

Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?

Poems and Letters
from Prison

G.N. Saibaba



In the afternoon of 9th May 2014, a posse of policemen stopped a car in Delhi and pulled out a wheelchair-bound man on his way home from work. He was then flown to Nagpur, where he was arrested under UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), the draconian anti-terror law. His wheelchair was damaged as he was hauled up and thrown into the police vehicle and the nerves of his left hand were injured, an infection that later spread and rendered both his hands virtually useless.

This man was G.N. Saibaba, a professor of English at Delhi University, scholar, writer and human rights activist. In the eyes of the Indian government, he was a dangerous threat to the State, accused of 'waging war against the nation'. In March 2017, the Gadchiroli Sessions Court sentenced him to life imprisonment for alleged links with a banned organisation, CPI-Maoist. Saibaba's appeal against the judgement, challenging the police evidence and witnesses, has been pending in the Nagpur High Court for five years. Meanwhile, he is kept in solitary confinement, denied the medical care he needs.

What would cause government agencies to take such an action against a man paralysed by polio from the age of five, suffering from 90 per cent disability as well as a cardiac condition and chronic and severe spinal pain?

Born into poverty in the town of Amalapuram in Andhra Pradesh, Saibaba overcame his disability to top his university and become a highly regarded professor. From his student days, he has also been engaged in activism on behalf of victims of poverty and state violence, and played a significant role in the campaign against Operation Green Hunt, the notorious paramilitary offensive aimed at dispossessing Adivasi people of their habitat by force.

Is this what makes him a 'terrorist' in the eyes of the State?

Even as human rights organisations across the globe demand an end to his detention, Saibaba continues to believe in the possibility of a better world. The poems and letters in this book convey his innermost thoughts and feelings—anguish, hope, resistance, and resilience—and a vision of a just, equal and humane India that we all deserve and need.



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SPEAKING
TIGER

CONTENTS

BOOK ONE: On Saibaba

Introduction: Letter to Sai

A.S. Vasantha Kumari

Saibaba: Professor of the People

Ashok Kumbamu

A Continuous Ode to Life

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

BOOK TWO: The Poetry of Saibaba

Preface: Poetry has Carried the Flame of Resistance so Far

Meena Kandasamy

A Delirious Dream

Tell Me, O Monk

Your Song of the City of Love

The Loving Kabir

Go Shouting Aloud in the Streets

Enter the Citadels of Love

The Goddess of Love

Remedy for Your Prolonged Grief

The Way to the City of Love

Love Isn't in Shrines

Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?

Win a World of Love

Renounce Your Ego

My Heart is Coloured with the Colour of Love

Bombs Go Astray

A Bird in Front of My Cage

The Ocean is His Voice

Aphorisms of Our Age

I Enter Your Land of Fantasy

The Well

A Bottomless Pit

A Fistful of Thoughts

Oh! Cinderella

I Think of Your Evergreen Smile

This Day Too Will Pass...

Ode to Life

Resurrection

How Beautiful to Wait for Your Visit

Your Letters Defeat My Solitary Cell

My New Friends

A Nightmare in My Dystopian Prison Cell

Declare Yourself a Liberal

O Justice!

A True Story of My Heaven and Hell

At the Clanking of the Keys

My Fellow Prisoners

An Elegy Written in a Deathly Prison Cell for a Moving Spirit of Life

The New God

O Joe, My Fellow Indentured Citizen

The River Flows On

You

A Letter to Dear Students and My Fellow Teachers

Koregaon's Heart of Bhima

My Love, My Freedom

Solitary Hope

When is the New Year?

Now We Have More Freedoms

A Terrible Void

A Sparrow in My Cell

From a World of Forbidden Things

Mother, Weep Not for Me

I Refuse to Die

The True Prison

A Clarion Call

Gandhi

Penance in Prison

This Frightening Dark Night

A Solitary Day in My Cell

Ode to a Prison Guard

The Beast Slithers Violently

A Storm Rages

Images of My Cage

My Love, Are You Tired?

Don't Shut the Windows of Our Dreams

BOOK THREE: The Letters of Saibaba

Letter from prison written by Saibaba to Vasantha on her birthday

Letter to Anjum, a fictional character in Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

[Letter to N. Venugopal](#)

[Letter from G.N. Saibaba to Justice Markandey Katju](#)

[Open letter from Vasantha to the supporters of G.N. Saibaba](#)

BOOK ONE

On Saibaba

I still stubbornly refuse to die
The sad thing is that
They don't know how to kill me
because I love so much
The sound of growing grass

G.N. Saibaba

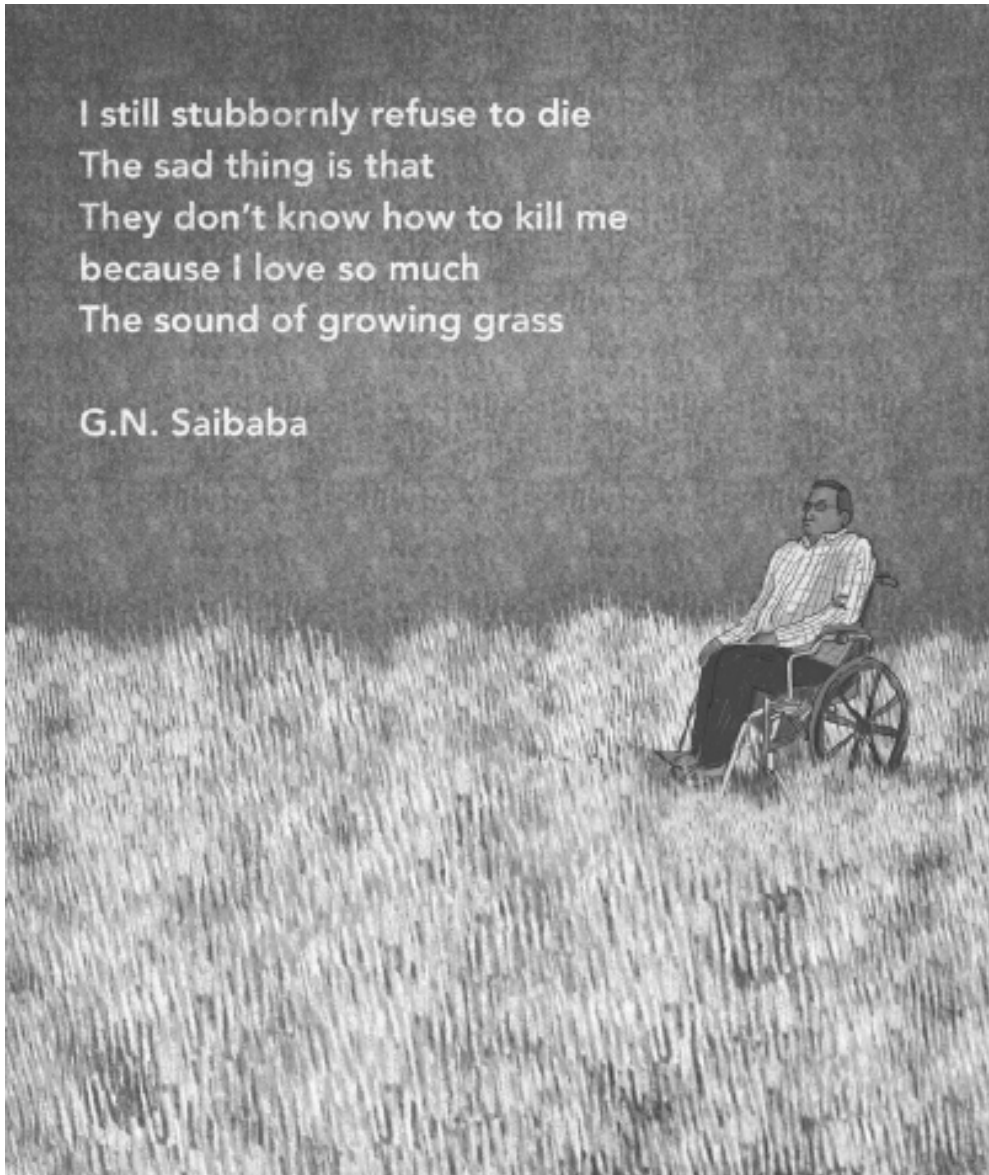


Illustration: Anarya

Introduction: Letter to Sai

A.S. Vasantha Kumari

My dearest companion,

The second of March last year marked thirty years since we decided to share our lives together. I don't know if you remember it, but you called me from jail that very day. In that short phone call, neither was I in a position to remind you, nor were you in a condition to remember it. When it comes to the struggle for survival, reminiscing about birthdays and wedding anniversaries isn't possible. Both of us were so desperate to share so much information in those few seconds we got at the mercy of the state, but the phone call would always end abruptly before the words could come out of our lips. In these seven years, you were forbidden to read or write in Telugu, our mother tongue. You must only have imagined how much more agonising this was for me. I am not well-versed in English and can only write in this language. Even now, I doubt if this Telugu letter will reach you. I cannot believe that this letter carrying my heartfelt feelings will ever reach your hands. Even then, if only in a futile attempt to comfort myself, I write these words to you with the warmth of the language that my mother taught me as a child.

