

02

A HISTORY TICKET STAMPED WITH THE WORD *FETTERS**Debabrata Bagui, RIE Bhubaneswar*

Such is the remorseless progression of human society, shedding lives and souls as it goes on its way. It is an ocean into which men sink who have been cast out by the law and consigned, with help most cruelly withheld, to moral death. The sea is the pitiless social darkness into which the penal system casts those it has condemned, an unfathomable waste of misery. The human soul, lost in those depths, may become a corpse. Who shall revive it?

- Victor Hugo

In the foreword of *13 Years* by R. Singh, translated by Madhu, Angela Davis observes that while the western readers are aware of the prison writings by the political detainees like Antonio Gramsci, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Nelson Mandela, George Jackson, Assata Shakur and Mumia Abu-Jamal, they are not aware of the circumstances that have created a significant tradition of political incarceration in Indian contexts. Singh's narrative plays an important role to fill in this gap and has become instrumental in political education in India. Davis, in the same place, has noted the description of prison as a university. She talks of the political prisoners who conducted tours to Robben Island and used to describe it as a Robben Island University. Similarly in Singh's narrative readers find a description of the events inside the bar and also understand different issues of the movement with which the narrator was involved. Experiences and insights about the world inside and outside - bring enlightenment to the narrator and make him realise the important functioning of the prison along with the role of social distinctions inside on the basis of class and caste. He evaluates his political goal in this light and weighs the possibility of a world without crime, without distinction on the basis of class and caste and without military and police forces. In this visionary world there is no need for prisons and other places for confinement, and it shows a way towards the new vistas towards a socialist republic.

Singh, however, describes prison as “a place of rumours and widespread illiteracy” (p. 106) with an atmosphere of “fear and oppression” (p. 78). He describes the dark aspects of penitentiary:

There was no library in jail where the prisoners could read books. Neither was there any private supply of newspapers. Each circle got a newspaper that went directly to the deputy jailor's office. After him, it reached the hands of a few privileged convicts-peon, writer, storekeeper. Some of the educated prisoners would occasionally get to read the paper, either outside the deputy jailor's office or at their barracks, thanks to the benevolence of the factotums mentioned above. (p. 105)

The narrator laments over the fact that because of supports from some of the inmates, protesters and political prisoners used to be frequently beaten badly, and these matters were not considered seriously. “In our country, and perhaps all over the world, the structure of the prison system crushes the spirit of long-term ordinary prisoners to turn them into callous brutes, and that is the extent of their mental reform” (p. 110). Although there is no rule to delegate prison work on the basis of religion or caste, because of their Brahmanical mindset the authorities used to set work on the basis of these. Inmates from the oppressed castes used to be assigned cleaning duties and were exacted back-breaking work without considering their age or health conditions. The readers are told of Gourishankar or Gouriya, who had his berth next to that of

the narrator. Brahmin inmates tried to avoid Gouriya, who was an anti-brahman and known as a troublemaker.

B.D. Sharma, the junior jailor of the circle, was himself a brahmin. The activities of Gouriya often reached his ears and he had devised a strategy to deal with him. Every six or seven days, he would summon Gouriya before the circle office. At one hollering from the jailor, Gouriya would immediately squat with his hands on his ears in the murga (rooster) position. The jailor would send for a lathi to beat him with, which made him run away in fear. This was not revenge for Gouriya's anti-brahmin attitude but to control and tame his baggad rants. One day when he was summoned for the murga punishment, he told the jailor, "Huzoor! Make me a different bird today." The jailor shooed him away by striking his lathi on the ground. (p. 100)

The memoir is full of the pangs that create a sense of horror not only in the minds of the incarcerated ones but among the readers also. The narrator recalls the tales about prison life that he heard during his childhood:

I had heard a lot of legends about prison life during my childhood. If you are slow at work, expect a kick on your butt. Inmates are made to sweep and mop, they are served water hyacinth weed in place of green vegetable, the flour for rotis are kneaded by foot, while the rotis are brushed with a broom, and so on. All these horrifying details warned us to be careful lest the same fate befall us. (p. 90)

