

# SONGS OF THE JAILED BARD: A STUDY OF TWO INCARCERATION NARRATIVES IN COLONIAL INDIA

Shaswat Panda

The prison in colonial India housed inmates of various kinds, from “common criminals” to political prisoners. Notwithstanding the oppression, the prison also became the site of conception of some of the known accounts of the inmates’ lives and times. Eminent national leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, the communist M.N Roy, the Hindu nationalist V.D Savarkar vividly documented their days in jail, as did many others, either in English or in the vernaculars. As autobiographies proper, or in other forms, these imprisoned authors wrote what David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn call “Life Histories”. The time spent in jail played a crucial role in shaping their individuality and impacted their political outlook in many ways.

The significance of the prison (for the purpose of my paper) lies in its colonial background. The prison, as many of its renowned inhabitants recalled, was a place that demanded rigorous discipline and gave many the solitary lives that was needed to focus on their patriotic goals or other individual pursuits. One of the reasons also, why it is worth shedding some light on, is the question of double confinement that it evokes. That is, what does it mean to be jailed while one is already under somebody else’s rule, anyway? As can be surmised, such a situation generated complex and wide ranging responses which found expression in various kinds of autobiographical writings. The discourses of individuality that were shaped by the encounter of the individual with the prison form the conceptual premise of this paper. While incarceration narratives have received much critical attention (in terms of the prison’s impact as an institution), it would be worth our while to look at the political expediency of the forms of such writings bearing in mind the autobiographical dimension of these narratives.

In this paper, I shall try to analyse the autobiographical writings (primarily based on writings in prison) of two political leaders

whose works are also considered as having literary merit. The two individuals in question are: Gopabandhu Das (the Odia nationalist), and Gandhi. Both of them were involved in the freedom struggle. In fact Das had been influenced by Gandhi, at a certain point in his political career when the movement for creation of a separate Odisha got linked with the nationalist movement. By offering a parallel study of the prison writings of Gandhi and Gopabandhu Das (which were autobiographical in nature), I shall throw light on the reconfiguration of the supposed western genre in colonial India, and examine the relationship of these leaders with their respective communities or *Desa*. Gandhi's writings which I shall discuss in this paper, were recollections of incidents which initially got serialised in *Young India* and *Navjivan*, and were influential in shaping his autobiography, *The story of My experiments with Truth*<sup>1</sup>; It must also be added that prior to his much celebrated autobiography, his prison experiences in South Africa had become part of a book entitled *Satyagraha in South Africa*. The writings of Gopabandhu Das which I shall expound on are two of his autobiographical poems "Bandira Atmakatha"<sup>2</sup> (Autobiography of the Prisoner) and *Karakabita* (Poems of Incarceration) (1935).

What were the ramifications of encounters with a form of writing like autobiography in incarceration insofar as the question of individuality is concerned? What was the political expediency of such a form of writing? These are a few questions which I shall try to answer in my paper.

Javed Majeed in his book *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal* (2007) has made a sharp observation regarding the relationship between "nationalism and individual personhood" (Majeed 3). He has argued, how through the writing of autobiography (an act which is as political as literary) "collective life is drawn from a vision of individual self" (3). The emphasis, I believe is on both the aspects, that is, collective identity and **individual self**<sup>3</sup>. Taking a cue from Majeed, the paper shall attempt to show how even while the autobiographical writings of Gandhi and Gopabandhu Das carried the spirit of nationalism, they did not offer totalising or homogenising discourses of nationalism in the usual "you shall assume what I assume" manner. The echoes of nationalism that one hears in these texts are individual articulations trying to find resonance in collective action. Although Majeed drives his point home in trying to situate postnationality in the autobiography of Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal. I draw on his idea to emphasise the relation between individuality and collective identity that is premised

on ideas of experiment and participation.