Before our marriage, we used to write numerous letters spanning multiple pages to each other. Those were the letters of love in our youth. They were filled with tons of sweetness, love and hope. Those unforgettable letters served as the friendly breeze that filled our days with untold excitement, brought irresistible laughter to our lips, courage to the mind, joy and light to our eyes. But in our chitter-chatter, I remember, we didn't just talk about our individual selves, we wanted to share this sense of joy, friendship, and companionship with others in the society. In those letters where we dreamt about an egalitarian society, where there is no

discrimination between castes and religions, no inequalities between the rich and the poor, hate had no place at all.

Today, even though my heart is in disarray and my words are in shambles, I will gather all my strength to write this letter. Sai, do you remember? When we met for the first time in our tenth grade, you were having trouble solving a few questions in Maths. I was the one who taught you how to solve these problems. In turn, you used to teach me English grammar. After that, our friendship was strengthened by literature and reading books. It was very difficult for us in our adolescence to stay apart without seeing each other for even four days! And look at how things are now; we have to stay apart from each other, with countless obstacles and hundreds of miles blocking our meetings, for who knows how long. And that too is only because they arrested you in a false case on 9th May 2014, and a judgment that went against the institution of law was delivered on 7th March 2017, in the Gadchiroli Sessions Court where the Defense's arguments weren't even considered—sentencing you to a life term in prison. I can see no end to this injustice.

I suddenly recall your words from a letter I received on the seventh of March last year:

‘Today marks the completion of four years since my sentencing. I have been stuck in this anda cell for four years!! Never imagined this would be the case. No one in our family expected this to happen. This verdict is a mockery of our judicial system. Every single day felt like it was spanning across a century.’

As your health deteriorates in the jail, my head feels like it's going to burst with anxiety. The occasional phone call that I would get from the lawyers would make my heart start palpitating. What are these circumstances that we are being forced to face? For how long do we have to suffer like this?

Since your childhood, you have faced many hardships in your life. The backwater village that you were born in only consisted of wide fields and less than twenty huts. The concept of a polio vaccine did not even exist and you lost your ability to walk at the tender age of five. From such a place, you still were able to get the district first position in tenth grade. This is no small achievement. In a small hut with a coconut thatched roof, you used to study under the kerosene lamp. After completing your graduation, you worked hard

to earn a seat in the M.A. English literature programme in Hyderabad Central University. Until that moment you never stepped out of Amalapuram or the East Godavari district. You travelled on a train for the first time when you went to Hyderabad and did you not witness a new world in front of your eyes there? A vast university campus, a well-stocked library and countless discussions with fellow students. You were in Hyderabad and I was in Amalapuram, but despite the distance we never felt lonely because of the letters we wrote to each other.

Even though we were stuck in a small town in remote Andhra till graduation, our thoughts and feelings could escape narrow-minded confines and we could dream of lofty ideals only because of literature. We loved reading Tagore, Premchand, Periyar, Sarath, Chalam, Srisri, Koku, Kara, Ranganayakamma and works of many other authors with great dedication. After coming to Hyderabad, the working class, students' and women's movements during that time played a great role in putting our ideals into practice.

People often ask me why I chose you as my life partner. My answer has always been the same. In this patriarchal society where women are constantly oppressed and treated as second-class citizens, you have always tried to go against that thinking. You defend women's rights, their freedom of expression and treat them with great respect and dignity. You recognise that women play one of the most crucial roles when it comes to social progress and the development of society and have never underestimated us. It is precisely because of this that I wished to have you as my partner and sought companionship from you, hoping it would last more than a lifetime. Many of our friends tell us that ours is an example of 'true and pure' love. We loved each other freely, happily, and securely. At the same time, we could share intimate affection, friendship and love with many others. But now, the times are so rigid and murky that the word 'love' has been enlisted as a crime. A section of Indian society is cruelly persecuting the act of love and separating couples based on their external convictions. Hatred with its poisonous fangs is stimulating violence everywhere.

Many people think that you have been using the wheelchair since your childhood. But that is not the case at all. Till 2008 you did not have a wheelchair and you used to move yourself only by the force of your hands, covering your palms with Hawai chappals and crawling forward. The

college where you taught did have a wheelchair but our house was too narrow and small for one. People are often shocked to know that this is how you travelled throughout the country and visited many remote areas, bearing your body's weight on your shoulders.

After the completion of your M.A. from Hyderabad University you joined CIEFL^{*}, to pursue your Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching English (PGDTE) in 1991. This was the year we started our life journey together after registering our marriage on 3rd March. We did not believe in having a grand or traditional wedding celebration and just organised a small get-together to celebrate and inform our closest friends of our marriage. Can you believe it Sai, the total cost of this event was less than 600 rupees!

In a way, our experiences in Hyderabad gave us the opportunity to refine and put our thoughts, convictions and dreams into practice. We remained confident that a new society would certainly emerge, where the caste divisions, religious differences and gender discrimination would perish. We also got the opportunity of working to make our dreams come true.

I knew that somewhere in the innermost part of your heart you had a pain that you were unable to walk like others and reach all the places you wished to. Of course the government has proclaimed certain guidelines and laws for the convenience of the differently-abled, and these have to be followed while setting up government organisations. However, they are neglected and scantily implemented. Because of this you have suffered many inconveniences. Yet you were at the forefront of many mass movements, lending your voice to support and protect the rights of Adivasis, Dalits, women and many other minorities. By participating in the ongoing struggles and movements, we could enhance our capacity to understand things from the right perspective and achieve clarity in our thoughts. Whatever the situation, your determination and your hard work earned you multiple friendships along with successes. Mass struggles and social movements became your legs and made you walk. You never felt that you couldn't walk. Members of the family, well-wishers and friends never let you feel the lack of anything because of the infirmity. Your selfless dedication to the struggles made you close to the people and endeared you to them.

Sai, you went to New Delhi with lots of hope and expectations that the universities here offer differently-abled people a space to pursue and develop their academic research work. You continued your efforts to obtain a Ph.D. degree and employment in Delhi University. In fact, the extreme climatic conditions of severe cold and hot weather do not suit you at all. You would constantly get pain down your legs and back. But your intense desire for knowledge gave you the strength to withstand those unfavourable conditions. Your efforts yielded fruit and you obtained a permanent faculty position as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Ram Lal Anand College, affiliated to Delhi University. Your perseverance and commitment to the profession solidified your position as a great scholar and teacher in the minds of your students and colleagues.

Sai, I know that you share an equal love for both literature and teaching. In your childhood, you used to give private tuitions and classes to your juniors in order to meet the expenses for buying books and paying examination fees. But even in those days, you were offering free tuitions to poor and backward students.

Teaching is a passion for you indeed. You were always available to your students when it came to clearing doubts, arranging necessary books, giving notes and having discussions about various topics. You excelled in making your students understand difficult concepts in an easy manner. Sai, you know, our child also is on the same path. You are not aware of this, but her method of explaining things very gently and straightforwardly is praiseworthy. I always think that if you were here to see this, you would be so delighted!

There has never been a day that you missed classes or were late and left your students waiting. Your students tell me that you used to take classes to clear doubts in the garden for even a single student when no classroom was available. Teaching was so dear to you; it was your life. You were very particular about your duty as a teacher. Constant thinking, reading, writing, sharpening your ideas with innovation, imparting knowledge to people—this is your life calling.

When rural students were denied admission due to the non-compliance with reservation policies by the university authorities, you along with your colleagues protested and tried for the proper implementation of the reservation policy. You helped many students who came to the city from other

states financially when they needed to pay rent till they could get hostel accommodation.

You took an active part in curriculum and syllabus planning, setting up of question papers, conducting seminars, and contributed so much as a member of the academic administrative committee. You took it as a personal responsibility to help students who needed counselling. In this way, you devoted yourself to the teaching profession and worked unceasingly with a sense of dedication. This is why your students and your colleagues loved and respected you. You made the students excel not only in the classroom but also in their lives.

Against such a dedicated teacher like you the authorities under the guise of disciplinary action terminated your job in 2021. They detached you from the profession which you loved the most, that too because of a false allegation and a wrong judgment. I know that this must have been the most painful moment of your incarceration. Once you wrote in a letter, 'I still constantly dream that I'm teaching students in a classroom. I cannot imagine my life without the classroom, blackboard, and students.' Tears rolled down from my eyes when I was reading those lines from your letter.

