By working with published materials, I could ensure that I read and engaged with only those writings which had been consciously put out by their writers for all to read. Furthermore, I focus on those prison writings which are non-fiction and have been written following first-hand experiences of incarceration. In the case of prison writers, their unique position during incarceration, where they are denied the usual sociality and the experience of a social life, which are prerequisites to the experience of humanity, makes them witnesses of a form of life which can never be experienced by those of us who have always been outside.¹⁹ I take into account both kinds of writings, those written from inside, as well as those written in retrospect, after an incarcerated person has been released.

¹⁶ Kaur, 2019.

¹⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016.

¹⁸ Ferreira, 2014, 63.

¹⁹ Larson, 2017.

My reading was not merely an objective act of reviewing or analysing the prison writings for their content (though that was certainly one of the objectives), but was also a subjective practice of carrying out an ethnographic reading of the texts. I aspired to work with prison writings as Farge demonstrated in *Allure of the Archives*,²⁰ wherein she decoded lost voices from the formidable judicial records by focussing on the marginalised materials present in them and by engaging with the unintended imprints left behind resulting from various interactions between the archival material and its handlers. However, most of my materials were either digital or were first hand printed texts. And yet, through the process of my working with the multimodal²¹ materials that I gathered, which included the digital and physical books, but also supplemental materials like artworks, images, online articles, public interviews, digital forum posts which sometimes also had an interactive comments section, etc., I managed to create and find similarly telling markings.

I complemented my ethnographic engagement with prison writings with a combination of in-person, telephonic and zoom interviews. My interlocutors were formerly incarcerated prison writers, a publisher, and close family of an incarcerated writer. The lengths of the open interviews varied between thirty minutes to six hours. In this essay, I have used the real names of my prison writer interlocutors, but at certain critical points I have anonymised specific quotes to further ensure the safety of my interlocutors.

OF PRISON WRITERS AND THEIR WRITINGS: THE GENRE OF PRISON WRITINGS IN INDIA

In prisons in certain parts of India, certain undertrial or convict inmates take up the role of *Writers*. This is not an officially recognised position within the prison administration. It does not find any mention in the sparse official documents on prison administration, such as prison manuals that are available and accessible to ordinary citizens outside the legal apparatus and the criminal justice system.²² And yet, these *writers* find occasional mention in the oral and written narratives about prison life, and sometimes even find mention in regional news portals.²³ The first time I heard of *Writers* in prisons was when one of my interlocutors whom I was interviewing for this research, in passing mentioned an incident about a *writer* who was beaten up as punishment, when a cell phone was found in the room for which he was in charge.

In his prison memoir, Yashwant Singh, a journalist from Uttar Pradesh, who spent over two months in the Dasna Jail in the city of Ghaziabad in 2012, listed out glossary of new vocabulary that he picked up during his time in prison. The word *writer* in this list was defined as “an undertrial or convict prisoner who assists in the administrative activities of the prison, and carries out the task of updating all kinds of data and files. *Writers* assist the prison authorities i.e. the prison guards, the deputy Jailer and the Jailer in carrying out their administrative duties in the prison offices and in the barracks.”²⁴ Thus, *writers* are essentially incarcerated persons themselves, but hold significantly greater power, power that is borrowed from the prison administrators, over other fellow incarcerated persons.

As a researcher, interested in practices of writing in our prisons, I was intrigued with the existence of these *writers* in Indian prisons. One of my interlocutors, Virendra Vaishnav had also shared from his experience of eight years long incarceration in Surat, Gujarat, that administration of prisons required extensive writing, paperwork and documentation of various kinds. He further elaborated that often due to their incapacity to handle all that work on their own, sometimes due to its sheer volume and other times due to the lack of necessary skills, prison administrators often sought help from some of the educated incarcerated persons.

“In prison, I had to find some work to keep myself occupied. To make use of my skills and my knowledge. Otherwise, I would have gone insane. So then, I started helping out in the prison. But one thing really bothered me. And that was doing wrong, and writing lies. I was internally conflicted. But I had no choice. In all the official letters, one had to show that our prison was just wonderful. One had to boast about the

²⁰ Farge, 2013.

²¹ Dattatreya and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019.

²² Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016.

²³ Manoj Dutt DEV, “मंडलकारा लातेहार में राइटर और प्रभारी जमादार ने बंदी अकरम से की मारपीट”, *News Wing*, 3 April 2019.

²⁴ Singh, 2013, 15.

many positive initiatives that are taking place within the institution. And that there were no illegal practices inside the prison. I wrote many many such letters, perhaps hundreds of thousands of them. If I have to guess, I will say that I must have written approximately 100,000 to 150,000 letters, on average, in a year.” Vaishnav quoted very large numbers. His claim that he wrote 100,000 to 150,000 letters was impossible to verify. However, he continued, his tone now flat and his voice tired, as though even after several years, he could still feel the exhaustion from all that writing work, “I would spend my days almost continuously in the office, drafting letters, responding to official correspondences. The correspondence would come from the Inspector General’s office, from the Home Ministry, and so on. And I had to write responses to their letters on behalf of our prison.”

The labours of writing have always been significant to and an intimate part of prisons and the lives of those incarcerated within them. But for this research, I define *prison writers* as contrastingly different from these *writers* employed by prison authorities to do their bidding. Prison writers are empowered to produce prison writings, which counter the very narratives of the other *writers* and of their bureaucratic documentation for the prison administration. In that sense, prison writings offer “narrative resistance”,²⁵ and are in opposition with the official narratives, the audit reports, the prison manuals and the various other bureaucratic documents which are technologies for oppression of those incarcerated. I see *prison writings* as counter-narratives or counter-archives of everyday prison life. I borrow this notion of counter-archives from Merewether’s *Archives of the Fallen*.²⁶ In their written forms, prison writings too have an archival nature and a longevity and reproducibility.

Exploring Indian prison writings

The genre of prison writings in India has existed from the colonial times and yet has remained significantly under-researched. There is little academic research and very few scholarly publications which engage with writings produced by incarcerated writers, and even fewer still among those engage with contemporary writings.²⁷ Most conversations on Indian prison writings inadvertently divert to famous icons of India’s independence movement from the 20th century, and letters and essays by “freedom fighters” such as M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhagat Singh²⁸ from prison take centre stage. More recently, with the changing political climate in India and the rise of Hindu nationalism, prison writings by pre-independence Hindu nationalist leaders such as Nathuram Godse²⁹ (Gandhi’s assassin) and VD Savarkar have also significantly gained popularity.³⁰ Many of these political figures were incarcerated for their participation in the anti-colonial struggles against the British rule in India. Therefore, serving time in prison was integral to their political work, and producing written accounts of the ongoing freedom struggle while in prison was significant. Their writings from prison, while sometimes captured the everyday realities of incarceration, were mostly ideological texts aimed towards producing anti-colonial discourse and documenting the events of the ongoing freedom movement.

