

India: Women's Journey from One Jail to Another: In Conversation with Seema Azad

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Women end up in prison due to the traps of this patriarchal system that forces them to commit those crimes. They remain in prison because society and their families also considers them disposable

Q- Seema, tell us about your recently released book - Aurat ka Safar Jail se Jail Tak. Why the name?

Seema- In Varavara Rao's jail diary, the poet says, this world is a jail and the real jail is a small part of it. It occurred to me that, this world is a big jail, and women are locked in small jails. This jail I consider is a middle jail where women come from their smaller jails. And the women after getting released from this jail go back to the older jail i.e their homes. This is how the name of the book came to be. This book is about the women who are jailed and their journey. How did they land there? Also with women prisoners' you see that their crimes are mainly because they are part of this patriarchal society. It is the traps of this patriarchal system that forces them to commit those crimes.

Q- In the current political climate we are witnessing incarceration of the innocent. Many of them have written about their jail experiences as jail dairies. But it's very rare to see prison dairies of women. There was one of Mary Tyler in 1978 written from her prison time in Jharkhand. We have seen in popular cinema how prison is shown, how a woman prison is shown. There is an American series "Orange Is the New Black" which shows how prison works through cheap labour and how it incarcerates poor and marginalised. What were your observations?

Seema- A characteristic feature of a repressive state is arresting the activists and the dissenting citizens. However, for social activists, jail is not just a punishment but also an opportunity to see society. The state wants to send us to jail and for us to get depressed. But mostly it's the opposite. Activists come out stronger when they come out of jail. They come out and tell people that Jail is not a place where life ends.

It tells us that people do not know anything about jail. None of the movies I have seen give a realistic depiction of jail. I also had similar prejudices when I went to jail, but the next day I saw that people were taking baths, getting ready, children are playing, women are chatting. So yes we are away from our family and friends but here also life goes on.

This is my second book on jail. My first book was "[ZindanNama- Chand Taaron ke bagair Ek Duniya](#)". That book was to reduce the distance between jail and society. What is the caste ratio in jail? Women from which sections of society end up in jail? How children are taken care of in jail?

This book is about the journey of women who ended up in jail and how they ended up in prisons.

There are some prison dairies by women written in English. For example, there are two by B

Anuradha but not many in Hindi.

American jails are big factories of cheap labour. In India too this has begun. In some jails, in the name of "training", jute bags and candles are being made which are sold at 10-50 times what the prisoners are getting.

Angela Davis has written extensively on Prisons. She says prisons cause criminalisation of society. In the US, it is the Blacks and Latin population that makes most of the prison while here it is Muslims, Dalits, and OBCs that form most of the prison population. You can see this clearly.

Muslims are a minority in India and Hindus are the majority but in jails, it's the [Muslims and Dalits who form the majority](#).

These communities are too far from the legal system. They are far behind in the socioeconomic system. The process of buying or accessing justice and legal help is beyond their reach. Rich can manage the police and even judge but the poor cannot do such things. So, despite being innocent they spend years in prison.

I will give you one such example- One boy was released after 16 years. One of our friends lobbied for him and then he got bail and even the judge was surprised that nobody moved his bail in 16 years. His family was totally unaware of the process. He had already spent more than the time of punishment in jail. One woman I met was in that jail for 11 years. Nothing has happened in her case. I appealed in her case and then after 1.5 years, she came out. She was in jail for 7 years on charges of hiding a witness but she had spent 11 years in jail. Who will compensate for these extra years of punishment?

Q- You mentioned that Muslims and Dalits are overrepresented in prisons, also in women's prisons. What is the reason behind it?

Seema- The reason is not only their access to the justice system but all the state institutions that have a very flawed view of these communities.

Like in British times, there were tribes that were called criminal tribes. Today there is no such declaration but all institutions are of the view that poor, lower caste and Muslims are criminals and if they don't believe this then they should be made/portrayed as criminals. A mob killed Akhlaq and Junaid for supposedly carrying beef. These are the incidents that should have shaken us. But such incidents did not evoke any reaction from the state institutions because they also think that they deserve it.

If somebody was arrested as a Maoist or even a Maoist sympathizer then the judge also says- "They have Maoist label so we will not give them bail". Even in Nodeep Kaur's case, the police were beating her saying you are Dalit your job is sewer cleaning. This and several other incidents show the mindset of the state institutions and this is the reason Muslims and Dalits are in prison and because they don't have access to the justice system so they cannot come out of prison.

In prisons, since British times father's name and caste are registered because work is allotted according to caste in prison. Upper castes and rich are not given hard work and Dalits are given cleaning work. Sometimes upper castes and the rich are given toilet cleaning so that they cough up money for the guards and get different work assigned or no work if they bribe the officials.

In women's prisons also you will know after talking to a Savarna woman or women from a Muslim or Dalit background. Many start practicing untouchability, like "don't touch my bucket" or start doing more poojas as they will feel this is the only way to get out of jail.

Jail is like rice grain, like with just touching one grain of rice you can see if the rice is cooked or not same way jail is a mirror where you can see society's ills in its full vulgar display.

Bribery in Prisons actually pushes people who had come for smaller crimes into bigger crimes because they think this is the only way to have a better life. One such girl I have discussed in the book who was jailed for general thievery got in touch with a group of women who were arrested for sex work. She got attracted to all the glitter, makeup, and nice clothes they had and how much money they could use in the prison. After getting released she also joined those women. Who is responsible for pushing that girl into sex work now?