There was just as big a conspiracy behind your removal from the college and from the profession as there was behind the imposition of a life sentence on you. We were constantly harassed and they sent us notice after notice about your job. A single-man committee was constituted to take action against you in the garb of disciplinary proceedings. We fought for seven long years with the university authorities to defend your position under the law of the land but ultimately great injustice was done to us. However, as this matter gained attention people came to know how a sincere teacher was subjected to serious injustice and deprived of his life passion. Sai, do not feel depressed about this. When you come out of the jail, the whole world will be your classroom. Here you can continue to teach to your heart's content.

My dear, are you feeling dizzy while reading? Are your hands losing their grip? Your hands that lack an ability to grip, do not strain them further. It's all right; you can read the letter later. This brutal government pushed you to such a condition that both of your hands stopped working. Many people are not aware of how cruel this so-called democratic government is to you. Previously, your two feet were motionless but your hands were your strength.

Knowing this the government broke your hands too, reducing you to a helpless state.

I cannot forget those days. It was the twelfth of September 2013. In the afternoon, as part of a pre-planned conspiracy, fifty policemen in civil dress along with the NIA* stormed our house in the university quarters and took away your laptop, our phones, hard disks, pen drives and a few books without sealing any of the material they took away. What was in the warrant brought by the police? The warrant said that there were some stolen goods in some village called Aheri in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. All the onlookers were surprised as to why the police had come to Dr Saibaba's house in Delhi to search for those stolen goods. This was basically a farce. Even more surprising is the fact that neither the local police nor us nor the public knows till today what these stolen goods were.

They came to our house again in January 2014 in the guise of an interrogation. The leaders of the mass organisations, professors, renowned social workers and many students gathered in the street in front of our house in large numbers to show support and solidarity. Seeing such a big crowd, the NIA people left and informed us that they would come some other day. The next time they came, it was very sudden—they came with a large force and large police vehicles that surrounded our entire house. No one from outside could even peep in. Their aim was to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidate us. Even at such short notice, many professors, students and activists rushed to our house in no time. A number of media persons were also there among the crowd and after the interrogation, they were interviewing you until late at night.

All of these are things you know quite well and you might be wondering why I am repeating these details again! But, the fact is I cannot help but remember these incidents. Because among the material things they took away, there were many tokens of the past, photographs, our future plans and other precious belongings. They took away the study and teaching material you prepared over the years, study material belonging to our daughter who was giving her Boards, the many photos which I hoarded, and rare photographs of our relatives, friends and family members which I preserved as unforgettable trophies! My heart was full of regret and unease at the thought of those lost photographs and the material you collected for writing new books.

The next incident was on 9th May 2014, when they picked you up from your car while you were coming back from college. You were taken directly to the airport without informing the family or anyone. They later declared that you were arrested but by that time I was out of my mind with worry, wondering what had happened to you and went to our local police station to file a missing complaint. Many of our friends do not know all these details. You were forcibly taken to Nagpur and then to Gadchiroli. You later told me that they took you to Gadchiroli in big anti-landmine vehicles in which scores of commandos were fully armed with ultra-modern weapons. Escort vehicles surrounded the van that you were in left and right. There were nearly twenty vehicles with armed commandos aiming their weapons in all directions. They made such a big show of things to give the impression that they had arrested a hardcore and dangerous terrorist, not a handicapped professor. They deliberately spread the false news throughout the Marathi media that they had caught hold of a Maoist leader. When they took you to the trial hearings, they resorted to the same pomp and show with the escorts and armed commandos, often causing lengthy traffic jams for the locals. Even when you were taken to the Nagpur Government Hospital, there used to be at least two dozen commandos guarding you. They were making all this fuss to induce fear among the people and give them the impression that you were a traitor. Though the NIA tried its level best through the Marathi and Godi media to demonise you, the rest of the media throughout the country helped to inform people about your illegal arrest, your commitment to your profession and the social welfare activities you were involved in. Many people across the country and across the world immediately reacted and held protest demonstrations and issued press statements condemning your arrest.

My heart convulsed when you told me how they picked you up from the wheelchair and threw you in that big vehicle as if you were a sandbag; they did not let you urinate for more than seventy-two hours and did not provide essential BP medicines. I was in a state of panic when I learnt that you were bleeding from your nose and ears, and there were blood bumps all over your head. The police force and the commandos did not know how to deal with a differently-abled person and handled you very crudely. Your wheelchair got damaged and it took me some months after this incident to get it repaired. More than that, the nerves in your left hand got hurt and bruised when they picked you up and tossed you. You were in constant agony at this time, but all

they did was give you painkillers instead of taking you to a doctor. I'm sure this was a ploy to weaken your willpower. But this willful negligence by the authorities caused permanent damage and semi-paralysis to your left hand.

In 2019, we came to know that the infection in your left hand had spread to the right hand because no treatment was given to the persistent swelling you reported. Your right hand was partially damaged due to this neglect and lack of treatment. Because of this, you are now unable to write more than two-three pages a month and it pains you tremendously when you write even half a page. So now we have to live without your frequent letters which were the one source of solace in our lives. It was your hands that gave you the strength of a mountain. It was the strength of what you wrote and your intellect that carried you across the world; you attended many international academic seminars and conveyed your ideas to many people. You never let your disability serve as a hindrance to your intellectual pursuits but now the state has locked you up in the anda cell and has rendered you inanimate and immovable.

Because of the harsh conditions of jail life your health further deteriorated and nineteen serious health problems emerged. From the beginning, you couldn't walk, and now your hands have become motionless. The situation is so grave that you can't even go to the toilet on your own. You used to be so independent, but this capital punishment has reduced you to such a state that two people have to assist you all the time. You were denied parole mercilessly when your mother (my mother-in-law) was sick with lymphatic cancer and ultimately she passed away in August 2020. You were not even allowed to attend the funeral rites of the woman who raised you with so much love and care. They even denied the plea seeking bail on medical grounds as your health deteriorated. In this country, the situation is such that the mafia goons, ruling party henchmen and murderers have no trouble getting out of prison. The criminals who are captured red-handed with all the proof and who confess to committing the crime in the open court are able to walk out of the jail with the official carpet spread out for them. Not only that, but all the cases against them are then mysteriously dismissed. They can even sit for elections.

But they cannot give you, a 90 per cent disabled wheelchair-bound professor, parole for even a few days to attend your mother's funeral. You cannot go to the toilet on your own, you cannot take a bath or lie down

without help. Why should they incarcerate you without even a little respite? Even the United Nations, taking into consideration that you have been a stout defender of human rights, has issued a statement urging the government to release you on health grounds. But it seems as if none of this matters. Why are they so vengeful against you!

Nagpur has a very harsh climate too, with the scorching sun beating down in the summer and cold and heavy downpours in the winter. Your condition is such that you are extremely sensitive to these changes and your back and feet immediately start paining immensely. I cannot imagine the agony you must be facing as your nerves twist in pain due to the harsh winter. Even in the comfort of our house with the heater running in the winters, your feet were always ice cold. The anda cell is even more unforgiving as half of the cell does not have any roof on it with only an iron grill covering the open top, letting in the rain, sleet and scorching rays of the sun. On the other side, there is no door to your cell, but plain iron rods. You have described that it feels like you are sleeping on the roadside with no protection. The single razai that you cover yourself with must feel like a blanket of frost.

Under the provisions incorporated in the Transfer of Prisoners Act 1950, a convicted prisoner can be transferred to his hometown jail. Because of this, our family has written many appeals to the Maharashtra governor and the chief minister to transfer you from Nagpur Central Prison to Cherlapally Jail in Hyderabad. Governors and governments have changed since then, but we have not received a reply in this matter. The system is so horrible that I feel helpless in front of it. I recall your words, 'Prison is a vicious system. It is a criminal system that transcends even real criminals. Prison is a big shameful stain on human history. To keep yourself alive is a great struggle here. I am able to survive here only by recalling our beautiful dreams of love again and again. Every letter that comes from you brings a flood of those memories. I live in your dreams awaiting your letter.'

Do you know this, Sai? I travel hundreds of kilometres excitedly in order to attend the 'jail mulakat' to just catch a glimpse of you; but I return back even more dejected. The first time I came for mulakat, my request to meet you was rejected because we do not share a surname and they refused to believe that I was your wife. How is it their business that I did not take your surname after we married? Every time I go there, I am pestered and harassed with such little things. In the mulakat, a fibreglass window full of

scratch marks made by visitors over time separates both of us. I cannot even see your visage properly through the glass and we talk through a phone. I listen intently to whatever you say in those short twenty minutes from the other side of the window. Meeting you like this is even more painful. I wait with our daughter from morning to afternoon outside the prison for just these 15-20 minutes. You are unable to tell us everything you wished to share and many of my worries and feelings also remain untold. It feels like the joy I felt from hearing your voice evaporates into non-existence the moment the mulakat is over. I return with a heavy heart, hoping to grasp your hand in mine through the iron net and fibreglass that separates us.