The growing body of prison literature in post-colonial India continues to be largely fed by writings of incarcerated political activists and public intellectuals. In post-colonial India, J.P. Narayan’s prison diary written during his incarceration at the time of the Emergency is well known.³¹ Political activists, journalists and human rights defenders such as Joya Mitra, Arun Ferreira, Iftikar Gilani, Varavara Rao, Seema Azad, B. Anuradha, Ramchandra Singh, Rupesh Singh³² and many others have all published their prison writings mostly as books, and several of which have also been translated in multiple Indian languages. In addition,

²⁵ Ochs and Capps, 1996.

²⁶ Merewether, 2006, 160-162.

²⁷ Srinath, 2014.

²⁸ Gandhi, 1932, 2011; Nehru, 2004; Singh, 2018a.

²⁹ Godse, 2018.

³⁰ Savarkar, 2021.

³¹ Narayan, 1978.

³² Mitra, 2004; Ferreira, 2014; Gilani, 2005; Rao, 2010; Azad, 2017, 2021; Anuradha, 2021; Singh, 2018b, 2020.

there is a small but significantly growing body of work by non-political prisoners, which include the works by Jigna Vora, M. Chandrakumar, Virendra Vaishnav and Chetan Mahajan³³ among many others.

While the majority of prison writings in India continue to circulate in the form of published books, the advent of digital media has played a crucial role in popularising other formats of prison writings as well. During my research, as I was curating my own archive of prison writings, I observed that books in regional languages are often much harder to procure than the ones in English. On the other hand, prison letters, essays and excerpts from prison diaries and memoirs which when published online or posted on blogs found much speedier circulation through social media platforms and instant messaging applications. Furthermore, the digital media also allowed for images to easily accompany texts of the prison writings. So texts in the incarcerated persons' own handwritings and any accompanying artworks could also be shared with the readers. Recent letters written by incarcerated student activists Natasha Narwal and Devangana Kalita, excerpts of letters by Father Stan Swamy and poems from confinement by GN Saibaba are all examples of shorter prison writings which have found widespread circulation owing to the digital media technologies.

This brief discussion on the genre of prison writings from India gives us a broad view of the landscape with which this research is concerned. This overview of the genre is helpful as we delve into the actual writing practices, materiality and conditions of writing in the following sections of the essay, which reveal the hard labours, the struggles and the frustrations on the one hand, and the collaboration and support on the other hand, which together make up the process of writing in and about incarceration.

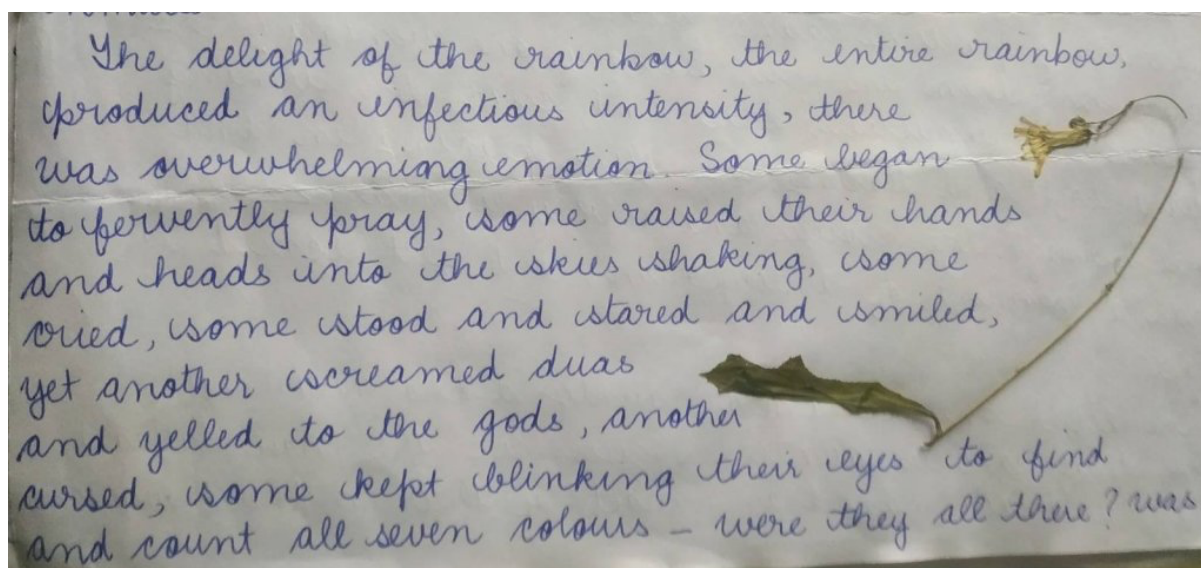


Figure 1. Picture of a handwritten letter by Devangana Kalita (© Raiot)

PRACTICE(S) OF PRISON WRITING

Everyday practices of writing in prison

I met my interlocutor Virendra Vaishnav over several days at his hometown in Surat. He is an artist and a writer, and had penned and published two prison writings in the course of his incarceration, though he shared that he had written a lot more in prison than what was published. After I finished my first day's meeting with Vaishnav, which had lasted close to four hours, I went back to my hotel room. To do my fieldwork right, I sat down to review my recordings and write up my notes for the day. Soon I realised that we had not discussed much about his actual writing practices while he was inside prison, which was the main focus of my research. Instead, our conversation had opened a gateway to his memories of those gruelling days, and most of our

³³ Vora, 2019; Chandrakumar, 2019; Vaishnav, 2017a, 2017b; Mahajan, 2014.

conversations had revolved around his other prison experiences, his life of freedom after eight years of incarceration, and his struggles of rebuilding his personal and professional life since then. We travelled through an endless trail of anecdotes which were generously peppered with Vaishnav's philosophical musings on numerous subjects such as life, God, spirituality, relationships, money and so on. He openly shared names of persons he engaged with whilst in prison, timelines of his incarceration and court procedures, anomalous and routine everyday events, and even detailed accounts of illicit activities that he witnessed in prison, all of which he had completely omitted in his published prison diaries *Life Behind Bars* and *Prison, Prisoner, Pain and I*.³⁴

A few weeks later, during my telephonic conversation with another interlocutor Rupesh Singh, I once again ended up listening to over two hours of anecdotes and tales from his first hand prison experiences. A journalist and a whistle-blower who works in the Left-wing extremism affected region of his home state, Singh covers news on conflict and human rights violations. In his work, he fearlessly confronts the government authorities by highlighting issues related to poverty and discrimination faced by adivasis and other marginalised castes and religious communities in the region. During our interview, Singh confided that it was this pro-people journalism that made him a target by the state which resulted in his imprisonment. During the telephonic interview he spoke at length about his prison experiences, individually describing his evenly divided time of six months between two prisons. But he did not just stop at that. In his monologues, he further went on to compare the two prisons, discussing food, infrastructure, sociality, corruption networks, violence among inmates as well as violence through police brutality, and many other aspects of the everyday life of incarcerated persons in the two penal institutions.

Thus, in a way quite similar to Vaishnav's, Singh also painted a vivid and detailed picture of his prison experiences during our conversation. Both their narratives were rich and wide ranging, and were in fact as illuminating and diverse as some of the written narratives I had read in books and other media about prison life from several other prison writers. Their recollections took me through a personal tour of their incarcerated lives, as if they wanted me also to see for myself, what they witnessed.