While the evolution of Gandhi's individuality has been discussed by various scholars, I shall restrict myself to his prison writings to draw attention to the role the prison plays as an institution and as a trope. The other focal point of this paper would be the emergence of self in Gopabandhu Das' autobiographical writings: something that scholars have reduced to historical testimony. I shall not only highlight the crucial role that these individual utterances played in redefining nationalism, but specifically through Das's writings, I shall underscore the 'regional' element which gives another turn to the autobiography written in incarceration.

## I

Much as he criticised it particularly while serving his term at Yeravada or no matter how harsh he found the conditions in (Pretoria) jail, Gandhi found the prison to be the right place to put his principles to practice. The prison, in many ways marked Gandhi's rites of passage (both political and philosophical). From hesitating to share space with what he called 'uncivilised' 'kaffirs' to asking for the "heaviest penalty" (which amounted to £500 apart from six months of "hard labour")<sup>4</sup> to becoming "a seasoned jailed bird" who "enjoy[ed] [himself] in house of freedom", Gandhi's days in jail seemed to have shaped his character in formidable ways.<sup>5</sup> It would be unfair to assert that Gandhi's prison experiences alone brought about the transformation in him. Such a reductive assessment overlooks his experiences and experiments, in London, or in South Africa or in India. But Gandhi's account of his prison experience are significant because of more than one reason.

To begin with, the prison became another laboratory for Gandhi to put to test his own abilities in his continuous quest for truth. In other words, jail was the site where a *Satyagrahi* had to face one of his most difficult trials. In South Africa as in India, Gandhi had been a little more than willing, and less complaining on having to face imprisonment, perhaps because of the challenging spirit with which he wished to experiment with *Satyagraha*. For, very early in his career when Gandhi was approached by Indians in South Africa, 'jail' was perhaps the first thing that he warned his compatriots against, but himself showed remarkable zeal in taking the plunge. Gandhi's conversation with tailor Motilal who was speaking on behalf of Indians in Viramgam, explains the above stated point, better: "Are you ready to go to jail?" asks Gandhi. "We are ready to march to the

gallows,” comes an enthusiastic rejoinder from the tailor. Gandhi then says “Jail will do for me, “But see that you do not leave me in the lurch.” (Gandhi 7). Here, as in other instances, one sees how going to jail is not just an enthusiastic show of camaraderie but a means of forging bonds which demand commitment and solidarity. Gandhi notes how in Transvaal courting arrest was easier and safe for the dissidents, and convenient for the police who thought that a few days in jail could “cool” their spirits. The Satyagrahi, on the other hand had to purify himself in jail by adhering to rules in the most difficult of circumstances, unless it involved comprising dignity or when the orders were grossly unfair. Citing the example of an Imam Abdul Kadir Bawazir who had to eat the mealie pap against his wishes, Gandhi reasons that one could be obedient and could yet purify himself in jail (203). But in order to not conflate *Satyagraha* with acquiescence, an event from Yeravada jail, which Gandhi recorded in his diary, might help. Upon discovering flogging of inmates in the jail, he makes it amply clear that:

Satyagraha requires a prisoner to obey all reasonable prison regulations, and certainly to do the work given. In fact, his resistance ceases once a satyagrahi is in prison. [But] It can be revived for extraordinary reasons, e.g., studied humiliation. (Gandhi 421)

The complicated ways in which *Satyagraha* was supposed to translate individual responsibility into collective action, can be examined by looking at specific historical junctures. The picketing and subsequent mob violence at a police station in Chauri-Chaura is a very crucial moment in history, and was perhaps the second most daunting challenge to Gandhi, the most difficult being partition.