But the torture, that he witnessed during his incarceration, went to such a level when the narrator commented that "Had we known the reality then, we would not have ever imagined prison in such pallid terms." He calls up the days when the inmates always lived in fear of the sudden visits and random rounds by the prison superintendent with a troop of about twenty *nambardars*, hardened criminals or *pakkas* and warders. "It was as if a feudal lord and his war machine were on the move ... Invariably every day battered and bruised inmates were taken to the hospital, their blood dripping" (p. 91). The detainees were not allowed to talk to other inmates or to lighting their beedi by another's. The narrator recalls an event when the prison authority burnt all the commodities which were brought by the members of the families of the prisoners. Jaggery, oil, ghee, roasted gram, chillies, beedis, tobacco and other possessions "lovingly stored in their filthy cloth-bags and bundles" were seized and burnt. A horrible description of a *gumti* has been provided.

Secretly warming oneself by the logwood fire, heating up watery dal or commenting on the rottenness of the food was enough to be called to the *gumti*. Allegations of unnatural sex also drew the wrath of the authorities. False charges were made by their hangers-on with the intention of keeping people under their thumb. (p. 92)

In *gumti* convicts were hung upside down, beaten up brutally and sent to the hospital only for first aid and returned to their place in jail for hard work, sometimes again with a fixed number of blows. Readers are intimidated of Narayan Singh who was awarded ten baton blows every day before being set to work.

After reaching the factory, Narayan Singh would lie down on the floor, raise his feet and suffer the blows raining ruthlessly on his soles. Sobbing, he would find the strength to begin his work without a word. This atrocity continued for months together. Even his moustaches were pulled out on one occasion and stored in a box. Who knows, it may still be lying in the jail storeroom. (p. 91)

Readers are told that the horrific torture on the prisoners could make the hardest inmates panic and shiver. The inmates could hear the cry of the victims throughout the day. The victims were beaten even before the meal is served in the morning. If out of the pain they did not want to take the food, they were beaten again. They were forced to take the piece of their food into their mouth with trembling hands. The detainees were habituated with their crying and screaming, and afraid about their fate. In spite of the torture, however, some inmates refused to break down and retained their mental strength. For most of the

thirteen years of their incarceration Dayashankar and Santoshanand were in solitary confinement and experienced inhuman torture.

Once G.L. Gupta awarded three hundred blows to Dayashankar with a cane fashioned out of a green branch of neem. Dayashankar extended his left hand and the muscleman struck with all his might. A red gash appeared, cutting across his hand to his bare arm. The second blow fell on his stretched palm with the same force. Dayashankar turned his face away and endured the pain. Then the stinging blows fell on his hand in quick succession. Soon his arm and hand turned into a bloodied mess but Dayashankar refused to yield or change his hand, Superintendent Gupta then stopped the pakka and asked, "How many did you count?"

"Huzoor, one hundred and seventy-six," the pakka replied.

"No, you haven't counted correctly. Start again," Gupta barked.

The lashes started once again. But poor Dayashankar suffered all the blows on one hand and looked as if done to death.

His whole arm was soaked in blood. As the cane hit his hand with full force, blood splattered and sprayed all around. Fibres of flesh turned to pulp and flew into the air. By the time the counting was over, the white of the bones had become visible.

"Why didn't you turn over the other hand?" Gupta asked Dayashankar.

"To blast your ego, you sinner!" Dayashankar answered.

In response to this he was hung upside down from a tree and thrashed till his body was a mass of mangled flesh. Later you are given some first aid and sent off to his solitary cell. His hand never recovered as the bone had cracked. (p. 92-94)

Santoshanand revealed the malpractice of the *Bada Sahib* and had to face revenge. Prisoners had to make a lot of items for the marriage of the sister of the *Bada Sahib* of the prison. Items like colourful strings for cots, flower vases, mosquito nets, beautiful rugs and carpets, garden umbrellas and wooden furniture prepared by the inmates were loaded onto trucks standing outside the superintendent's house.

