BOOK REVIEW

Captive bodies, defiant voices: Political Prisoners in Indian Jails

MEGHNA HARIDAS

Neeta Kolhatkar, *The Feared: Conversations With Eleven Political Prisoners*. India: Yoda Press LLP and Simon & Schuster India 2024, 240 Pages, ISBN: 9788198200369

Through a series of in-depth interviews with political prisoners in India and their families, Neeta Kolhatkar, in her non-fiction book titled *The Feared: Conversations with Eleven Political Prisoners*, uncovers the hidden stories, harsh truths, and unsettling lived realities behind Indian prison walls. Through these accounts, she sheds light on the profound physical, mental, and social toll that incarceration inflicts — not only on the prisoners themselves but also on their families, and how this experience continues to haunt them even after the end of prison time. Kolhatkar's work is crucial in foregrounding the perspective of political prisoners, emphasising the clear distinction between them and other inmates. "Political prisoners are political opponents, also known as prisoners of conscience", whose alleged crime is often holding an extreme or different political opinion that threatens the ruling government or mainstream ideologies (p xix). Nevertheless, prison officials often do not acknowledge this difference and treat them simply as criminals. By foregrounding their narratives, *The Feared* challenges the institutional erasure of this distinction and critiques the broader implications of political incarceration in India.

The text, constituting 240 pages, is divided into eleven chapters, each dedicated to a different political prisoner, incorporating their testimonies alongside their families' perspectives. It also includes two Forewords by Julio Riberio, former Director General of Police, Punjab, and Justice (Retd) BN Srikrishna. The author has also formulated a comprehensive Notes section toward the end, offering readers valuable insights into case details, judicial terminology, references, and other contextual elements essential for a deeper understanding of the text. One of the challenges of the text is that Kolhatkar frames the narrative based on a set of predetermined questions, which, after a point, can seem repetitive to the reader and do not necessarily bring out new insights. While there is a well-established tradition of prison narratives in the form of memoirs and autobiographies, they are predominantly those of the prisoners themselves, offering their subjective experiences of incarceration. In contrast, Kolhatkar's work broadens this scope by incorporating the voices of the prisoners' kin, shedding light on the often overlooked social and psychological repercussions of political imprisonment on families. This approach fills a significant gap in the public discourse, as not enough recorded texts capture how incarceration reverberates beyond prison walls, shaping the lives of those left at home.

Further, the book features a diverse range of interviewees from different states across India, encompassing individuals arrested under various political regimes and representing a spectrum of ideological affiliations, simultaneously highlighting the notable increase in political incarceration in the last decade. The selected eleven political prisoners are Sudha Bharadwaj, Sameer Malik, Shoma Sen, Prashanth Rahi, Sanjay Raut, Kishorechandra Wangkhem, Anand Teltumbde, Binayak Sen, Kobad Ghandy, Muralidharan K, and P Hemalatha*. Through this strategic selection of interviewees and their accounts of varying lived experiences, Kolhatkar succeeds in crafting a well-defined narrative that addresses the intersectionalities in their treatment in prison based on factors like gender, caste, age, political alliance, economic background, geography, etc. Such intersectionalities are addressed by interviewees like Sudha Bharadwaj, who notes that "in a very typical patriarchal system, the women's jail was always subordinate to the main prison for men. Now the main library was in the prison for men, and only 25 books from there could be brought to the women's jail" (p 15). While a significant proportion of the narrative focuses on Maharashtra's prisons, Kolhatkar effectively utilises the prisoners' experiences in multiple jails — owing to their frequent transfers — to offer a comparative analysis of the organisation and functioning of different jails — the degree to which prison reforms have been implemented among various Indian states — that enables us to examine the healthcare provisions, sanitation, food quality, and the extent to which prisoners' rights are upheld across different institutions. She notes that compared to the northern regions, the prisons in southern India are better organised, reformed and maintain a higher quality of food and sanitation (pp 119-121).

One of the notable qualities of Kolhatkar's writing is how she centres the prisoner's narrative and pays attention to their autonomy. While upholding the highest standards of journalistic ethics, Kolhatkar resists the detached, objective lens often associated with reportage. She does not treat these interviews as mere opportunities to extract sensational headlines or turn lived experiences into commodified news stories. Instead, Kolhatkar expresses an evident sense of empathy and compassion, lending the interviewees an empathic ear to hear their side of the story, and acknowledge the sensitive nature of the individual's experiences as well as those of their family.