In an interview given to *The Bombay Chronicle* on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1922, Gandhi had remarked that “violence practised near Gorakhpur was not individual, not in connection with any private wrong but from a vague sense of political wrong” (169). Gandhi here seems to be critical of violence stemming from mass hysteria, and the lack of individual will of the *satyagrahi* to abjure violence. In the same interview he emphasises “self-sacrifice” for the cause of the nation instead of “mass civil disobedience [which] is the shortest cut” (169). Gandhi’s theory of self-sacrifice was not merely prescriptive, at least his life in jail seems to vouch for it. Speaking on visitors and not having access to newspapers, he maintained:

I am as happy as a bird. Nor do I think I am doing less useful service here than outside. To be here is good discipline for me, and **separation from co-workers was just the thing required to**

**know whether we were an organic whole or whether our activity was one man's show-a nine days' wonder**<sup>6</sup>. I have no misgivings. I have, therefore, no curiosity to know what is happening outside. And if my prayers are true and from a humble heart, they, I know, are infinitely more efficacious than any amount of meddlesome activity. (400)

Here, like in many other instances Gandhi highlights the force required to check [violent] actions. The strong insistence on the part of the individual to resist hasty action, could be seen as a corollary to what Gandhi had observed about Chauri-Chaura in that interview with *The Bombay Chronicle*.

While the importance of Gandhi's tendency to experiment with values has been noted, and scholars have argued how therefore, Gandhi's autobiography brings ethics to everyday practice<sup>7</sup>, it is important to extend our vision beyond the confines of one text. Gandhi had wished his autobiography to be read along with *Satyagraha in South Africa* probably because he wanted his readers to be able see a continuum or a narrative (because these accounts were being serialised). But there seems to be an ethical imperative which is to look for a common principle to link his autobiographical writings. Taking seven of Gandhi's written works, Tridib Suhrud has traced the presence of *Satyagraha* as a common link in all of them (Suhrud 87). To the list of seven works in Suhrud's thoroughly argued essay, one might add Gandhi's numerous, other autobiographical works albeit the structural disjunctions or the lack of formal adherence to the western model.

## II

One could see the commitment to *Satyagraha* in Gandhi as a means of linking individual action with collective aspiration, but not through appeals to abstract idea of a timeless, homogenised idea of nation. Rather, his belief is founded on a history of rigorous examination of principles carried out at an individual level. If such a modern, scientific approach offers a unique insight into the autobiographical self in colonial context, the case of Gopabandhu Das gives it a different turn.

Gopabandhu Das' persona, his image are as fascinating as are the writings through which he represents them. As stated before, by the time he got arrested and later imprisoned, Gopabandhu had become a renowned figure. He was known as a social worker, a preeminent leader in the Odia nationalist movement (he was an active member of *Utkal Sammillani* and he had worked tirelessly to bring together

people living in different Odia speaking tracts). He had been a member of the Bihar Odisha Legislative Assembly, he had instituted a school for boys in Satyabadi which became a model for educational institutions. But most of all, he was known as someone who always reached out to the poor. The relief work which he had carried out during the floods in Jenapur and elsewhere is one such instance. The impact of Gopabandhu can also be sensed from the fact that while he was being constantly monitored and practically under section 144 all the time, his written speeches were being read out in meetings. In one of the meetings his voice had been recorded in a gramophone recorder and was played before the gathering and on another which had been declared illegal, (took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1922) more than five hundred listened to his speech which was read out in his absence. These incidents are more vividly described in biographies of Das. As for his autobiographical poems, they are neither long nor do they give a detailed or chronological account of Das' life and times; these events are at the most reminisced by the narrator. It is perhaps because of the length and disjointed nature of the narrative which explains the negligence that these poems have suffered at the hands of scholars.

The two major critic of Odia autobiographies, John Boulton and Barbara Lotz have only considered autobiographies of Odia leaders significant from the point of view of history. They have failed to see any element of individual expression or evolution in life narratives of major political figures from Odisha. Barbara Lotz has particularly commented on Gopabandhu Das' *Bandi ra Atmakatha* and finds it not significantly different from the other autobiographies she has analysed in her essay. According to her, they all bear a 'fuzzy' relation with history (Lotz 383). The dismissal of autobiographies like the ones written by Das' as only good for history sake, is an unfair judgment and therefore we must trace the distinct presence of individuality in the autobiographical poems of Das. The jail, for that matter, might help us locate those signs of individuality. Besides, it is also important that just as in the case of Gandhi, one must try to look for the missing links in Das' autobiographical poems, and not read them in isolation.

