

BEHIND THE BARS: TWO STORIES OF INCARCERATION*Debabrata Bagui, RIE Bhubaneswar*

From ancient times to the present why didn't the so-called enlightened souls the saints, and the seers, the prophets and philosophers, scholars and thinkers formulate practical rules for our social system not to leave space for such endless misery and sorrow? This should have been the natural condition of human life evolving through the ages, that there be no killings and killers. No dacoity and no dacoits, no sign of crime. No one would be rich or poor, high or low born. We would have had no compulsion to bear the burden of a repressive state machinery, a police and an army. prisons would not be needed at all. ... In a classless society, every one receives a share of the production based on their needs. (Singh, 31-32)

Thirteen Years (2018), a diary by R. Singh (translated by M. Singh) narrates the events that took place during his political imprisonment and the impact the events created on his psyche. In spite of being a prison narrative the text provides the readers ample materials that remind them many other narratives that portray the lives behind the bars. In *Hannaman* (1990) J. Mitra writes as a witness, an observer and an insider. She left home in 1968 when she was barely 18 years old and joined the agitating student groups as a political and social justice activist. *Hannaman* is part of this movement and plays a crucial role in moving forward the public debate centring the issue. Mitra calls up here the less fortunate ones whom she left behind. She depicts these women, who overstepped the periphery of social norms sometimes unknowingly but mostly due to lack of any other choice, were discarded from society and imprisoned for "correction." The movement was characterised by generating a consciousness across different social boundaries, armed struggle in many areas and a stern retaliation by the state. Students made themselves involved in raising the revolutionary consciousness of the peasantry in the rural areas of many districts. An indirect result of the movement was felt in accentuating the intensity of the women's movement. The political radicalism had an impact upon upholding the women's issues. Mitra was from the generation that threw in their lot with the toiling people, with the hope of establishing a new and just order. In her writing, like those of Mahasweta Devi, Bani Basu and Meenakshi Sen, readers find women protagonists who hardly find expression in popular literature on Naxalbari. Some captives like Krishna Banerji of the tumultuous period have disclosed the situation of the prison of that time. Their writings focus not upon their confined political comrades and their own sufferings. They feel sympathetically of and talk about the poor prisoners who faced daily harassment, maltreatment, cruelty and discrimination. *Hannaman* is part of this movement and plays a crucial role in moving forward the public debate centring the issue. Mitra calls up here the less fortunate ones whom she left behind. She depicts these women, who overstepped the periphery of social norms sometimes unknowingly but mostly due to lack of any other choice, were discarded from society and imprisoned for "correction."

The narrator in *Hannaman* remembers the day when the police caught Maria, an Italian with her French friend when they were going to catch a flight for Nepal. About two ounces of cocaine was there with them. Not having her drug ingested Maria became almost hysterical. Mitra talked to her:

"Isn't your mother worried that you are on drugs and wandering around this way?"

"She has her own life to lead. Why should she bother about me?"

True. We who love to “bother” about everybody, find such detachment somewhat peculiar. This cannot be the natural face of any society. There is something wrong with it. That beautiful exterior with an empty brain? No thoughts. No direction. No sense of life. Nothing. How many are there like her, drifting gradually towards a collective landslide? (Mitra 128)

The narrator, at this point, lets the readers know the anguish of affection and love through the life of Jalmani who, instead of empathy or sympathy from her husband, got beating, a child and humiliation. He, however, had other girls with him. Jalmani met a young merchant who respected, loved and sympathised with her. She gave him money from her own earning without having the idea that it was spent for buying scarf and jewellery for a young beauty. Seeing the girl hanging from the merchant's neck Jalmani cut her in two pieces with an axe. Jalmani later repents for action and says she should have killed the merchant not the innocent girl, but she could not kill him. In jail Jalmani hopes to be released by the court and would return to Darjeeling and chop woods, sell them and with the money send her son Bijoy to school. But the court does not release her. Besides, it is decided that Bijoy would be sent to a foster home of which Jalmani has no idea. She does not realise that even she bang her head hard against the wall, the state would not bring her son back to her. When Jalmani goes back to her slum in Darjeeling after getting release, none tells her where Bijoy is. Two months later Bijoy sends a post-card to another inmate requesting to look after his mother and informs that he is going to be released “just” after eight years.

The sense of hopelessness and despair in *Hannaman*, however, is not entirely without the sense of renewed interest and joy. Some of its pages provide readers feelings of intense affection, unity, amity, and a profound trust. Bapidi, a sex worker who has syphilis in her body, drops gifts at the narrator's door with a note stating that she has got two extra customers. A touch of refreshing wind is felt in the following description too:

Sometimes, in a flash the children run up to me. Who can ever hold them back? They give me a leaf, a feather of yellow-beaked blackbird, or a piece of bread from the morning meal. One morning I wake up to find that someone has placed a bunch of budding bel flowers through the bars near my head. I don't know who left them there. But like a flock of stars in my grey, solitary days, like a group of loving faces, the memory of their fragrance still resurrects me. (Mitra 51-52)

Singh's narrative too is not devoid of such incidents. Different type of experiences inside prison get themselves reflected there:

Any detainee who arrives in prison battered and bruised recovers very fast. Yes, despite poor medical facilities, contaminated drinking water and the bad food, he gets back on his feet very soon and appears as well fed and healthy as before. But this is a deceptive recovery. (19)

While political prison has been viewed as a university by Molefe Pheto, questions are natural to be there in the mind of a prisoner. Singh writes:

I was unable to decide who the culprit was in this complex situation. Was Jaswant solely responsible for looting or was it the result of youth's helpless addiction to a fast living culture, needing big hauls of immediate cash, legal or illegal, to fulfil their desires and compensate for unfulfilled ones. The capitalist society and its class hierarchy ensure that lower and middle class youths are for that illusive joy of life in hotels, clubs, violence and adventure. I also wished the parents of Lakshmi and Jaswant had agreed to let them marry, but they were victims of that rigid, feudal mindset and inflated ego still common in our villages. (30)

The narrator provides detailed description of the events that moved him inside the prison. He talks of the inmates and their habits, the description of the employees inside the prison and their behaviour and of himself too.

I was very weak. I had tied around me a lungi made from the folded layers of my dirty, torn dhuti. My shirt was in tatters. A thick layer of grime covered my body. My hair was unkempt and greasy, and feet bare. Everyone stared as if I were a strange and loathsome creature. As I stood there, dazed, I heard the call to file in for bread parade. (20)

... The prisoners raised a rumpus through the night. They joked, yelled, cursed, banged on their plates and sang boisterously. Undoubtedly, some of them were good singers. But at the slightest provocation they would mouth such obscenities as were simply unimaginable outside. This was perhaps their way of defying society, as they gleefully challenged and demolished the bounds of societal norms, morality and restraint. In its sting, lethality and brazenness, the prison lexicon is thing apart from the ordinary run of bad language. (22-23)

The horror of the nights in the prison finds a place here:

At times, when the loud calls of the watchmen from all the barracks and of the sentries who tapped on the windows and of convict watchmen at the main boundary reporting "all OK", sounded together, the surrounding town must have shivered with a nameless apprehension. Quite often an official or the head warden would turn up at this unearthly hour to enquire the name, number and berth of prisoner or another. The entire experience was something new, horrifying and utterly unimagined, but later became an inseparable part of my life in prison. (23-24)

Prison literature as exemplified by these two narratives meet the criteria of testimonial writing that often helps the reader to realize the relations of hegemony and resistance as came into being in the acrimonious scene of popular rebellion.

The collective identity and political perspective demands reading the narratives through the lens of *testimonio* that can be defined as:

a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or significant life episode (e.g. the experience of being a prisoner) (Beverly and Zimmerman 173).

Some critics have claimed rather forcefully for the connection between *testimonio* and places as a genre of as-told-to life narratives that developed and flourished in Latin America, especially in the 1960s, beginning with Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, a transcription of the life of the 105-year-old Cuban ex-slave Esteban Montejo. Although Barnet invented the term *testimonio* with the publication of Montejo's account, in fact this format had existed long before the 1960s. Indeed as Raymond Williams has pointed out, there is a long history of oral autobiography by oppressed people that is not limited to Latin America (Beverly 71).

What do we gain by treating these narratives as *testimonios*? For one thing, it addresses the simultaneity of form and voice. As a genre that transgresses the boundaries between the public and the private, *testimonio*

is placed at the intersection of multiple roads: oral vs. literary; authored/authoritarian discourse vs. edited discourse; literature vs. anthropology; ... autobiography vs. demography; the battle of representationality; the canon debate; 'masterpiece' of literature vs. minority writing... (Gugelberger 10-11).

Testimonios-unlike most classic autobiographies in the western tradition-do not merely concentrate on the inner self, but also draws on communal experience. What's more, *testimonio* allows a focus on the

multiplicity of subjectivities at work in the text without sacrificing the authority of these narratives. In reading the two narratives as *testimonios*, the reader can realize its complex dialogic nature and to move the focus of discussion from the implicit individualism often implied in autobiography.

Testimonio communicates, centrally, the political perception of a marginalized community - it is a history from below narrated by a participant who functions as a Gramscian "organic intellectual", and also communicates a combined vision for the future, the collective political imperative of the community (Sommer 107-30). The generic conventions of the *testimonio*, therefore, urge the reader to identify the collective voice, the political standpoint of the community in struggle through a sensitivity to both the articulations as well as the silences of the participants and the trajectory of the community as opposed to that of the individual in a novel or autobiography, thus facilitating thoughtful engagement with these aspects of the narrative. The two narratives here, in tune with the genre of *testimonio*, are examples of profoundly political work.

References

1. Beverley, John. *Against Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
2. Beverley, John, and M. Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.
3. Gugelberger, Georg M. *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
4. Mitra, Joya. *Hannaman*. Translated from Bangla by Shampa Banerjee. New Delhi: Women Unlimited. 2004.
5. Singh, R. *Thirteen Years*. Translated from Hindi by M. Singh. New Delhi: Navayana, 2018.
6. Sommer, Doris. "Not Just a Personal Story: Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self." *Life /Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Bella Brodzki and C. M. Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. 107-30.