This one time I came to meet you, I learnt that you were being taken to hospital. I made many enquiries but none of the jail administrators gave me any information. I was told to leave the premises. All I could do was wait outside the main jail gate in the blazing sun, hoping to see you and confirm your well-being. After half an hour, many escort vehicles surrounding a small car in which you were sitting started moving. I ran in the direction of the car, yelling, but they would not stop. You later told me that you were not aware of the fact that I came to meet you that day till you heard my screams. I immediately rushed to the hospital after this. Not knowing which room you had been taken to, I shouted loudly ‘Sai! I came here but these people are not allowing me to see you.’ You responded from one of the rooms and told me that we could meet after some medical tests were completed and you had requested them to allow this meeting. I waited for you from 12 o’clock to five in the evening in front of the Gastroenterology department, without even having lunch. A group of lady constables surrounded me and did not allow me to take even a single step in your direction. After 5 p.m., the constables started pressurising me to go to the canteen for some tea. One lady constable told me that they would admit you in the hospital for the night and allow us to meet in your room. I figured out that something was wrong and did not budge from the spot. All of a sudden, about a dozen policemen emerged from the room. I could barely catch a glimpse of your wheelchair from in between their legs. As I started walking in your direction, the lady constables grabbed me and started dragging me away. I had to hold onto a pillar and loudly yell, ‘Are they admitting you to the hospital? They are not telling me anything.’ I could see you stop and request them to allow us to talk for a minute, but the request was rejected and they started taking you to the lift. As the lift was

going down, you yelled back to me, ‘Come to the jail for mulakat tomorrow. I am not going to be admitted in the hospital.’

Such was the harsh and unfeeling attitude shown to us. Not only was I not informed about your health condition, I was even given false information that you were being admitted to the hospital by the constables. This left me in a very disoriented state of mind, wondering what happened to you and why they had to bring you to the hospital. Generally, they allow family members to meet prisoners in the hospital, but they played such a cruel trick on us. Why should we be treated like this? No medical records had been given to the family and lawyers for more than two years, so I did not know what to expect. Standing alone in the hospital lounge, I wanted to cry loudly, unable to bear this horrible experience. But I decided not to let my tears roll down and show weakness in front of the officers. I will never allow those sadists to feel happy.

After this incident, I filed a complaint in the court regarding this matter. I could finally meet you in the ICU when I got the court’s permission. The terrible condition in which the hospital was being maintained shocked me. I saw rats roaming in the ICU and the bathrooms were extremely unhygienic. There was not even a single wheelchair-friendly toilet in this hospital. For you, the hospital was a worse place to be in than the jail cell!

The hardships of our family transformed into the hardship of the nation as the Covid pandemic shadowed the country in 2020. Along with the spread of the virus, repressive policies and tyranny also spread like wildfire. There was bitter silence for a long time in our struggles seeking justice. Due to the pandemic, all the jail mulakats were stopped and the prisoners stopped receiving newspapers. There was no news about you or your health. We did not know how to send you the life-saving medicines that we usually send you every month as the post offices were closed. I was constantly anxious about your health.

The Supreme Court passed orders that prisoners should be released on bail or parole during the pandemic or the authorities should see that they are in contact with their families by phone. Even after the orders were passed, the Nagpur jail took a long time to implement them. They mentioned the dangers of Coronavirus as a pretext to reject your parole when your mother passed away. But could they even stop the virus from entering the barracks of

the jail? You also contracted the virus due to the unhygienic conditions of the jail and the virus took down the remainder of your strength.

In those barren and hopeless days, we came to know from our lawyer that you took it upon yourself to initiate an indefinite hunger strike in October, fighting for the rights of prisoners inside the jail. We were very worried and did not want you to continue the hunger strike, fearing that this would worsen your health to a great extent. All the calls we made to the prison authorities went unanswered. Your efforts bore fruit though; as a result of the hunger strike all the prisoners were sanctioned weekly phone calls, one to their families and one to the lawyer. They agreed to give you access to the outstanding medical records, newspapers and your monthly medicines sent by us. They also agreed to allow letters and books written in Telugu, after they had gone through NIA's long process of scrutiny. Even though it brought about some positive measures, I was very distressed. I felt like the veins in my head would burst due to anxiety. In a condition where you did not have access to healthy meals and were denied medical treatment, I was afraid that you would be left so weakened after the hunger strike that Covid would become extremely dangerous for you. How could you have gone on a ten-day hunger strike till you started vomiting blood? I spent many sleepless nights full of sorrow and was very angry with you.

Finally, I received your letter written in Telugu on 21st January, forty-five long days after you had written it. It was subjected to a lengthy scrutiny by the Anti-Naxal team. I felt like I gained wings strong enough to traverse this barren sky as I read your pearl-like words in Telugu and your wonderful translations of Faiz's poetry.

In that letter, what you wrote about these sterile Covid times is true: 'As the Corona lockdown merged with the rigid walls of the prison, I was left in complete darkness. This dreadful tyranny and inactivity transcended even the tyrannical regimes of the Middle Ages. The virus and the confinement it brought along transformed the jail into a concentration camp and the outside world became akin to a massive prison. In these circumstances, where you people outside of the prison walls have had to face an insurmountable amount of repression, can you even imagine the conditions we had to face inside the prison? If the virus was only a dreadful disease, I believe people had the power to defeat it. But it is not a simple isolated disease anymore. The lockdown and policies enacted under the shadow of the virus have only

succeeded in making people's lives miserable. The virus has become a tool for people's oppression. The real plague and pandemic is not the virus, but the tyranny and repression that are eroding our freedom.

'Five years have passed since the horrible verdict of my conviction and all of us are still languishing in the anda cell, with each day moving at a snail's pace. Many times as my health deteriorated and reached critical phases, I felt like it would be difficult to keep on surviving and living. Somehow under all these unfavourable circumstances, my will to live and my life stood steadfast.'

It is true, Sai, I agree. In fact, it is your courage and immense trust in people that made your survival possible.

When I received the long-outstanding medical reports, I immediately consulted our family doctors. They told me that your health condition is very critical. The cardiologist said that blood is not being properly pumped to your heart as the wall has thickened on the right side. Some important tests need to be performed urgently to assess the situation. According to doctors, some of the symptoms that you reported earlier, like constantly falling unconscious and continuous pain in your chest, are very dangerous signs. The doctor told me that in case you have a stroke, recovery would not be possible unless there is emergency medical equipment right next to you. Based on the reports of the orthopaedic department, the doctors said that you must be provided with physiotherapy, occupational therapy, tense and stimulation treatment on a day-to-day basis. The reports reveal shocking issues, including a bent spinal cord, sleep apnea, stones in the gallbladder and kidneys, and most concerningly, a cyst in the brain! You have also mentioned that there is a huge lump on the left side of your abdomen and you get waves of shooting pain in your waist and shoulders. None of these issues have been addressed and no treatment has been provided so far. The reports indicate that all these issues were existent before the Covid infection, and I can't even think of how you are dealing with it now, with the fatigue and weakness that comes after Covid.

The lack of nutritious food in the prison is shocking. You can only buy fruits from the shop at inflated prices. We cannot even send you enough money for that, as money orders over 3,500 rupees are not allowed. Will you be left with anything after buying daily necessities like soap, toothpaste, postage stamps, envelopes and a few fruits?

This prolonged separation is gradually wearing me down, mentally and physically. The winters after my menopause have been tough; coupled with anaemia and thyroid, my joint pains and back pains have increased. Most of the women my age suffer from similar conditions all over the country. If you were here right now, you would definitely take care of me. You used to always take responsibility for some of the housework and helped me to fold clothes, wash dishes, chop and peel vegetables and keep the house organised. You would get all the groceries on your own. But Sai, don't be concerned about my health. You have to stand strong as I get my strength from you. Till we get justice, you have to persevere and fight.

I dreamt of a beautiful moment last night. I had put my arms around your neck and pressed my cheek to your face. I was saying something and you were listening intently with a smile as you sat on your wheelchair. How wonderful was that dream! I imagine many such moments in my spare time; you dictating your novel as I type it for you, me consoling a deep pain rooted in your heart, us having literary discussions with our daughter. All these precious and fleeting moments from my imagination should not remain as mere dreams. I will fight for them Sai, so please take care of your health as much as possible. This darkness will soon fade. You will return to me very soon.

I know that this separation is miserable for you too. You had written, 'Just like how the state apparatus is sucking the life out of the people and the society, it is squeezing my body dry too. I do not know how much of myself will be left when I leave the prison.' I too fear the same. Even able-bodied people are not able to endure the harshness of prison life; it must be far worse for you. But still, like you said, 'We should not drown ourselves in our miseries. The actual misery lies within the society. What else can the system that tries to repress human thought and consciousness bring, apart from deep-rooted misery? Our victory lies in nothing more than overcoming that misery. Along with repression, we have to endure and overcome the humiliation we face from the people around us. For this, we need to have a lot of patience and skill.'