In both the texts, that is *Bandi ra Atmakatha* and *Kara Kabita*, the prison is compared to a place of pilgrimage or worship. In *Atmakatha* it is called "Holy Prabhas" (the possible reference could be a place where Krishna is supposed to have performed a *yajna*) and the degree of cynicism is less. It is told that Gandhi too has been to prison, and he considers himself a mere follower of Gandhi. He calls it "Jatiya

mukti ra Swargdar” meaning doors to heaven (literally) or the famous crematorium in Puri. In *Kara Kabita*, however, the responses to prison tend to become ambiguous and it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine the jail as sanctified place. Except for a couple of instances where it is called a place of pilgrimage, the dark prison, it seems, has rendered all other forms of darkness insignificant for him. It is a place which taught him to endure or accept everything with the equipoise of a stoic. One of his inspirations, interestingly is Socrates, as seen in “Bandi re Sandhya Bhakti” or Evening-Prayers.

But the most striking reference to the prison appears in the poem titled “Pitrupakshya Tarpan” or Rituals for Dead Ancestors. In this poem he has doubts if his prayers and offerings will be accepted by his dead ancestors because he is an *aparadhi* or criminal. Here, he questions his status as a criminal or accused because his crime does not appear as violation of code of conduct as prescribed in [Hindu] religion. More important is the fact that he doubts if he is a “rajneeti aparadhi” or political prisoner. Questioning the legitimacy of colonial rule, he refuses to believe that his actions have been inimical to *Raj Dharma* when there is no rule, much less a ruler. He, therefore believes his body is not defiled and he can therefore, offer *Tarpan* to his ancestors. The varied and ambiguous responses to prison need to be thought of at the level of the individual and his relationship to a larger community. Das’ manner of invoking religion in his narrative is very different from the way someone like Gandhi who would say, “I have made the world’s faith in God my own, and as my faith is ineffaceable, I regard that faith as amounting to experience ... I have no word for characterizing my belief in God”; in other words that belief was influenced by, but not necessarily restricted to Hinduism (Gandhi *Kindle Locations* 381-382).

Das on the other hand constantly refers to Lord Jagannath of Puri in his poems, seeking guidance from the divine force. In *Kara Kabita*, the jailed protagonist seeks blessings from Lord Jagannath, invokes him time and again; In *Bandi ra Atmakatha*” we are told that *Utkal* (previous name of the present day Odisha) need not ask for more when their “leader is none other than Lord Jagannath himself”. The same deity is again referred to in “Bandi ra Swades Chinta” only this time for a devotee who is far away and helpless. Religion here becomes a means of imagining a communitarian identity. However, it is not sectarian politics which Das takes recourse to. The cult of Jagannath, as many scholars would agree, was one of the points around which Odia nationalism revolved. So, even though there are numerous references to the question of country’s freedom, or there is a sense

of reverence towards Gandhi and celebration of his cult, or there is also a call for joining the freedom movement, the regional markers remain distinct. The other important point to be kept in mind is that through a constant tone of nostalgia and an increasing feeling of isolation, the narrator sees himself as one that is isolated from the larger community that he belongs to. So, instead of projecting his emotions on the community, he constantly imagines himself as one among the lot, except that he has been separated.