Why did my interlocutors respond to my interest in their practices of writing in prison with numerous narratives about everyday carceral life? My questions to them were about their experiences of writing inside prison. I asked: At what time of the day did they write? What writing materials did they have access to? Where would they be located when they wrote? And how did they preserve and circulate their writings? In response, I received several stories and anecdotes, on a wide range of themes, and very little information on their experiences of writing. I wondered, through their painstaking efforts of describing several aspects of their prison life, what were they trying to communicate about their writing endeavours in prison? Why was it so important to them, that I should be acquainted with these scenes from their prison life, even though neither of them had, until then, written or published much to describe these scenes? Vaishnav's books had mainly comprised of free-flowing emotional jottings, while Singh had written a handful of poems while inside, and following his release, had only published a couple of short narrative blog pieces reminiscing his prison time. At the time of our conversation in March 2020, Singh was still drafting his now published prison memoir titled *Kaidkhane ka aaina*,³⁵ which literally translates to *Mirror of the prison* indicating that the memoir contains reflections from his carceral life.

At one point in our conversation, Vaishnav confided, "In the prison, I had occupied a corner. I would mostly stay there. Almost like a scared animal which tries to hide in one corner, keeping out of the way of everyone else to protect itself. I would constantly keep praying for protection from God." On several occasions, Vaishnav spoke about his need to shield himself, not just from physical harm, but also from psychological and emotional harm that he would expose himself to, through interactions with the prison authorities and his fellow inmates. Along these lines, he also wrote a note in his diary, "There is no space for good news; I am

³⁴ Vaishnav, 2017a, 2017b.

³⁵ Singh, 2020.

actually living in a disaster zone – a culture that revels in negativity and the rotten.”³⁶ Elsewhere in the diary he mentioned that during certain periods he would spend 10 to 12 hours every day, just writing while inside the prison.³⁷ During the course of his imprisonment, Vaishnav had used up close to a dozen notebooks in which he wrote by hand. To him, writing provided a refuge from all the “negativity” around him. It became his way of insulating himself, as it kept him meaningfully occupied, and allowed him to avoid engaging with the various happenings around him that could interfere with his well-being. And yet, his practices of writing were not detached from the prison life around him. In his diary, he wrote, “I prefer to vanish into the background like an invisible man, unnoticed by those around me, yet observing everything that comes my way.”³⁸ A careful reading of his books revealed that his writings were indeed a silent and suppressed, yet engaged, response to the everyday happenings that he experienced and witnessed in prison through his years of incarceration.

In journalist Rupesh Singh’s case, which was notably a much shorter period (six months) of incarceration, writing in prison was a significantly different affair from that of Vaishnav’s. For one, due to his background in journalism and political activism, and the nature of the charges framed against him, he was constantly kept under exceptionally severe surveillance. To be caught with unauthorised writings and illicit writing materials could only further jeopardise his pending trial. Hence, he mostly held back on actual writing in prison, with the exception of 5 poems that he wrote clandestinely during the initial days of his imprisonment.

Incidentally, Singh appeared to be prepared for this. During the interview, he candidly shared that from the very start he knew he would not be able to write in prison, as his incarceration was primarily targeted towards stopping his journalism and the writing that he did outside. Yet, despite all these odds, writing about his prison experiences and all that he witnessed was constantly on his mind, as he navigated through his days under incarceration. During our conversation Singh said, “They snatched my pen, but they put me amidst innumerable stories.” As a journalist, Singh was professionally trained to scrounge for “stories” which were in a dire need to be told to the world. Hence, he saw his time in prison as a journalistic venture and activism, and consequently an extension of his professional life. He told me that while he was in prison, he would actively try to speak with as many people as he could, including many of the prison staff, and gathered their narratives and experiences. Though while in prison he could not write much and in fact could not even keep written notes of his encounters, but his perspective continued to be that of a journalist and a writer. He spent his time going about conversing, observing and creating a mental repository of vital themes, ideas and narratives which he could, in his own words, “put down on paper”, once released. Singh’s articulation of his memoir writing as *putting down on paper* alluded towards the mechanical action of writing, as though the composition of words and ideas had already been fully framed in his mind from his time in prison itself.

Thus, both Vaishnav and Singh engaged with their surroundings during incarceration in their distinct ways. Their writings essentially emerged from their immersion in their respective prison lives, and were a response to what they experienced and witnessed. Their practices of writing, literally in the case of Vaishnav and metaphorically in Singh’s case, were indistinct and inseparable from all other daily activities in their carceral routines. And hence, all my questions and provocations on writings and writing practices under incarceration would inadvertently be turned towards prison life experiences in general. For them, as was the case with several other prison writers too, writing wasn’t merely a hobby that they would pursue as their preferred way to bide time in incarceration. On the contrary, writing was a necessity, a means of surviving the violence of imprisonment and a means of maintaining one’s wholesome identity.

Motivations behind writing in prison

Why do incarcerated people write and what motivates their painstaking endeavours to document their carceral experiences? It was easy for me to raise this question right at the beginning of my conversation

³⁶ Vaishnav, 2017a, 110.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

with Mahajan, as in one of his notes in his published prison diary he had written, “It was on the very first day in here that I got the idea of writing down my experiences in jail.”³⁹ His decision to document his prison days was purposeful, and was made very early on in his relatively short, one month long incarceration. This gave me an opening to ask him directly, why did he decide to write during his brief prison stint? Mahajan responded to it equally straightforwardly. He said, “The reason to select writing was pretty much, as I have also said in the book, one of the few things that you *could do* in prison. So, in my case I could read, and run and I could write. If you’ve read the book, you know that I was running through the whole experience, I was reading a lot. And then the third thing that I could do, was writing. And I wanted to have something positive, something constructive, something concrete that I would be able to take away. That’s what writing offered me and that’s why I grabbed it with both hands.”

Over the course of our conversation as well as throughout his book, Mahajan evidently demonstrated a compulsive need to constantly *do* something, to be productive, to have something with value to show for his time and existence. He wrote in his diary, “I am not the kind of person who can just sit idle and do nothing. When I see people sunbathing by the pool or on a beach, I just don’t get it. So, for me to just hang around and do nothing is hard.”⁴⁰ He further reflected on his fellow inmates when he wrote, “The most difficult time is between 4.30 p.m. [when prisoners are locked up for the day] and 9.30 p.m., which is the earliest I am able to sleep. The only thing I can do is read, except that the power supply [read electricity] fails way too often. So, when there is no power one can just lie in bed and wait. Most people in the ward do just that even when there is power. They don’t read. A few may talk. But a lot of people just lie in bed and wait.”⁴¹

Among the limited options available to Mahajan to fill time in the prison, to not just avoid boredom, but in fact to utilise his time productively, writing certainly took centre stage. But from several entries of his prison diary, I gathered that his reading and writing practices during his days in prison, whether consciously intended or not, also served another purpose, which was that of setting himself apart from his fellow inmates. At one point, when I asked him why he thought more writings weren’t coming out from carceral experiences in India, he said quite matter-of-factly, “Most inmates are not literate enough to be writers. The people who you see in prison on average are not the types who even read, forget about writing. So, I was quite an anomaly in that sense.” And thus, Mahajan’s routine of writing for several hours every day helped him to produce and maintain his distinct identity of an upper class, educated, English speaking and respectable fellow, who did not really belong in the prison, but happened to be there as a matter of chance.