Sai, you don't know how much courage your words give me. In another letter you wrote, 'Committing your life for societal transformation and betterment of people is the hardest task of all. Only those who put their lives on the line can commit to this task till the end. You should not grieve, but

rather walk with your head held high. No matter who tries to humiliate you, you should keep looking ahead and walk on the right path. These tough times will pass, and the day we will be rid of the present oppressive conditions is not far away. Those who stand firm to the end will go down in history.'

No matter how long we talk on the phone, the conversations can never compare to the letters we exchange. We are only able to exchange temporary information through the calls. Even when talking face to face, we cannot convey our emotions properly. But the letters we write to each other have the inherent ability to convey feelings of love, affection and pain. By sharing our words, it feels we can share parts of our being.

The state of Maharashtra has resumed jail mulakats from 1st November 2021, and all phone calls have been stopped. After twenty long months, I could finally meet you last November but I was so tired that day that I was not able to talk to you properly. Nowadays, long-distance journeys are taking a toll on my body. At least through the phone calls, we could get regular health updates from you. Since then, we have not received a single letter from you. Among my worries, all I can do is read your old letters and recall your words.

My biggest concern right now is your health, especially the fact that you have not received any medical treatment in the last four years. Once you wrote to me that you were not sure how long you could survive in these conditions with an abject lack of medical attention. You said that we might hear the news of another Stan Swamy if no treatment is provided to you. Whenever I think of these words, my mind goes to a dark place and a heaviness that does not leave fills my heart. In one of your now rare letters written on 29.12.21, you wrote: 'My lower back and hip joints pain has not been allowing me to sleep. This has been continuing for more than the past two months. There is no relief. My BP is also going up due to this extreme pain. Not able to concentrate on anything. This pain does not allow me to focus on anything. My head constantly spins and I feel dizzy. Please see to it that I'm sent to a hospital.'

A few days later, I received the news from the lawyer that you contracted Covid on 7th January this year. The jail authorities did not inform us and we do not know how severe the case is. There is no one to take care of you in this situation, Sai. You will be isolated alone with minimal or no

help in that anda cell where you cannot even climb up on the wheelchair on your own. Who will take care of you in that dark cell?

As I started writing this letter, I struggled a lot to pen my words as memories emerged and choked me. I have been struggling to write this letter since September last year and I could only finish it this January, after four long months. Your words, your letters and your poems always serve to instill me with courage and strength.

We shall never be lonely. We have been companions to each other and we shall remain as such. The unjust verdict that is a stain on the judiciary might have separated us physically, but we will always be one. In this fight for your release, in this fight for defending our democratic rights and values, I am not alone, Sai. There are many people who support our struggle and your selfless dedication. I appeal to many more readers now, to follow our journey and take part in our fight for justice.

I wanted to conclude this letter by bidding farewell to the year 2021, hoping that my words will brighten the start of the year. But before I could send this letter to you, I received the horrible news that you might have contracted Covid for the second time. Even though things look grim my dear, let us overcome our struggles, bit by bit. I hope against hope that this year will provide us with a brighter future where you can break free of the shackles of confinement. I will constantly dream of the future that we wrote of in our letters thirty years ago.

Let me embrace
The stacks of our intimate sweet moments,
On this dark solitary night.
Let me play
The silent notes of
Our future dreams,
Inviting the shining dawn of
New victories, my dear.

With love
Yours, Vasantha

January 2022

(A.S. Vasantha Kumari is G.N. Saibaba's wife)

*Translated from the Telegu by
Rajendra Babu Arvini and P. Varalakshmi*

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Saibaba: Professor of the People

Ashok Kumbamu

What if I told you that there was a disabled professor in jail who was forced to crawl around because the prison authorities had denied him access to his wheelchair? What if I said that he was suffering from a series of life-threatening ailments, but the same government that locked him up had refused to give him access to even basic medical treatment, and that this professor was in such agony that denying him medical treatment is akin to a form of torture? And what if I also told you that he was convicted of ‘waging war against the state’ from his wheelchair based solely on the testimony of twenty-two coached police officers? Would you believe me if I then said that all of this happened in a country that calls itself the ‘world’s biggest democracy’?

I am of course talking about the case of Professor G.N. Saibaba of Delhi University in India who was arrested in 2014. The sad thing is that what has happened to him is not an exception or a unique miscarriage of justice in an otherwise democratic and free country. In fact, Saibaba could even be considered lucky for *only* being arrested and imprisoned for his vocal criticism of the government and its genocidal wars against its own people. If he was a poor peasant from a lower-caste background, or an Adivasi (indigenous person), he would likely have been beaten and killed for the ‘crime’ of democratic dissent. Perhaps he would have been tortured first, only to have his corpse dressed up as a guerrilla and dumped in the forest for a photo-op. The Indian government needs these photos as evidence that they are ‘winning’ the war against their own people.

If Saibaba was a woman then he likely would have been raped while under arrest, or killed for putting up any resistance. If he was a Kashmiri he would have grown up with hundreds of thousands of soldiers occupying his homeland. If he was a Muslim who dared to speak out, or even show his religious views in public, he might have been tied up in public, made to chant ‘Jai Shri Ram’ (*Hail Lord Rama*) and beaten to death. All the while the police would have looked on to ensure the protection of the good citizens who were punishing dangerous ‘potential terrorists’. This is the reality for oppressed people in India, and it is why, when temporarily released on bail, Saibaba said that he had left one small prison only to enter a larger one.

Sadly, Saibaba’s case is no exception at all as far as the treatment of academics and human rights activists in India today goes. Since his arrest, countless others have been locked up on similarly absurd charges. Progressive journalists who criticise the Hindu nationalist tide sweeping the country are thrown in jail or even assassinated by right-wing groups with ties to the government. Even movie stars and other celebrities aren’t free to criticise the government without receiving death threats and accusations of ‘anti-national’ behaviour. So in this sense there is not much that is exceptional or extraordinary about Saibaba being arrested and deprived of medical care and his wheelchair. In fact, this sort of treatment of dissidents is quite normal in India. He is just one of tens thousands of political prisoners throughout the country.

But despite being imprisoned for years, despite being in such excruciating pain that he routinely loses consciousness, and despite being repeatedly denied access to medical care and bail by the courts, Saibaba continues to hope and to write. Not in his native Telugu—because the prison authorities have banned even this—but in English and Hindi. And his hope is not a naïve optimism that everything will work out. Saibaba knows that his situation is desperate and that he may not leave prison alive. But he has hope nonetheless, a hope grounded in the people and their struggles, a hope that they can and will overcome their oppressors in India and around the world.

This is what makes Saibaba’s poems so powerful. From the egg-shaped ‘anda’ cell in Nagpur, he writes line after line of rebellious poetry. His anguish, his agony, and his optimism bleed through each stanza. He writes with a courageous and heartfelt conviction in the power of the people and the struggles of the oppressed and downtrodden. Having spent time among them,

he knows of their struggles, big and small. He shares their dreams and aspirations, and most of all he knows their potential. Their potential to move mountains and break chains, their potential to change the world for the better, and to sweep away all those who profit from inequity and oppression.

When reading Saibaba's poetry one cannot help but share his convictions. While many are aware of the horrors of the contemporary world—from war and famine to climate change—there are few who can write about the world and the people with such powerful and infectious optimism. Saibaba's confidence in the people and their struggles stems from years spent among them. Perhaps after reading his poetry you too will feel the need to spend time among the people to share in their struggles. If you do, you will see, like Saibaba, just what they are capable of.

I believe that understanding Saibaba's life and his values will teach us how to stand up for our principles despite daunting obstacles. They also enlighten us about the purpose of life and where to stand in a context of social injustices and people's resistance struggles. Anyone who is aware of Saibaba's political life will acknowledge that my words are not an exaggeration. Let us adopt the values upheld by Saibaba, and commit to seeing him released from wrongful detention.

(Ashok Kumbamu is a sociologist and a member of the Free Saibaba Coalition, US.)

A Continuous Ode to Life

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

In Santiago, Chile, recently, I visited the human rights museum erected so that people may not forget the years of human rights abuse under the Pinochet dictatorship. It also covers human rights abuses in virtually every continent. Some of the images of the carnage of the fighters for freedom and human dignity for even the least among us, were hard to look at, without struggling to hold back tears of sorrow but there were others, those of scribbled notes and sketches of defiance, expressions of love, amidst the desolation in the human cages, that brought tears and smiles.

The latter made me think of Professor Saibaba and his poems from prison, with their constant affirmation of love, captured in the recurring line, 'I Refuse to Die'. He is talking of the death of the spirit, the result intended by those who cage progressive intellectuals and writers in prisons. But opposed to the death of the spirit is Love. The love he talks about is both very personal, the tenderness that comes through in the poems for Vasantha, but also love of the struggling people, that comes through in all the poems. His personal anguish at his being uprooted from his family and community becomes also that of the farmers and Adivasi people uprooted from their lands to give way to mining corporations. His poetry is on the side of unity, love and life as against division, hate and death.