Santoshanand conspired to bring all the senior officials of the district to the jail for a crackdown. To attract their attention, he and two other prison inmates climbed a tree within the prison compound. At once the security sirens started blaring. The moment Gupta heard the commotion he quickly sent away the trucks and bid adieu to the bride without waiting for the marriage rituals to finish. Only when the magistrate reached the jail precincts did Santoshanand and his fellow conspirators get down from the tree, but their plan had suffered a blow due to Gupta's cunning. As expected, Santosh and his fellow-in-crime were thrown into solitary confinement and tortured beyond anybody's imagination.

When Gupta got his transfer orders he called together all the prisoners and told Santosh that he would be released from solitary confinement if he sought pardon. But bold and brave as he was, he refused to do so and spat with hatred. Only upon the arrival of the new sahib was he released from the solitary cell. (p. 93 94)

The memoir is, however, does not give expression to only terror and trepidation. Readers find some descriptions that play the role of something like comic relief. The narrator lets them know that the political prisoners were not always afraid of the Bada Sahib whose ceremonial procession became a matter of fun. The prisoners chanted:

*"Bol jamure kya dekha?
Bina tilak ka raja dekha
Aur jamure kya dekha?
Chanwar dulate pakka dekha.*

Tell me sidekick, what do you see?
 An unanointed king is what I see.
 What else, sidekick, do you see?
 A muscleman waving a fly-whisk.” (p. 108)

Bara Sahib, needless to say, did not let the matter go easily and waited for an opportunity to crush the ego of the political prisoners. With a lame excuse Pankaj, a political prisoner, was slapped and Bara Sahib distributed leaflets with the following among the inmates:

*“Bol jamure kya dekha?
 Neta ke upar neta dekha.
 Aur jamure kya dekha?
 Machhardani hilte dekha.*

Tell me sidekick, what did you see?
 Saw one leader atop the other.
 And sidekick, what else did you see?
 Saw their quivering mosquito-net.” (p. 109)

In spite of being a fabricated tale, the prisoners enjoyed chanting and shouting these words and it became a matter of amusement to them. The memoir provides the reader a taste of tender aspects of family relationships also. Readers find the narrator in Kanpur where his mother fed him with her hands. After his mother and grandmother had to leave him in the railway station and permitted his wife to accompany him during the journey:

The train was speeding through the early dawn. The armed constables sitting around me had dozed off. My younger brother, Kailash, too was trying to catch some sleep on the upper berth. Finding a quiet moment, my wife hid her face in my chest and cried. I remembered the days spent with her in Manjhiya when she would hide her fair, flushed face in my bosom and laugh. After reaching Fatehgarh jail the next day, I asked my brother and wife to return so that they could find a connecting train easily. They left with heavy hearts. (p. 76)

Once the narrator met the jail superintendent who came on his round and told him that since he and his associates are political prisoners they could not be held in cells. The superintendent refused to listen to the narrator and say that as far as his knowledge goes there are only two types of prisoners i.e., the under trials and the convicts. To him, the term “political prisoner” does not have any meaning. Singh tried to make the point that when a person is sent to prison because of political reasons no one is expected to misbehave with him. He is, rather, provided some privileges. But, “... even ordinary prisoners here were deprived of facilities they have every right to receive.” The superintendent, however, turned a deaf ear to this explanation. There were, however, more experiences to be faced by the narrator.