Furthermore, in the epilogue to his prison diary, that was published a full year after his release from prison, Mahajan recalled his labour of rewriting and editing his diary for publication as therapeutic. During the interview Mahajan summarized this as, “Writing a book was a good positive experience, because then it’s like going out to the whole world and admitting that I did go to jail, and now I’ve written a book about it, and it’s not my problem anymore... I’m not hiding it and I am not defensive about it. I am being upfront and brutally honest about it, saying this happened.”

During one of my conversations with Vaishnav I asked him if, when he wrote, he could show or share his writings with anyone inside the prison? To that he responded, “I was certainly fond of speaking with my fellow inmates and enjoyed reciting poetry to them. But despite that, my biggest problem was that I was unable to release or express my suffocation inside the prison. There weren’t many persons who understood English there. There was not even a single person with whom I could share what I had written [Vaishnav wrote mostly in English]. If I tried to share my writings with someone, they would often respond by saying they did not understand what they just read or heard. Even after sharing translations from English to Hindi or Gujarati [languages that his fellow inmates knew and spoke], they would still be unable to comprehend it. In such situations, even if you want to express your feelings, you end up holding back.” In a similar vein, he wrote in his diary, “I don’t think anyone will ever understand me unless they have lived my life. So, I

³⁹ Mahajan, 2014, 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

prefer expressing my feelings here. If I do not express them, I sometimes feel I will explode. Writing here feels cathartic, and I am glad I started a journal. It helps me cope.”⁴² Scholars across disciplines who work on writings produced under incarceration will agree that there is a “therapeutic function of narrative activity”.⁴³ Thus, writing during incarceration can be instrumental for incarcerated persons to survive and thrive on an everyday basis.⁴⁴

Vaishnav showed me some of his notebooks which he was allowed to keep in the prison and in which he wrote. They were large hard bound ruled notebooks, locally known as “registers”, and were very similar to what college students often use for their studies in India. His fine uniform handwriting in black ink on the ruled pages of thick hard bound notebooks appeared almost meditative to me (see Fig. 2). During our interview he told me that he had kept around a dozen notebooks of this kind through his over eight years long incarceration. Moreover, Vaishnav’s writing style had no structure, and his writings had no markers of time. The vague and anonymised events or narratives that constituted his texts very hard to follow for readers, and from the writings it seemed as though his days, months and years were completely indifferentiable from one another. Yet in some ways, these writings were a perfect representation of his prison days as he experienced them, endless and monotonous (see Fig. 3).

⁴² Vaishnav, 2017a, 28.

⁴³ Ochs and Capps, 1996.

⁴⁴ Jacobi and Stanford, 2014; Maybin, 2000.

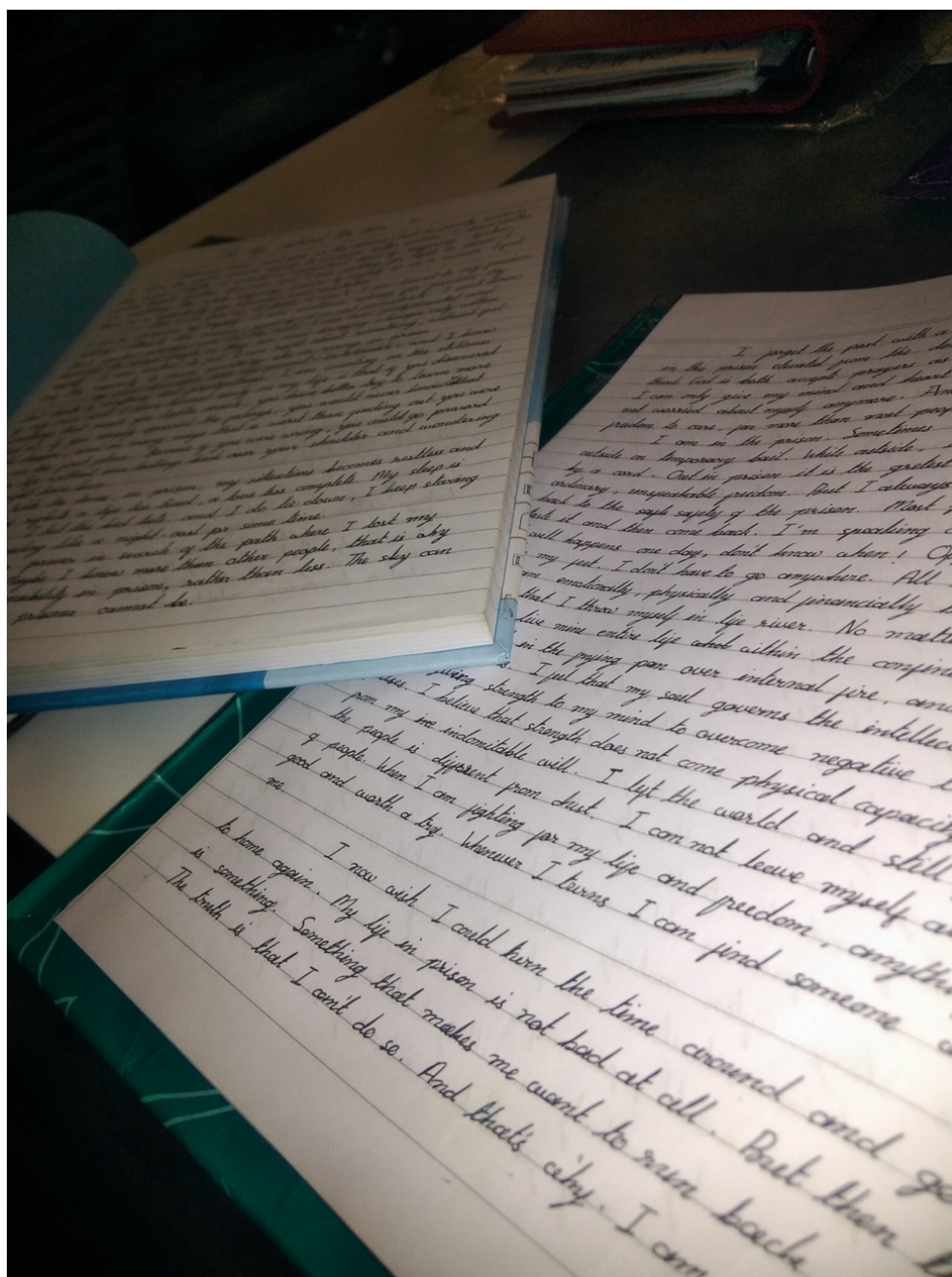


Figure 2. Few open pages from Virendra Vaishnav's notebooks (© Pandey)

People make mistakes because they are unaware of their true nature, but I had made a judgment of my life. I seem to be constantly tied down, always being sucked into various complexities of life: I need to learn to break free again! Prison is teaching me to value everything and everyone, no matter how small. There are unspoken rules of my life that I need to cherish, in the race of life, I am easily disheartened and succumb to death. I don't have freedom, how can I offer it to someone! There are times when I want nothing better than to be left alone. My brief, handwritten note may be remembered for a lifetime, and may even change a life. I cannot change the prison into paradise, everybody has to change it by changing himself. Even I cannot change the prison because it is not a reality, here nobody is listening, nobody is caring about anything.