Among the items I bought at the museum in Santiago were small figures of Pablo Neruda and Victor Jara. Pablo Neruda alongside other poets appears in Saibaba's poems. Neruda's words from his *Songs of Protest* conclude Saibaba's poem; 'Ode to Life':

I have a pact of love with beauty.
I have a pact of blood with my people.

Victor Jara, the Chilean musician whose fingers were chopped off by the military in a public stadium so that he would not play his guitar in support of people's power, appears indirectly in Saibaba's poetry in the figure of Ekalavyan, the self-taught archer in the *Mahabharata*, whose thumb is chopped off so he would not compete with the sons of the mighty and powerful. Saibaba's poems are in solidarity with the Ekalavyans of the world.

One of the poems is a letter to his dear students and fellow teachers, with this touching line:

'I have lived all my conscious life on the campuses of learning and teaching in search of knowledge, love and freedom. In the course of this search, I learnt that freedom for a few was no freedom.'

This line sums up Saibaba's philosophy and tenacity. He is continually learning even from the harsh conditions of prison. Saibaba's collection is one continuous ode to life. It joins other great collections of poetry from prison.

(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a Kenyan novelist, author of Devil on the Cross which was originally published in 1980 in the Gikuyu language and later republished in English as part of the Influential African Writers Series in 1982. The novel focuses on politically challenging the role of international money and culture in Kenya.)

BOOK TWO

The Poetry of Saibaba



Illustration: Narendran R. Nair

Preface: Poetry has Carried the Flame of Resistance So Far

Meena Kandasamy

When the history of political repression in India is chronicled someday, G.N. Saibaba's name will come at the very top of the list of those who were unfairly punished and victimised in these hopeless times. A professor of English with 90 per cent disability, confined to a wheelchair because of childhood polio, he has been portrayed as a dangerous terrorist-threat to the nation and remains incarcerated under a false case following a staged trial.

Prison poetry is *sui generis*, a genre unto itself. In reading G.N. Saibaba's verses written from an anda cell in Nagpur jail where he is under solitary confinement, we read his poems as the testimony of a victim, the diary of a dreamer-survivor, the romanticisation of struggle by a dissident, an academician attempting to explain tyranny using the simplest expressions at hand. Even love is a political project for Saibaba: '*Love can be found/ neither in shrines nor in scriptures/ It can't be achieved/ through yoga or meditation/ Listen to me, o' grievors/ The world of love takes shape/ In your acts of struggle for it.*'

G.N. Saibaba's poems also expose the disturbing colonial legacy that haunts India today. The country's criminal justice system continues to be a colonial project; it is not meant for an independent nation, it is a slightly altered version of the 160-year-old British creation expressly introduced for the purpose of persecuting people who are seen as seditious, branded dissidents and traitors. The crime for speaking against the state is capital punishment, an act that allows the state to get away with murder. Saibaba writes, '*The gallows/ hang everywhere/ from the branches/ of the outgrown colonial trees.*'

As in the work of his contemporary and India's other well-known political prisoner, the revolutionary Telegu poet Varavara Rao, there are poems about prison guards. Such an outstanding effort by the poet to recognise the humanity within the jail landscape gives us the necessary reminder that the system is designed to punish, designed to be bereft of empathy. In 'Ode to a Prison Guard', Saibaba writes, *'He demands no tips/ or favours/ for his untiring services/ He calls the unattending doctor/ repeatedly on his wireless set/ patiently/ when I am sick and unconscious. [...] He hides/ his own sad stories/ lending his patient and compassionate ear.'* He then shows the permanency of the prison guard's enslavement, *'The cursed souls come and go/ but he is a permanent prisoner'*. In a sad twist, he reveals how the prison industrial complex offers little consolation even to those who are enforcing the rules.

His love poems to Vasantha—wife, comrade, childhood sweetheart—intertwine the promise of love and a better future. *'My heart aches this night/ I have no more tolerance/ for how can we not dream together?'* The carceral state has not even allowed them the liberty of dreaming together. In her introduction to his poetry (included here in this book), Vasantha writes of how he has been robbed the right to write in his mother tongue—a punishment like no other, a punishment for which not only the prisoner but even his partner pays the price. This is thought policing at its most dire, a brutal silencing similar to cutting off one's tongue at the root. She receives his letters in her second language, a distancing imposed on them for no fault. Even in person, they are not allowed the small solace. He marks this cruelty in a poem ('How Beautiful To Wait For Your Visit'): *'My cage prohibits all relations/ and bans love, proscribing the language/ of hearts, as the woman behind me/ reminds, "Speak only in Hindi," while you/ stand on the other side of the opaque/ fibreglass window; words fail me, as though/ I have forgotten the language of our love and intimacy.'*

Before I hand in this small preface, I speak to Vasantha aunty, and she reminds me to unfailingly mention that none of these poems were written as poems. Censorship by the prison authorities is extremely severe, so each and every poem that you encounter on these pages was written as a letter addressed to various people. These are words that carry the latent fire of resistance, words that have been smuggled past the heavy censorship of Indian prisons, words which shine light on oppression.

In a poem addressed to Varavara Rao, Saibaba rues the imposed and self-imposed silences of people against injustice, which he labels the true prison. Yet, his poems carry an optimism that belies the horrors of solitary confinement and the tragedy of his own failing health. It is a contagious positivity, and as we wait for his release and celebrate his work, I want to end this with his powerful words addressed to his wife: *‘Don’t shut the windows of your dreams/ I am coming to see you like a whirlwind.’*

10 January 2022

(Meena Kandasamy is a poet, fiction writer, translator and activist from Chennai.)

A Delirious Dream

I had a dream
as the delirious virulence
of the virus shook me.

I failed in mathematics
in the Second Year Intermediate.
Now what to do
with my MA, PGDTE and Ph.D
or even with my BA?
Do they still stand,
or get cancelled automatically?
I was gripped by the intensity
of the microbe's attack in my throat.

We were still in our home town
My little brother thrust a letter
from you in my hand
It read: 'Forget me;
let's not continue this relationship'.
Sweat flowed down my spine
drenching my prison clothes.

The next day,
in my next moment
of delirium,
I stopped you at the college gate
pillion-driving Murthy's cycle;
You turned your face away saying:
'I don't want to talk to you'.

I was shell-shocked
under the pathogen's war
on each of my limbs.

Tens of thousands of people
turned up in our city of love
for a right to livelihood.
The police came with a sheaf of papers
The order stated:
'Permission is not granted
to the rally and public meeting'.
What to do with the sea of people
already in communion?
Does the order still stand?
My feverish body
shivered in pain and anxiety.

Your words on the prison phone
the other day started ringing
in my head again and again:
'An exodus of migrant workers
has been walking back to their villages,
hundreds of miles away'.

Shockingly,
the attack of the virulent
bug flew away with
your voice vibrating in my mind.

*Wishing you all those days of love and freedom back soon into your
evergreen smiling face.

25 July 2021

(Written to Vasantha)

Tell Me, O Monk

Tell me, O Monk,
how did you renounce
the worldly things?

When you gave up your garments,
you changed into fine silk saffron ones.

When you started preaching against greed,
you occupied vast lands, and
accumulated uncountable wealth.

When you famously declared
shunning of all passions,
you began to spread hatred
among the communities of people.
And finally, you grabbed
the seat of power
in the name of the Almighty.

Kabir, the servant of people, says,
Does this son of a monster
ever relinquish his greed for the chair?
My wayfarers, if you still have any questions in mind,
see the atrocities perpetrated
by the seat he so firmly clings to.

15 February 2020

Your Song of the City of Love

Your song rings in my mind,
'This city belongs to our hearts of love'.
My love, I fell for your sonorous words,

'Come out, let's walk along the lanes,
let the flowing flags of our blood
fill the city's high sky in waves.
This city belongs to our hearts of love'.

Your tunes flooded my fiery veins,
the aspirations in everyone's blood
lighted every square of the city bright.

Every step of lovers pitched to your melody's call,
every street gleamed with the processions of your song,
every garden bloomed in bunches of flaming flowers.

'No more, O lovers, liberty be a mere statue on far off shores,
no more your hopes be buried in your hearts.
Love shan't be a forbidden fruit any more,
this city belongs to our hearts of love'.

The rising echoes of your song caressed
the bales of silvery cotton clouds of joy
floating in the blue sea of the sky.

The poets weaved the warps of hopes and wefts
of longings of every wretched heart on time's loom.
The painters coloured them in the colours of love,
the singers trained the threads of life with your melodies.

But when has love been declared a war?
When have the demons of the smart city
begun to trample and crush the hearts of love?
Why are the days suddenly filled with this darkness?