Q- What is the daily routine in jail? How do women come to terms with longer sentences?

Seema: Talking about myself, I could not register anything for at least one week. I was in the mindset that any minute my bail would come; I didn't even know that I was arrested under UAPA.

Then when I got to know about the charges and realised that it will be a long one. Similarly, I have seen other women. One takes a long time to get rid of all the prejudices that they have about jails. But there are many instances of cooperation, which is something that I have not seen outside the prison. Some give their fresh clothes, soap, oil, bedding, and blankets to the women who are new and have nothing with them.

Normally there is work assigned. Some prepare for their court hearing, some would chat. I gave books to some women who could read. I would get involved with children, playing and telling them stories.

Prisons are called 'Reform centers' but in the name of reform, people are just thrown there like something unwanted. But nothing is done to reform them or make their lives better. There is no means to instill positivity in them. All of them have some or the other form of mental illness. During my two years stay, I saw a woman slowly become insane. We also told guards and officers that this woman needs help. There is no psychiatrist or counselor in jail. This is the story of every jail.

During my time, yoga and Jain munis were also brought who would conduct spiritual classes because in the head of prison authorities all inmates are hardened criminals and through religion and spirituality they can be purified. This again a very Brahmanical view of things. This is their definition of reform. Now we hear that books are not allowed for reading but religious books (Gita, Kuran) are given for free to every prisoner.

Those who come to prison, their life just pauses there. Even if their family comes to visit the world that they had seen with their own eyes has stopped. Even they get dreams of their old life.

One of the inmates she had left behind her 3-year-old child. Even though she has met the child during the family visits and the child was 5 then But in her dreams, the child is still 3 years old.

Q- You mentioned many instances of cooperation among women even in that cruel system? In a system without men did you see any instances of women realising their own existence and life without men and patriarchy?

Seema- Yes and this is my favourite! Once a couple was arrested.

The husband was in men's jail and the wife in women's jail. During the internal visits, the husband gave his dirty laundry to the wife to clean and bring it next Saturday. As men's clothes are not allowed in women's prison, the guard scolded her when he saw her washing them and told her to

return them to him on the next visit.

When she returned from her internal visit she was very happy and said... 'Good! Alas got free from washing his clothes,' and hearing this all women laughed with her.

This is not a small incident. It shows how patriarchy ties up women and how much women enjoy when they feel they have broken free from it. This enjoyment can also be seen when they are dancing and singing, far away from the male gaze in women's jail. They can express themselves. The freedom that women get from the distancing with husband, in-laws, etc is really something.

So in their understanding, they also want to live in a commune kind of place where they are free from patriarchal and family roles and be themselves, enjoy themselves.

GLN- Yes, even in [Mary Tyler's book](#) many women had said the jail is better than the homes they come from...

Seema- Yes and also some are so poor they are happy to get 3 meals a day in jail and don't want to go outside. One woman was about to get released so the guard told her you are getting released so your lunch did not come. She started begging the guard to give her food but he won't budge. She somehow took some food and hid it but the guard caught her and took it away from her. It was heart-wrenching and to see how vulgar our society is we can see in prison esp the attitude of prison authorities who don't even treat inmates as human beings.

GLN- How did you manage to keep yourself positive for 2.5yrs?

Seema- I was also depressed in the beginning but then I started to see it as an opportunity. As a journalist how many people get to see this and chronicle it. But there was a constant struggle to keep the spirits high. So books were a great solace, I had read jail diaries of Bhagat Singh, Julius Fucik, Mary Tyler, and Nazim Hikmet. So I realised their importance then.

My family and friends would visit me often and they would tell me that and so and so is also fighting for you. So that would give us hope. Also if I would hear of some protest or movement that gives us a lot of hope and inspiration.

When I was in jail that time Anna Andolan was going on and we would see in newspapers about it. Now we know about its problems but just the news that people are coming together to fight for a cause would give immense strength.

But during the Corona period, things got so bad in prisons. I got to hear that people are severely depressed in the absence of family visits. There are guards around trees to prevent suicide. So books and family friends visits should be reinstated immediately.

Q- On the occasion of International Working Women's Day, in the present-day do you see any hope for women's liberation?

Seema- Yes definitely, esp if you the CAA-NRC movement that has brought in a wave of Azadi. Muslim women who were said to be in the cage of their burqa, now inside every home Faiz's poems were being practised, women were preparing speeches at home, brothers were cooking food, fathers were dropping mother and daughter at protests.

This 8th march was very significant as we see now women in large numbers have come to participate in the farmers' movement.

GLN- Do you have suggestions on Prison reforms?

In the name of reforms state only increases security, so I would want society to not stigmatise inmates. Those who have UAPA and other charges are the real patriots. Meet them, boost their morale. Raise our voice for at least access to people and their access to justice.

Gauri Lankesh News Desk

Seema Azad is a freelance journalist and runs a bimonthly magazine called Dastak (knock) on Adivasi and land issues. Seema is also a writer and a poet. She is also a national council member of PUCL (people's union of civil liberties). During her 2.5 years of incarceration, she wrote about 26 women who were doing time in Naini Central Jail, Allahabad

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