The immense pain of having to live without your own family is worse than death. I have two options: either to remain stuck in the brokenness and never heal, or pretend the brokenness is not there at all. I have to deal with the broken place that life had offered me. I marvelled at how the small doses of care, love, security and assurance can work wonders in prison. I know it's not easy, but one must try to make one's scars beautiful to enable healing to one's own self. With dharma, the law will help the helpless and provide justice to all. Without dharma, the law will be a tool for control, oppression and even sabotage.

Figure 3. Screenshot from Virendra Vaishnav's *Life Behind the Bars* (pp. 76-77 Kindle Edition)⁴⁵

But not all prison writers write for these reasons of filling their time in prison or for gaining comfort and closure from their harrowing carceral experiences. For journalist Rupesh Singh, who in the summer of 2020 was finishing up the manuscript of his prison memoir, his motivations for writing his prison diary were concerned with exposing the crumbling criminal justice system and the injustices within it. Similarly, Joya Mitra, an author and social activist from Bengal, who was imprisoned for her participation in the ultra-Left Naxalbari movement, wrote to memorialize the stories of several of her fellow incarcerated women and “to tell people about an outlandish world, that stands cheek by jowl with the town, the marketplace”.⁴⁶ In her memoir, Mitra wrote about her own experiences of imprisonment and everyday struggles during her time in

⁴⁵ Vaishnav, 2017a.

⁴⁶ Mitra, 2004, 5.

prison, alongside narrating personal stories of various fellow incarcerated women, particularly those who came from very marginalized backgrounds whose stories of incarceration would otherwise have gone undocumented. For political prisoners such as Singh, Mitra and many others, being incarcerated and writing in and about incarceration was very much political work, not lesser than the social and political activism that they practiced while outside the prison. As Ferreira, evasively and yet truthfully, responded to his mother's enquiry of whether he was beaten up while in police custody, "It's all part of the struggle."⁴⁷

In a similar vein, Chandrakumar's motivation to write up his prison diary⁴⁸, decades after his release, came from his need to put out a rare account of incarceration from the underrepresented perspective of India's working-class people. In his prison diary which was written retrospectively, Chandrakumar produced a vivid account of his everyday prison life by narrating wide ranging incidents, from struggles to securing food and water on a daily basis, to forging friendships inside the prison, and finally to finding meaningful work in the prison kitchens. During our conversation, he shared that for most ordinary (read working-class) people, experiences of incarceration were matters of deep shame and these people could rarely speak about the exceptional humiliation that they experienced every day in prison. An autorickshaw driver by profession and only formally educated until grade 10, Chandrakumar was vocal of his identity and social position of a working-class ordinary man. His position in the social hierarchies, and his commitment to narrate his story from that very perspective, made his narrative quite unique. He said to me, "My diary is a collective voice of all those who couldn't speak openly about their carceral experiences for various reasons."

However, Abdul Wahid Sheikh's writing of his autobiographical narrative *Innocent Prisoners*, was written for much darker reasons.⁴⁹ His book is a detailed testimony of the innocence of the thirteen accused (including himself) in the July 11, 2006 Mumbai Train Bomb Blast Case. Sheikh, who spent almost a decade in prison as an undertrial, was the only person acquitted of all charges in this case. But through his writing, he is determined to prove the innocence of all his other twelve co-accused as well. Originally written in Urdu while in prison, Sheikh's manuscript pages were frequently confiscated and destroyed.⁵⁰ After many struggles, he was able to smuggle his manuscript pages out of the prison in parts. In the introduction to his book, Sheikh called this book a manual for the Muslim community, and an attempt to provide them with a hands-on guide, especially designed for any persons framed in similar cases in the future. One of his chapters titled "Police Torture", comprises of a gory point-wise listing of the various torture techniques employed by the police and the measures that individuals subjected to these torture techniques could take to alleviate their pain and survive the ordeal. And hence the book serves several purposes, from being a counter narrative of the accused's innocence, to exposing the state sanctioned violence and brutality, and finally as a manual for the marginalised and vulnerable Muslim community.

MATERIALITY AND SCENES OF WRITING IN PRISON

Writing in material deprivation

When I asked Vaishnav to describe his experiences and challenges of writing and drawing inside prison, he admitted that his biggest challenge was getting access to writing and art materials. He shared, "I had a thin mattress which I used. When you fold a mattress, that is small and thin, like the one I had, it can be folded into four parts. I would fold it's three parts instead and leave the fourth part open. I would sit on this last part. So 75% of the mattress was rolled to make a desk and the rest 25% was what I sat on. And I had a thin board which I got after a lot of negotiation and haggling [for bribe] with the prison authorities. I would place it on the thrice folded part and use it like a table." He emphatically added, "I had applied for a desk, but that

⁴⁷ Ferreira, 2014, 52.

⁴⁸ Chandrakumar, 2019.

⁴⁹ Shaikh, 2021.

⁵⁰ Mahmood Farooqui, "Review: Begunah Qaidi by Abdul Wahid Sheikh". *Hindustan Times*, 24 August 2019; Kaur, 2019.

request was refused citing security reasons. But it is mentioned in the [Prison] manual. According to the manual, writing material should be provided, and a painting stand should also be provided.”

Vaishnav further described other ways in which incarcerated persons were deliberately kept deprived of reading and writing materials. The withholding of incarcerated persons’ possessions and the compulsive bribery required to access even basic necessities inside the prison, was a sensitive topic for Vaishnav, as he had been a victim of this system for eight consecutive years. He shared, “Inside the prison, there was a canteen [referring to a store] where some objects of common use were sold... But there was corruption at every step in the prison. To buy envelopes for letters, to purchase pens, for everything that one could purchase at the canteen one had to pay exorbitant prices. They started selling the cheap 1 Rupee Pens, the use and throw kind, in my last year in the prison. But that was not much use to me for my writing and drawing as I used black gel pens which were sent to me from outside. But I had to beg the prison authorities continuously and rely on their pity to get them. Even my books which were sent to me, and the newspapers I used to order, were sometimes not delivered. Most things that were sent for us would just disappear, and we, who were inside, would never even know that something came for us.”

These revelations threw light on the effects of surveillance and restrictions on the movement of objects into the prison, and their impact on practices of writing. By making the access and availability of writing material extremely difficult and expensive, prison authorities used these inconveniences as a deterrent to stop most people from writing within the prison premises. The deprivations were actively produced to keep opportunities of corruption and harassment available to the prison authorities. Keeping incarcerated persons in deprived states, was an effective way to wield power over them.