The shadows of tyranny have begun to dance
on the shining walls of the smart mansions.
Every heart of love's been treated as a traitor,
Every song of love's been declared seditious.

The flood of tears has drowned the city,
The clouds of dust have covered the moon,
The songs of poets and the dreams of the youth
are silenced and smashed by the tyranny of hatred.

The hall of songs and dance,
where we made vows of love,
has been demolished
by the worshippers of hate.

The posters of hope are torn into pieces,
The leaflets of streaming dreams are burnt down,
The banners of love are seized and taken away,
The lovers in the city have been fettered and caged.

The blood spilled by the lovers
is still wet in my memories.
In the wilderness of my solitude
your song keeps ringing in my mind:

'Life's here, love's here,
grief of the heart's gone,
the city of love's born.
Let's march up onto the hill, dear'.

Your song wakes me up
every morning in my solitary cell.
I look around for our companions
who signed the bonds of our hearts

in dripping blood of crimson love.

My love, my heart aches,
my mind frets,
but your song goes on
in my numbed mind.

‘The rivers of love’ll flow again,
the green vales of life’ll come alive.
The mountains of grace and dignity are ours,
this city belongs to our hearts of love’.

1 January 2020

(Written to Vasantha)

The Loving Kabir

Go Shouting Aloud in the Streets

O friends,
the hearts of my heart!

When so much of love is
deeply hidden in your hearts,
why don't you break
your silence at this
moment of crisis?

Why do you lose
all momentous times
every time?

If such a burden
weighs down your eyelids,
why don't you sing
of love this dark night?
This isn't the time to sleep.

Listen to me, my friends,
Kabir always says,

To declare your love,
you should go shouting
aloud in the open streets.

4 July 2019

(Written to Varalakshmi)

Enter the Citadels of Love

My fellow traveller,
My dear companion,

There is no doubt,
this is a clear war
between love and hatred.

Having decided to stand
firmly on the side of love,
why do you still waver
in taking out the sword
of love in your hand?

Kabir, the soldier of love, says,
I tell you the ways of love!

To enter the citadels
of the city of love,
you may even have to
lose your head.

As a true lover,
you know this well,

But then, my dear companion,
why do you weep over it?

8 August 2019
(Written to Rivera)

The Goddess of Love

O lovers,

The monster of hatred
is out on the streets.

Why do you still
hide behind the prison-house
of narrow domestic walls?

You know only the goddess of love
can put an end to this monster.

Why do you
hide her in your hearts?
Let the beloved come out
unveiled today.

Kabir, the servant of love, says,

Don't imprison love in your hearts
She has to rise
putting out the flames of hatred.

13 September 2019

(Written to Karunakar)

Remedy for Your Prolonged Grief

Feel not shy to show
your tearful eyes
Let the streams of tears
run like rain today.

Hesitate not to pour out
the prolonged grief of your heart
Anyway, this world is made
of sadness and sorrow.

When the rain of your tears stops,
you can measure the growth
of the newly born green saplings of love
They'll grow into a beautiful forest.

Kabir ever says,

Love is the only remedy
for your age-old and relentless grief
Have a brave heart to unveil
her formless shape.

7 October 2019

(Written to Gitanjali)

The Way to the City of Love

O sisters and brothers,
My fellow wayfarers,

Why are you treading
this weary path?

If you don't know the way
to the city of love,
how'll you reach it?

It's not enough
to have the desire to go there.

My companions, no doubt,
there are dozens of highways

But don't deceive yourselves with the idea
that every path leads to the city of love.

Kabir, the servant of love, says,

The city of love
isn't on the far-off shores
All true lovers find it
in the villages of their heart's vicinity.

20 October 2019

(Written to Rajendrababu)

Love Isn't in Shrines

If love is found in shrines,
My friends, there wouldn't have been
a single miserable soul in the world.

For every lane, path and corner
is decked with colourful shrines
of every hue of the faiths of God.

If religion helps you to attain love,
more of them are available in this land
than anywhere else on this earth.

But why are we still
intoxicated with hatred?

Kabir says,

Love can be found
neither in shrines nor in scriptures,
It can't be achieved
through yoga or meditation.

Listen to me, O grievors,
The world of love takes shape
in your acts of struggle for it.

2 November 2019

(Written to Basith)

Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?

O Pundit,
O Mulla,

I'm not an atheist
for I don't preach ungodliness
as my profession.

I'm not an agnostic
for I don't carry a basketful
of doubts on my head.

I'm not your secularist
for I don't stand
at the crossroads of all religions.

I'm not a rationalist
for I don't use
the logic of pure reason.

I'm not a heretic
for my business isn't
to chase after your orthodox ways
to worship and life.

Kabir says,
 He's a messenger of love for people
 Why do you fear my way so much?

20 November 2019

(Written to Udaymitra)

Win a World of Love

My dear companions,
My fellow wayfarers,

Kabir isn't a priest or a preacher,
neither a monk nor a fakir,
nor a griever of this sorrowful world.

He isn't a renouncer
or a healer with miracles.

Listen, my fellow travellers,
Never a prophet wiped out
all the tears of the earth!
Never a messenger of the Almighty
cleansed the world of injustice!

Kabir, the servant of people, says,
It's you and you alone,
who can fight and win a world of love.

1 December 2019
(Written to Shasikala)

Renounce Your Ego

O lovers,
My fellow dreamers,

You have given up everything
for the sake of love.

But why do you weep
for the forsaken things?

You have left your home
and families, and every near and dear
till you bring victory
to the city of love.

Still why do you feel
so much anxiety
for the smaller things
that you lose on this long journey?

My dear companions,
why don't you renounce
your ego and narrowness of mind as well?

Kabir, in service of love, says,

Those who want to reach
the city of love should give up
ego and arrogance before
they begin this journey.

12 December 2019

(Written to Arunank)

My Heart is Coloured with the Colour of Love

Living in the prison-house,
I've learnt to set myself free,
I've broken all walls of narrowness.

I've ploughed the land of my mind
and now my heart shines with
the rays of a zillion green trees.

In the company of true lovers
through the journey of my life,
I've found loving comrades on my path.

Kabir says,

I've shed all the inherited
dogmas and frailities, and
my heart is coloured with
the colour of love.

* Everyone has her or his Kabir. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore had his own Kabir. In his English renderings, Tagore mystified Kabir's songs. Tagore never verified his source of Kabir's songs. He borrowed the songs from two scholars from Bengal, one in English and the other in Bengali. Both the scholars never confirmed the veracity of the songs' originality to Kabir. Tagore had created his own Kabir. Here, my Kabir is demystified. In any case, every age has its own Kabir.

31 December 2019

(Written to N. Venugopal)

Bombs Go Astray

The orphan in the picture has a question,
why did you bomb my mom and dad?

A chilling dread pervaded my prison cell,
sleep evaded the torturous nightmarish night
of the day the newspaper carried the image
of the child writing the question on a rock.

Bombs go astray
as often as the street dogs do
in the dusty streets of my smart city.
The child may be from Syria or Somalia.
How does it matter? Each bombed family
is a human land with dreams like you and I have.

Bombs go astray
Precision bombs go astray precisely
like the appointed election trolls
bark on the ugly highways of the social media.

The habits
of the hi-tech wars die hard.

Bombs go astray
falling from the heavens
anywhere on anybody's head.
Every patch of the living habitat
is a potential warzone.

The child may be from Lybia or Lebanon.
Every child is a human land,

war is the most lucrative
of all businesses.

Bombers love proxy wars
and secret militias on the ground.
Wars and proxy wars
unfold into each other daily.
I see no tears of fears
in the hidden eyes of the picture.
Perhaps, she sees the monster too often.
The child may be from Chechnya or Nigeria.

The monster grins and grunts,
scrambling all over with
the deadly trigger buttons in hand,
and strikes at will.
The bombs fall as easy as
bird droppings from the sky.

The child may be from Palestine or Pakistan.
The warzone child has no luxury
to weep and wail unlike you and I who are
armed with Gandhian peace and nonviolence
or with Martin Luther King's kind words.

Air strikes
strike in hundreds or thousands
even as you and I sip from our cups
of peace sitting across
the coffee table or sleep
in our restless cosy pillows.

We cry foul of war and violence
watching it all on the colourful
smart screens with thrill and awe.
I fail to read the child's eyes
as she stands, her back
facing my peace-loving eyes

through my sleepless night
in my tiny egg-shaped prison cell.
The child may be from Kashmir or Yemen.

The collateral is the refrain
of the eternal war song.

A war is declared
or undeclared.
It's open or secret or sacred.
Bombs are counted or uncounted
with ground militias
or with grand alliances.

It's no business
to count the casualties of citizens.

Liberal democracies fight
most gruesome wars and produce
handsome dictators of covfefe.
Their faces fit beautifully well
on the flat screens in our
peaceful drawing rooms,
where serene incantations
of peace flourish with yoga
and meditations of a hundred denominations.
Vasudaiva Kutumbakam!
Shantih! Shantih!! Shantih!!!