At times, the prisoners were given a postcard each to write to their dear ones, messages which were then strictly censored. One of my postcards fell into the hands of the jailor. It was placed before G.L. Gupta, and I was asked to appear before him. I hid the remaining secret papers and braced myself to be thrown into a solitary cell. It used to be commonplace in those days. I waited in great apprehension of being asked to appear before him but Superintendent Gupta never sent for me. Instead, my history ticket was stamped with the word *FETTERS*. This was an unbelievable incident of his tenure, for in the normal course my misdemeanour would have invited the harshest of punishments. I was put in fetters. By this time I had become so used to being in irons that I accepted the trouble without fuss. (p. 95)

The aspect of solidarity makes Singh's narrative a *testimonio*. One of the aims behind it is, as expressed by Angela Davis in her life narrative, to “encourage others to join the struggle (xvi).” The present paper endeavours to highlight the narrative as a site of politically charged discourse that speaks on behalf of marginalised populace. They are people who are oppressed, bullied and tormented by the dominant group of societies. They have been characterised by “collective unaware and largely silenced and buried under a heap of false and perverted rhetoric. And in this, the writer can't help but perform a political act, because reality is political (Craft 10).”

In “The Margin at the Centre: On *Testimonio*” John Beverley maps the parameters of the testimonial narrative. He focuses on the material conditions that produce this form of expression. Literary forms, he states, which developed in the period of colonial expansion do not merely reflect social relations. They act as agents in the formation of hegemony. Beverley views testimonial literature as part of the struggle to resist and subvert the colonial discourse of literature. It challenges the hallowed categories of singular authorship, literary aesthetics, and the elite cultural construction of “masterpieces.” The *testimonio*, Beverley puts, “is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value (28).” The “testimonial function” is based on the Other's struggle for legitimacy and power. This struggle is the referent of testimonial discourse. But it is also the pragmatic function that the discourse itself accomplishes among various “literary” discourses (Craft 16). The testimonial text is performative. It is placed at the “centre of the dialectic of oppressor and oppressed in the postcolonial world (Beverley and Zimmerman 176).” Further characteristics of testimonial discourse include polyphony and a collective subject in the so-called democratisation of literature. Foucault's observation of the disappearance of the author-function in postmodernism is significant in this respect. Here, the first-person point of view is still maintained. But the subject multiplies beyond the narrators and collaborators. As a result many gain access to the public sphere of the written text. The eyewitness often insists that he speaks as only one of many who have suffered tyranny. He claims that her story is not atypical. He emphasises that many others have been silenced by the same repressive authority that beleaguers him. Very often he seems to subordinate her own singularity to the identity of the community. Thus, additional voices weave intertextually in and out of such texts. The solitary hero figure of the romantic novel theoretically disappears. Whereas the romantic hero is unique, superior, and exemplary a metaphoric signifier, as Sommer explains the *testimonio*'s protagonist leans toward the metonymic, an extension of the collective and in many cases the plural. This feature distinguishes *testimonio* from autobiography, a genre Sommer finds peculiar to Western culture. The protagonists that do emerge in *testimonios* are notable by their shared ordinariness.

Singh's memoir is successful in raising some questions in the mind of the readers regarding their country and society. The interrogation at the end of the following excerpt is perhaps one of the strongest among them:

Legend has it that when the hungry mob encircled the palace of Louis XVI of France, the Queen, Marie Antoinette suggested innocently, 'If they don't have bread why can't they eat cake?' A similar story goes around in our village. A poor mother tried to pacify her daughter crying of hunger by saying that she would be married into a family where she would have all comforts-servants to wait upon her, expensive clothes to wear, lots of jewellery to put on and a doting husband. On hearing all this, the little girl saw her dream shatter, and looking at her mother with disappointment she asked, "But mother will I get bread to eat?" (p. 96)

Works Cited:

1. Beverley, John and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

2. Beverley, John. "The Margin at the Centre: On Testimonio," in *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
3. Craft, Linda J. *Novels of Testimony and Resistance from Central America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.
4. Davis, Angela. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. 1974. Reprint, New York: International Publishers, 2008.
5. Singh, R. *13 Years*, Tr. by M. Singh. New Delhi: Navayana, 2018.
6. Sommer, Doris. "Not Just a Personal Story," in *Life/Lines*, eds. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. 107-130. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988.