However, the states of deprivation in prisons, are often not uniform for all incarcerated persons, and some are able to get some exceptional treatment on certain accounts. My other interlocutor Chetan Mahajan, for instance, had a slightly different experience of writing. While speaking about his initial few days in prison he shared that, “There wasn’t a table and a chair. Even getting the notebooks and pens was something for which I had to request my brother, who brought it only three days later. So for the initial days, I didn’t have tools to write.” But fortunately for Mahajan, he got access to these writing materials with much greater ease, and got them fairly early on, in his month long prison term. For Mahajan, his father’s influence and clout as a former colonel with the Indian Army made the relatively easier availability of several amenities possible. Mahajan was quite candid about his exceptional situation in his writing and during our conversation. He said, “It was established early enough that I was not available for harassment. People outside having spoken to the jailer, etc. So it was a little easier for me, as people largely started leaving me alone.” Within days of his arrest, Mahajan was moved from the usual ward to a lesser populated, better equipped and safer Hospital ward of the prison. After a few more days, he managed to get on and off access to an office desk and chair at the clinic in the Hospital ward. These concessions eased his challenges of reading and writing, significantly.

Thus my two interlocutors, Vaishnav and Mahajan, had somewhat different experiences of accessing writing resources. While, Vaishnav had to rely on the occasional bribery to the prison authorities to be able to receive writing materials sent to him by his family and friends from outside the prison, Mahajan received more favourable treatment due to his family’s influence. However, both these cases were symptomatic of the same arbitrariness and selective implementation of prison rules, which also permeates all other aspects of carceral life. Access to any additional resources, barring the bare minimum personal effects that an incarcerated person is allowed to bring inside at the time of being admitted, results from a negotiation with the prison authorities. Incarcerated persons are often forced to move court and get permissions from the judiciary to be able to access reading materials.

Situations of deprivation are often confronted with creative utilisation and repurposing of the scantily available alternatives, material or otherwise. Leonard Baer writes about the innovative reuse and internal

commodification of objects of everyday use in prisons in England.⁵¹ In deprived environments, even everyday objects like soap can take the form of a currency.⁵² Simultaneously, they also serve particular social purposes, like gifting, exchange and inheriting amongst the carceral community. Writing practices inside prisons are shaped by these deprivations, even as they simultaneously document the ingenuity that emerges from the scarcity. The innovative use of the limited objects that are available in prison to cope with prison life is a theme that many prison writers have addressed through numerous examples in their writings. One example that particularly stands out in our present reference to writing materials is from Ferreira's letter to his mother, in which he wrote, "Mummy, no need to bring a pair of slippers for me. I have collected two old pairs and have got them repaired with used pen refills. It's a trick I have learnt in prison. In times of scarcity, necessity is the mother of all invention."⁵³ Most objects inside carceral institutions are repurposed for multiple (re)uses and even writing materials find their place in prison ecologies, serving more than just one purpose.⁵⁴

Ecologies of prison writing

On our second meeting, Vaishnav brought along two of his notebooks from home, which he had kept as diaries while in prison. Vaishnav's hardbound A4 sized notebooks, in which he wrote during his incarceration, were protected by covers made by repurposing discarded packaging of paper reams that are often used as office stationery. I wondered if he had gotten access to the discarded packaging while he worked in the prison offices, but my suspicions could never be confirmed. The first page in one of these notebooks contained a declaration of sorts in Gujarati, the official language of his home state where he was incarcerated. The note identified that the notebook was his property and required the mention of total number of pages in the notebook, lest they be misused within the prison by anyone else. This page was supposed to be stamped by the prison authorities, but in the case of this notebook, they never got around to doing. The exact number of pages were also not filled in. Maybe it was oversight, or maybe Vaishnav was ordered by the prison bureaucrats to leave the page numbers blank so that the updated figures could be reported as and when required. After all, Indian bureaucracy, in general, is riddled with such gaps (read opportunities) that have the potential to be manipulated on a need basis, and prisons aren't any different.

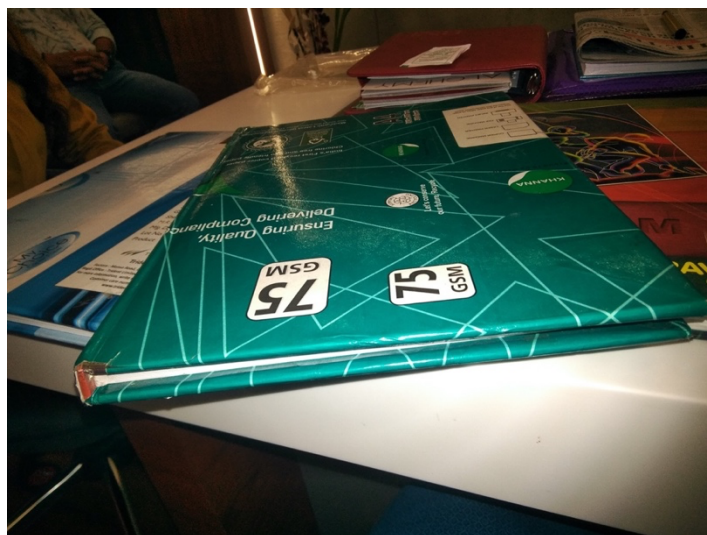


Figure 4. Two of Virendra Vaishnav's notebooks (© Pandey)

⁵¹ Baer, 2005.

⁵² Bandyopadhyay, 2018.

⁵³ Ferreira, 2014, 107.

⁵⁴ In Garcia's work on the personal archives of letters exchanged between three generations of women, incarcerated Bernadette ingeniously reuses the paper from the letters sent to her by her family, in which they leave one side blank on her request, so that she could write back to them. She picks this trick from her fellow detainees. Garcia, 2016.

Was Vaishnav in collusion with the prison authorities? It was quite possible, as Vaishnav had repeatedly emphasised on the rampant corruption in the prison system during our chats, and the forceful inclusion of most incarcerated persons to participate in these transactions. This was something he also brought up several times in his books, albeit indirectly and without implicating any individuals in particular. Most of Vaishnav's stationery and art materials had been allowed inside against a payment. And yet, in the prison system, the power hierarchies were so uneven that though the prison staff could easily escape not doing their duty of authorising and legitimising the possession of the notebook by Vaishnav, however as an incarcerated person he was forced to comply, at least on his part, with such bureaucratic rituals.

The presence of the note on the first page, even in its un-stamped and unauthorised state, was imposing and oppressive. But more than that, it was an ominous reminder every single time the notebook was opened, that the notebook could be snatched away from his possession at any point and the drawings and writings in it could be surveilled and censored. During our interview, Vaishnav revealed that none of the prison guards ever read his writings in prison. However, from time to time, they would just ask him, and remind him in warning tones, that they hoped he was not writing anything controversial, which essentially referred to anything that could get the prison administrators into trouble. The text on the first page of the notebook was a silent version of that same reminder. And it visibly worked. It turned his writings into a journey inwards, keeping his texts free from the burden of names, dates, details of events, and sanitised of any identifiable details that could be connected to real life.

As we were together browsing through his notebooks, we stumbled upon Vaishnav's identity card from the prison that was tucked inside one of them. He showed me how he had to hold it up near his chest, with both hands, every time there was an inspection by senior prison officials in the prison. If it was carelessly held, there were consequences of reprimand and possible punishment. The cards did not have pictures. But instead had the penal code sections, listing the alleged charges for which each person was incarcerated. It seemed that was all the information they needed, and in fact used to characterise and identify an incarcerated person. One wondered whether the officials on rounds even read the fine text on them. Regardless, they amply served the purpose of subjugation through humiliation of the inmates.