Kolhatkar doesn't limit the book or her conversations to the sole objective of uncovering the experiences of incarceration of political prisoners in Indian jails. She allows the conversations to flow and organically unfurl, giving the individuals the space and time to tell their stories. This is evident in the chapter on Dr Binayak Sen (pp 126-154), who has worked closely with mine workers and daily wage labourers in the factories of Chhattisgarh, to set up a health centre for them in Chhattisgarh. He was among the first intellectuals who were arrested, allegedly due to their Naxal ideology, in 2007 when the Manmohan Singh government recognised the problem of Naxalism as the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by the country. Kolhatkar interviews Binayak and his daughters, Pranhita Sen and Aparajita Sen (pp 147-148). Their conversations reveal his memories of incarceration, the conditions at different jails, loneliness in solitary confinement, the effect of jail time on his physical and mental health and its toll on the family. Kolhatkar asks the daughters, "Is there something about him that is not known to others?" (p 147). The daughters go on to talk about how wonderful a cook he is. They refer to a childhood memory, that of a cooking blunder by their father when he made a chicken soup (p 147). Though it is in no way related to her primary scope of inquiry, Kolhatkar shows interest in their story and allows them to continue sharing this memory. The conversations extend over two pages in the book. At first glance, the inclusion of such extensive personal details may seem tangential, as they do not directly document the experience of incarceration or the political struggles of the subjects. However, these narratives serve a deeper purpose — they dismantle rigid perceptions of political prisoners, allowing them to emerge not just as activists or detainees, but as individuals with histories, relationships, and ordinary lives that extend beyond the confines of their imprisonment.

Political prisoners are often incarcerated, merely for holding an opinion that doesn't align with the mainstream view. Throughout the book, many of the interviewees note that once you enter a prison, irrespective of whether you are falsely accused or innocent, you are treated as a criminal (pp 7, 37) Inside the jail, your identity as a prisoner overshadows your identity as a human being, often resulting in denial of fundamental human rights and access to basic healthcare. This sense of ostracisation and perception as being less than human permeates the walls of the jail, influencing the larger social outlook towards such individuals. Hence, such personal anecdotes play a crucial role in viewing them through an empathetic, humane lens that we often forget because of the constant othering orchestrated by the state, the judiciary, the officials and the media. This humanising effect is further reinforced by the black-and-white photographs that precede each chapter, depicting the interviewees and their families in intimate, familial settings. Captured in their homes, they are surrounded by the quiet markers of daily life, their expressions often warm. It is refreshing to see them smile with pure happiness in those pictures even after going through so many hardships, personal challenges and as they continue to fight. This book breaks the wall of othering and brings in a sense of intimacy that allows the reader to reread their stories, not as mere case studies and news articles, but as the lived reality of a fellow human.

At the start of each chapter, the author provides a detailed overview of the various charges imposed on the interviewees, the timeline of their arrest, the political atmosphere of the time, the details of their cases, etc. Kolhatkar effectively draws from her experiences as a journalist to craft the introduction to each chapter in an objective tone far removed from the shrill popular media narrative. Each chapter develops the discussion through interviews in a question-and-answer format. The book does not follow a chronological order in presenting the cases, but the narrative is skilfully woven together. While the first chapter is on the woman political prisoner, Sudha Bharadwaj, the book concludes with the chapter on P Hemalatha, the wife of Varavara Rao, who was incarcerated in 2018. By linking their experiences and the two different lived realities of incarceration, inside and outside the prison walls, the author creates a cohesive, circular flow that ties the narrative together seamlessly. The titles of the chapters are also crafted with utmost care and creativity. Titles like "Irony dies a hundred deaths" (p 73); "They write, and wrath is wrought upon them" (p 87) and "His bail is a jail for me" (p 224), etc are catchy and evocative facilitating a narrative that locates the reader within the story. The titles carry the weight of what is lost or preserved in the fight for justice, and are often politically charged and provocative, highlighting the intensity and sensitivity of their experience.