The one last point that I would like to highlight is the role that place or geography in general, plays in the autobiographical writings I have mentioned. Writing in Yeravada jail, Gandhi recalls South Africa in vivid details in the first chapter of his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*. In the subsequent chapters we find careful description of places in South Africa. In the preface to the book Gandhi assures the reader that he even though he has not consulted any notes, his memory can be relied on. Had Gandhi achieved a similar feat with regard to London, Naipaul would perhaps have been less critical in his essay, "Indian Autobiographies". But then in his autobiography, the chapter on London is titled "in London at last". For the young Mohan Das Gandhi, perhaps it was a question of surviving and reaching London. But insofar as South Africa was concerned it was about "arrival". Gandhi's association with places does not merely speak for his eye for details. By reimagining places, Gandhi also invokes his association with individuals and the way they impacted his life. In the case of Das, the autobiographical narrative breaks away from the conventional bildungsroman or the confessional mode to the effect that it can be read as a journey which halts at the jail. But, the political implication of the journey is equally important. The places which are mentioned in *Atmakatha* (for instance Bhadrak, Jenapur, Kanika) are places where Das had left a mark through his active involvement in political and social activities. He not only recalls his participation but points out to the problems and social vices that grip those places or the economic exploitation they have fallen victims to. The prison as opposed to these places is only mentioned using metaphors of darkness. While Das increasingly becomes nostalgic, Gandhi had once rubbished reports of having been struck by melancholia and has constantly shown how the prison kept him preoccupied for the right reasons. But in either case, it is a sense of selfhood or individuality which pits itself against a community. The association with places and events is a way of identifying with community and overcoming abstract ways of connecting with them.

The prison writings of the two leaders discussed in the paper



highlight the complex ways in which Indians thought of the prison. One could extend the same argument and speak in a similar manner of the Indian response to autobiography. While, like Gandhi himself, one could say that autobiography was a western form (at least in terms of its origin), it is equally true that it did certainly gain distinct shape(s) in India. The autobiography as it developed in the prison is not merely a reflection of the transformation of a genre, but a testimony to the reconceptualization of the institution called prison.

### Notes

1. See Arnold, David. "The Self and the Cell". *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Eds. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004. Print.
2. The poem was published in book form in 1923 in an edition of *The Samaj* which was meant to commemorate one year of Gopabandhu Das' imprisonment. After this I shall refer to the poem in its book form.
3. Emphasis mine
4. See Guha, Ramachandra. *Gandhi Before India* (Kindle Locations 5010-5011). Penguin Books Ltd. Kindle Edition.
5. See CWMG Vol 8, Vol 26, and Vol 27
6. Emphasis mine
7. See Sunil Khilnani's introduction to M.K Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927-29). London: Penguin, 2001. Kindle e-book.

### Works Cited

- Arnold, David. "The Self and the Cell in India". *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*. Ed. Stuart Blackburn and David Arnold. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004. Print.
- Boulton, John. "Autobiography in Oriya 1917-1976". *Essays on Odia Literature*. Jagatsinghpur: Prafulla, 2003. Print.
- Debendra Kumar Dash ed. *Utkalmani Gopabandhu Granthabali* (2003). Cuttack: Granthamandir, 2014. Print.
- Gandhi, Mohan K. *An Autobiography: Or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. 1927-29. London: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: Vol 26*. WWW. Gandhiserve.Org. Web. Accessed 4<sup>th</sup> April 2017.
- Guha, Ramachandra. *Gandhi before India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2013. Kindle e Book.
- Lotz, Barbara. "Autobiographies of Oriya Leaders: Contributions to a Cause". *Text, Context in the History, Literature and Religion of Orissa*. Ed. Angelika Malinar et.al. Delhi: Manohar, 2004. Print.
- Majeed, Javed. *Autobiography, Travel Writing and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

- Naipaul, Vidiadhar S. "Indian Autobiographies". *The Overcrowded Baracoon*. London: Penguin, 1974. Print.
- Satpathy, Nityanand. *Hey Saathi, Hey Sarathi (O My Companion, My Guide)* (1969). Cuttack: Granthamandir, 2014. Print.
- Suhrud, Tridib. Gandhi's Key Writing: In Search of Unity. *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*. Eds. Anthony J Parel and Judith M Brown. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Print.