Besides the identity card, Vaishnav also hoped to find, amidst the pages of the notebooks, some of his old coupons that were used as currency in the prison to purchase essential items from the store. From his restless ruffling through the pages of the notebooks looking for these old coupons, I could infer that in the prison, he often used these notebooks to store certain items for safekeeping. It was evident that Vaishnav's prison writings were quite literally touched by his prison life. From these quintessential prison objects in and around his writing materials, one imagines that his writing practices could in no way have been an escape from his prison life. On the contrary, his writings in their physical form were fully immersed in incarceration, even if the text circumvented the reality of everyday carceral lives.



Figure 5. The back of Vaishnav's Identity Card that fell off from inside one of his notebooks (© Pandey)

The materiality of writing in prisons was something my other interlocutor Chetan Mahajan too found worthy of mentioning, several times over, in his book as well as during my interview with him. For him, what stood out was the mechanical act of writing on paper. As a seasoned corporate executive, he had virtually quit writing by hand in his personal and professional life. His month long stint in prison forced him to rediscover this practice. He wrote, "Of course it takes work writing pages upon pages by hand all over again. It's been decades since I last gave an exam which I wrote by hand, and everything one writes today is on the computer."⁵⁵ In one of his latter entries he noted, "I finished the refill of one of my two pens today. Don't remember the last time that happened to me."⁵⁶ He spoke about this once again almost seven-eight years later during our conversation in March 2020. Describing his writing Mahajan said, "It was all on paper, it was all physical. I had a couple of pens and these two long notebooks. By the time I left the prison, it was two registers full of handwritten scrawling. I don't think I've written that much since college. So it's been a lot of handwriting." Was it a sense of achievement that he experienced through the writing by hand? Was it amusement at revisiting these old-school way of writing? Regardless, the physically laborious act of putting pen to paper in prison, and further transcribing his writings into typed text to make them publishable once he was released, certainly left a mark on him. It was perhaps engaging in these tedious acts, stretched over time, that allowed him to process and reconcile with the trauma of injustice that he faced.

Scenes of Writing

Linda Brodkey's essay titled "Modernisms and the scene(s) of writing", though significantly dated now, is clear in its articulation of our widely accepted mythical imaginaries of the appropriate ways of writing.⁵⁷ Geared towards those interested and involved in teaching writing, the essay argues for the need of a pedagogical transformation in the methods for teaching writing. This suggestion is aimed towards making writing a "social and material political practice", in contrast to the former understanding of writing as the physical act of scribbling by hand and to be pursued in perfect solitude.

⁵⁵ Mahajan, 2014, 61.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁷ Brodkey, 1987.

In the essay, Brodkey discusses the “scenes” in which writing is often imagined to take place, or in many occasions even prescribed to take place. In our minds, the thought of a writer often conjures an image of the solitary writer, performing the act of writing in a tranquil environment, away from any elements of the social life. Brodkey argues that this image is so strongly embedded in our minds, that many writers are forced to recreate these scenes in order to legitimise their own written words. She also acknowledges that there are certain privileges associated with being able to have access to these adequately solitary spaces and a distraction-free frame of mind. Even outside prisons, recreating such conditions can be a luxury that is unavailable to many writers in action. But finding such pristine conditions are almost an impossibility for writers inside the overcrowded and dilapidated prison barracks in India. For certain, the isolation of incarceration does not ensure quietude that is expected for efficient writing.

In her hands-on instructional book on ethnographic writing, titled *Alive in the Writing*, Kirin Narayan dedicates a whole section to the scene of writing in her chapter on Place. Narayan writes, “I find that placing myself at the moment of writing grounds a skittishly distracted mind, bringing the present into better focus and so adding clarity to other ventures too.”⁵⁸ Chetan Mahajan’s prison diary is characteristic of this form of writing, what he himself termed during the interview as “real time writing, capturing things as they are happening to you.” Mahajan believed, that being able to write while inside the prison was crucial to the form and content of his book, and it allowed him to paint as vivid and detailed a picture as he did in the book. But more importantly, in her book Narayan expands the imagination of the scene of writing, beyond the physical, the material, and the visible, to all that is perceivable through our senses. Narayan writes, “Consciously drawing on the full range of senses can evoke a place more thoroughly.”⁵⁹ During my interviews, when Virendra Vaishnav and Rupesh Singh recounted their carceral experiences at length, their narratives also invoked many senses. The stench of human sweat in the overcrowded prison barracks, the frequent sights and sounds of police roughing up the weakest of incarcerated people or of brawls between the incarcerated, unappetizing and tasteless prison food, the absence of fresh airflow and the dampness by water dripping into the cells due to leaky roofs, these and many more such sensory experiences were spoken about in great detail which helped me, an outsider who had never lived inside the prison, to imagine their scenes of writing.

As though they were attuned to Narayan’s advice on ethnographic writing, several of the prison writers whose works I studied, already made frequent references to their sensory experiences of incarceration in their writings. For instance, in his collection of essays written from inside the prison, titled *Captive Imagination*, Varavara Rao wrote, “In prison they strike each hour of the day. At night they even strike each quarter of the hour and proclaim: Sab theek hai! Everything is fine! Wave dissolving into wave, the silence of a prison becomes a disturbed lake.”⁶⁰ Similarly, in one of his early entries in his diary, before he had gained access to a desk and a chair in the prison clinic, Mahajan noted the physical discomfort and its deterrence on his writing in prison. He wrote, “After the first two to three days in jail I have a backache [...] in a bit I realize there are no chairs at all in the jail. We have the floor and the walls. In the ward we have metal hospital-style beds. We also have some improvised stools. But no seating with any kind of back support [...] The absence of a table and chair is very irritating to me – especially since I want to write a lot.”⁶¹ Through many such anecdotes in their writings, prison writers persistently demonstrated the systemic sadism that exists within prisons in India, where constant discomfort is caused to all senses of the imprisoned bodies.

It is clear that the ideal *scene of writing* is non-existent in Indian prisons. Yet, in spite of the adversities posed by the unfavourable tangible and intangible elements in the prison environments, the image of the solitary writer is still recreated by many prison writers. Vaishnav disclosed, that most of his writing and drawing took place at night in the prison, “after people were locked up for the day and had somewhat settled down for the night.” Similarly, Mahajan mentioned his successful attempt of getting access to a desk and chair in the prison clinic, where he could spend some hours of each day before lunch-time, almost alone,

⁵⁸ Narayan, 2012, 27.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁰ Rao, 2010, 10.

⁶¹ Mahajan, 2014, 76-77.

reading and writing and mimicking a writer's discipline of working fixed hours at a distraction-free space. Maybin's research with letter writing practices of incarcerated persons on death row complements these experiences. As incarcerated writers search for quietude to be able to write, the practices of writing also allows them to "create a personal and relatively private space."⁶²

Prison writers and their writings are in defiance to the normative scene of writing, and instead triumphantly emerge from very adverse ecologies. The scene of writing within prisons is one marred with multiple states of deprivations. There is an obvious lack of basic amenities, a shortage of writing materials such as pen and paper. Additionally, there is also an absence of solitude and of basic comforts, for most part of the day. Overcoming all such hurdles, prison writings emerge strong. They become the remarkable testimonies of resistance and subversion of one of the most violent forms of state oppression.