Kolhatkar looks at the prisoner experience through the larger lens of bio-politics, ethics and public health. Behind the walls, their individual subjectivity is completely overlooked. These groups of people are treated as a collective burden and as less than human. One of the interviewees, Rama Ambedkar, shares that "there is no human dignity even for a dead person in prison; they didn't even have a stretcher. They would dump the body in a bedsheet and take it out of the hospital. The doctors in jail did not touch patients; they carried a big torch like a railway guard and would focus the torch beam on patients to diagnose them. Dressings, injections, administration of saline etc. were done by the prisoners themselves" (p 124). This reflects the harsh dismissal of basic healthcare and complete dehumanisation of individuals, details that only such phenomenological works could reveal. Kolhatkar's work serves as a powerful lens through which the biopolitical control of citizens' bodies within the Indian prison system is laid bare. By weaving together narratives of systemic violence, psychological neglect, and the urgent need for reform, they not only expose the dehumanising structures of incarceration but also demand a reimagining of justice — one that acknowledges the profound impact of incarceration on both the body and the mind. In doing so, they push the boundaries of public and legal discourse,

compelling us to confront the ethical and political imperatives of prison reform in India.

***Note:** Corrections made on August 4, 2025.*

Author: Meghna Haridas (meghnahdas@gmail.com), PhD Scholar, Manipal Academy of Higher Education

Conflict of Interest: None declared **Funding:** None

To cite: Haridas M. Captive bodies, defiant voices: Political Prisoners in Indian Jails. *Indian J Med Ethics.* 2025 Oct-Dec; 10(4) NS: 333-335. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2025.055

Submission received: March 25, 2025

Submission accepted: April 28, 2025

Published online first: July 22, 2025

Manuscript Editor: Sanjay A Pai

BOOK REVIEW

Viewing the revivalist movement in Ayurveda from a socio-cultural perspective

SWATI SHARMA, KISHOR PATWARDHAN

Saurav Kumar Rai, Ayurveda, Nation and Society: United Provinces, c.1890-1950. Orient Blackswan Private Limited (Publisher). 2024. New Delhi. ISBN: 9789354428517. Pages: 264. Price: INR 1400

In this book, Saurav Kumar Rai explores the different dimensions of the revivalist movement in Ayurveda, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh). He also examines the status of Ayurveda immediately following independence, when the anti-colonial nationalist context was no longer relevant. Rai employs a historiographical approach that examines the entire process through the lenses of culture, caste, class, community, religion, and gender. This approach offers a broader perspective compared to dominant styles that typically view the question from either a "resistance or acceptance of colonial dominance" point of view or from an exclusively "medical science" point of view. What makes the book unique is the diverse, historically significant sources the author relies on to draw his conclusions. These sources include vernacular documents such as newspapers, pamphlets, official circulars, speeches, interviews, and many more.

In the first chapter, the author describes the historical backdrop and complexities surrounding the revival of Ayurveda. He sheds light on how the distribution of essential medical facilities was heavily influenced by colonial rule. He also explains how the colonial government used Western medicine as a tool to achieve its objective of control over the masses, using the handling of an epidemic as an example. He notes that, despite viewing Ayurveda as an "unscientific and ineffective system of medicine," the colonial government, due to a lack of interest in developing state-of-the-art healthcare infrastructure for Indians, allowed indigenous practices to continue.

This situation led to a renewed interest in reviving indigenous healing systems among their proponents and practitioners. Ayurveda and Unani emerged as the two primary contenders representing indigenous healthcare, but not without identifying themselves with religion: Ayurveda was associated with Hindu culture and Unani with Islam. The author argues that this division was based more on the religious affiliations of the practitioners than on the nature of their practices or knowledge. Additionally, he observes that divisions existed within the Ayurveda fraternity itself. While some Ayurveda practitioners embraced the use of Western science for diagnostic and other purposes, others advocated for the preservation of the original purity of Ayurveda. Nonetheless, the author notes that both groups of *Vaids* (Ayurvedic practitioners) incorporated certain aspects of Western medicine, such as the institutionalisation of learning, the professionalisation of practice, and the standardisation of pharmaceutical production and supply. He alludes to how this adoption of "Western" standards further led to the rise of many substandard ("bogus") institutions, practitioners and pharmacies. Institutionalisation of education was perceived as relatively easy as well as attractive because the standards of education were not defined. The author notes that proliferation of such substandard educational institutions led to the distribution of certificates mentioning various kinds of qualifications. He notes that these institutionally qualified "new" *Vaids* and *Hakims,* eventually succeeded in acquiring a "registered" status when The United Provinces (Indian Medicine) Act was passed in 1939. As a result, many legally qualified but poorly trained practitioners emerged, overshadowing traditional practitioners who mostly acquired their skills through familial lines. The author views these adaptations as a subtle acknowledgment of the perceived superiority of Western medicine by this new generation of practitioners.