CONCLUSION: (UN)FREE WRITINGS THAT CROSS PRISON BOUNDARIES

During our conversation Chandrakumar, a Tamil writer from the city of Coimbatore, mentioned the original title of his translated memoir *The Prison Diary of an Ordinary Man*.⁶³ The book in its original Tamil version was titled *Kattudhalayinooday Kaatru* which was literally translated for me as "the wind that finds its way". Proud of the ingenuity in his title and sensing my only partial comprehension of the translated phrase, Chandrakumar himself took the initiative to elaborate on its meaning. He explained that through this title he evoked the air that can enter and flow even in the darkest lockups and the most unventilated carceral spaces inside prisons.

Prison compounds and buildings which are built to be opaque, marked by tall un-windowed walls and with heavily barred entrances and openings, are designed to restrict the entry of anything that can possibly be comforting to its inhabitants. In the formidable prison, where entry and exit of persons and objects are stringently monitored and controlled, wind is still able to find its way, often through the unintended pores and cracks, into and out of the prison. The wind that enters the prison does not just provide respite to those in captivity, but is also a witness to the atrocities that are taking place inside. It is this defiant wind that has witnessed and experienced incarceration and can now reveal the most intimate details of that experience. Just like the wind, prison writings too can record a similarly intimate account, as they are written by those who have witnessed and experienced incarceration first-hand. These writings have the mobility to reach the narratives and stories of those held inside prisons, to the oblivious world outside.

In his memoir, *Colours of the Cage*, Arun Ferreira wrote "Letters to my family were not only a medium for communication but also a pretext for mutual consolation. On the arrival of my messages, my wife would come to Bandra almost immediately to meet with Mom and Dad. My elder brother and sister who lived nearby would drop by too and my letter would invariably result in a family discussion."⁶⁴ In his book, Ferreira generously used excerpts from these very letters which he sent to different family members through the course of his almost five years long imprisonment. Along with his letters to his wife, he would also often send sketches of beloved cartoon characters for his son. Sending these sketches allowed him to create and maintain a relationship with his son, who was barely two years old when Ferreira was first arrested, and hence had no personal memory of his father.

During his six months in prison, Rupesh Singh wrote five poems within the initial days of incarceration and smuggled them out of the prison. Though only a handful, these poems were of great significance as they found a place in a book of his compiled writings, which was titled *Hum azaad hain tab jab humein bolna aataa ho* " [We are free only as long as we know how to speak up]. This book was published by his spouse, within the first few weeks of his incarceration. It was clear that the book aimed to showcase Singh's work with the sole objective to *talk him up*, and consequently to generate solidarities in demanding his release

⁶² Maybin, 2000, 178.

⁶³ Chandrakumar, 2019.

⁶⁴ Ferreira, 2014, 29.

from prison. The writings in the book were an assortment of essays, poetry, journalistic articles, and images, most of them created by Singh before his arrest and which had earlier been published in various media. Two longish notes in the beginning, one by Singh's spouse and the other by a close friend celebrated Singh and his work. The final section was devoted to scans, screenshots and texts of social media posts and news articles from several popular and alternative media sources about Singh's illegal arrest. The five poems by Singh sent from prison, even though so few, were crucial to this volume because they represented his indomitable spirit and his defiance against the oppression of incarceration. They added Singh's personal and presential touch to the volume. It was through the poems that the readers could be directly confronted by Singh, while he remained physically confined in prison.

These two examples of prison writings being exported out of prison sites, where Ferreira's letters travelled legitimately, while Singh's poetry was smuggled out, are just two of the many other examples which capture the diverse potentialities of prison writings. From expressing affections and maintaining familial ties, to registering protest and creating solidarities outside, prison writings become vehicles through which the spirit of their writers too manage to escape out of the sites of incarceration, partially filling the holes that they left behind in the world when they got locked up.

Fascinatingly enough, prison writings do not just make a one-way voyage outward. Both Rupesh Singh and Chetan Mahajan spoke about their works reaching back into the very prisons from where they emerged. In Singh's case, several copies of the volume of collected works mentioned above, were first brought in legally and circulated among the incarcerated. Later, after the prison authorities realised the threats of his work being read by fellow incarcerated persons, they retrieved all the copies. However, one copy continued to be in circulation, discreetly. On the other hand, Mahajan revealed that a couple of months after the publication of his book, he got a call from a landline number, presumably from one of the fixed line phones inside the prison. On the other side was one of Mahajan's friendly former prison inmates, who told Mahajan that his book had already reached the prison but was curious as to when a Hindi version become available, so that they could finally read it. Thus, even though the English volume largely remained inaccessible to even the prison guards and officials, the physical copy of the book had certainly made its way back into the prison.

However not all writings produced inside the prison successfully make their way out of the prison borders. Arun Ferreira's letters would sometimes be censored and not be allowed to leave the prison. In one of his subsequent letters published in his memoir he writes, "I have followed your suggestion and begun numbering the letters I send. In this manner we would know if some letters go missing. Great idea! You can never trust these guys. Whenever I ask the local boss the reason for delay in mail, he blames the postal department. However, I believe otherwise."⁶⁵ Similarly, as mentioned above, Abdul Wahid Sheikh's first version of his manuscript of *Innocent Prisoners* was confiscated and destroyed, forcing him to rewrite the whole book again before it could be smuggled out successfully the second time.⁶⁶

Prison writing is also a social practice, and consequently a privilege even among incarcerated persons.⁶⁷ The writing and its circulation involve not just the labours of the incarcerated writer, but an active collaboration with various other actors such as supportive families and friends, sympathetic prison administrators and cooperative fellow incarcerated persons. As my interviews with Vaishnav and Mahajan suggested, for pursuing writing inside prisons, there is a continuous dependence on someone outside who is willing to support an incarcerated person's writing endeavours inside the prison. Moreover, in the case of letter writing, one needs a recipient to receive the letters on the other side of the prison boundaries, and these recipients should care enough to write back and correspond regularly.⁶⁸ Similarly, exporting writings outside the prison, safekeeping the written materials and providing support in publication, are all activities which require people and resources from outside the prison.

⁶⁵ Ferreira, 2014, 50.

⁶⁶ Mahmood Farooqui, "Review: Begunah Qaidi by Abdul Wahid Sheikh". *Hindustan Times*, 24 August 2019; Kaur, 2019.

⁶⁷ Wilson, 2000.

⁶⁸ Garcia, 2016.

Thus, the phrase (Un)Free Writings in the title of this paper evokes this ambiguity and uncertainty that is inherent to the movement of prison writings. Prison writings are simultaneously free and not-so-free. I think of writings as both material objects which like vessels hold these writings (letters, diaries, manuscripts, and books) and as intangibles (anecdotes, stories, narratives, theories and experiences). Unlike their imprisoned writers, these writings can have relatively freer lives of their own. Prison writings can become a medium through which the incarcerated persons can voice their resistance, protest their repression, proclaim their innocence, and engage with the world outside, even as their writers remain unfree.

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