War is the most permanent
of all businesses of peace.

The orphan in the picture has a question,
why did you bomb my mom and dad?
Bombs go astray into my dungeon,
sleep evades my prison nights.

22 June 2019

A Bird in Front of My Cage

A bird in front of my cage
fell sick in his nest high
in the iron bars of the roof.
The feathers of his wings were clipped
by a strange disease in the nation.

He gasped and gasped for breath
and for a flight away from his confinement
unconscious of his bare wings. With grief
and sorrowful eyes, some solitary
souls cried out silently:

He needs fresh air and a healing touch.
Others murmured: It's too late,
he's half-dead anyway; now it's only
a matter of time. Each one of the caged
being empathised with the ailing bird
helplessly and embraced him with their eyes
craning their necks up to the familiar
bars above their heads as if he
were their fellow inmate.

Many an anguished heart whispered:
He was energetic and spirited
till the other day when he built
the nest helping his beloved
oblivious of the cruel times ahead.

Now closing his eyes, he would lie down
in his broken nest day and night

ever since a stormy hot summer wind
swept away his loved one
and the newly born chicks.

If he were dead now
in his broken solitary nest
it would be a grief.

If he were removed with brute force,
it would be a death by a lynch mob,
but who cares in this callous world,
whispers spread surreptitiously
and steadily from one solitary cell
to another by word of mouth.

Yet some others suspected:
He was a dreaded agent of terror
captured while hatching the eggs
of conspiracy. Others ruled out
the conspiracy as mere rumours,
and asserted: He was a messenger
of peace and justice. But a few
jailbirds cautiously stated:

The case was made solely on conjectures,
it wouldn't stand in a court of law,
though it might take years or even decades;
a lifetime isn't enough to expend for justice.

Some said, he was a pigeon
while others believed him
to be a dove. But hushed voices
of nuanced minds reasoned:
He was neither a grey pigeon
nor a white dove, but a pristine
indigenous *phakhta*. At the end of the day,
there wasn't an agreement on the bird's
antecedents, whether of his crimes

or of his species. A day before
a highly placed mandarin of reforms
was to visit for inspection,
a mission was set up to clean
the dirt of the ancient premises.

Labour's long hands were made
to work with brutal urgency;
every speck of dust was swept away
along with the broken nest. Within no time
a great flock of grieving and shrieking
voices hovered outside the cage
turning my locked air thick with sorrow.

However, the dignitary, it was learnt later,
failed to grace his own visit
due to unavoidable circumstances
or as the hearsay had it,
avoided the ghastly incident's shadows.

The grieving air remained
infectious in my closed cage.

7 May 2019

(Written to Chandu, 9-year-old son of the poet's brother.)

The Ocean is His Voice

The feisty poet walks up and down
measuring the adjacent yard of gallows
as Faiz did five decades ago.

Bhima-Koregaon ignites history.
A world of silence
is smitten into smithereens.

Poona was the capital of Chitpavans.
Once again, their last bastion
raises its ugly fangs.
The ghosts of the Peshwai lash their whips.
Nana orders,
Ghasiram the Kotwal chains humanity
with red-hot iron balls.
Spitoons are hung
to the necks of the earthly hearts.

Here, once the Mahatma
planted a mango tree,
and nudged Ambedkar
to acquiescence in a war of peace.

A lamp burns everyday
on the tree's *chabutara*
as the tourists come and go
in silent obeisance.
The octogenarian poet gazes on
the shadows of its branches
swaying on the walls of the deathly yard.

A ruthless streak of terror
is unleashed outside the high stone walls.
Yerawada rises again.

The shadows of Poona's tyranny
cast across the stone walls of the nation.
Memories abound
the tracks of history.

Socrates was given a glass of hemlock.
Galileo was walked upto the gallows
for mapping the skies
defying the sun going around the earth.
Hikmet was incarcerated
for the Turkish soldiers
read his poems hidden
under their pillows in army barracks.
Faiz almost faced the death sentence
for he sang paeans to labouring hands.

Déjà vu...Déjà vu...
Seeing the poet handcuffed
and walking through the gates
of an imprisoned court of law,
a dazed scribe of eminence
cried, heartbroken
tears rolling down his cheeks.
Decades have passed.
Now again, farcically enough,
history repeats itself.

His poetry smells of the soil.
In it, the oceans churn;
the whirling cyclonic
Eastern winds roar;
the thunderous Western monsoon clouds
carry torrents of rains.

The collective voice speaks
through his nimble words.
His lullabies hum children
into dreams of Future's visual frames.

His words echo
in the great mountains,
voluptuous forests,
recalcitrant boulders of the soil,
and the resistance of the earth
flows in tiny streams
through the crevices of the jagged
rocks of the Deccan Plateau
gathering into the mighty rivers.

It's poetry, stupid.
It's stupendous poetry.
It doesn't need weapons
to smelt break the iron heels of history.

His poetry has winged seeds
that float over to every shore
sailing on a gentle breeze of love
and embrace the earth's moisty crust.
The ocean is his voice.

May Day, 2019
(Written to Manjeera)

Aphorisms of Our Age

1

New universal truths
emerge out of new experiences
of democracies.

2

The priests of democracy
enjoy the ease of lying
in the public domain.

3

The sundry demi-gods possess
high-tech from the past and the present
to run the twenty-first century democracy.

4

Foul language defines
the sacred games of democracy.

5

Data is the diet par excellence
of the diabolic elections.

6

Like money begets money,
data breeds data.

7

Data greases the palms
of the ruling machine.

8

Your personal data
shapes your shadow
that surveils every corner of your life.

9

The prices of crude oil fall
as the data, the new oil of democracies surges
with mystic powers.

10

To graduate as a super-democracy
produce more data,
less food grains.

11

The monks howl and prowl
shitting along the holy riverbanks,
preaching cleansing of democracy.

12

As democracy deepens
in the ancient land,
the monks occupy the seats of power.

13

In the early days of cyberspace,
all that happened in the real world
could be captured in the virtual.
During its late avatar,
nothing that takes place in the virtual
can happen in the real.

14

If you commit a petty crime,
the law takes its own course.
Sport far larger crimes,
you end up making laws.

15

If a nation were a nuclear start-up,
rules of denuclearisation apply.
Build up a huge stockpile of nuclear arsenal,
respect pours in praising you as a nuclear power.

16

Larger the military-war complex,
superior is your democracy

among the nations of the world.

17

The farts of a democratic
dictator smell sweet.

2 April 2019

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

I Enter Your Land of Fantasy

Your letter takes me
into your land of fantasy.
The haunted house in your story
is familiar to dreamers like me.

We grope in the darkness
of the brutalities of life
escaping into distant lands
of freedom and adventure
gulping swigs of faint-inducing
potions like your tale's heroes do.

The ghostly figure's
Twitter bird splutters out
foul language of hatred
across the globe.

The old theatre of cold war
plays new games,
where nukes grow
and hearts decline.

The prankster's wonderland
trades in wars and super wars.
Here democracies
are manufactured and exported.

Every once again,
the cold war is closed
and reopened noisily.

'The strangest of times...
the best of times',
spread out on the floors
of the global prison-house.

The naked Emperor
wears nuclear clothes
and dazzling cyber arms.

The big button man
triggers peace in the East
hugging the small button's
'Little Rocket man'.
The 'mentally deranged dotard'
loves raising walls of hatred.

The machine is front-loaded,
top-loaded,
and bottom loaded.

The gods of the market
bay for blood,
and human sacrifices.
Their battles of trade
precede nuclear wars
and genocides in every nook and corner.

No inch is left undigitized
on the earth
in the nuclear war chambers.
Democracy is the commodity
they trade in the global market place.

16 January 2019

(Written to Sahas, a primary school student in the US, on receiving his letter on 16 January 2019 in which he wrote about his upcoming book of fantasy and adventure.)

The Well

A well at the far edge
of my childhood village
comes to my mind
as the restless night agonises
my squandering thoughts.

Lying down on my back
in my dingy prison cell,
I think of our friendship.

Vivid memories flow
like the watersprings
from the crevices
of the earth's layered soil.

I used to peep into the well
in my maternal grandma's compound
holding the top rim
of its round wall.

The water would look
crystal-like, deep and calm.

In the morning
the sun's warm and thin rays
would mirror on the surface
turning it transparently radiant.

In the afternoon
I could see the silvery
white sand at the bottom

under the sheet of the quiet water.

In the evening
before the twilight spreads,
I would witness my face
and the tossing heads
of the tall coconut trees.
Still the sand would be visible.

Sitting on a mound of sand
and watching me play with the well,
grandma would say,
'It has a thousand springs beneath'.
Sprinkling a few drops on my face
she would caressingly chant,
'This is sweet and pleasantly cold;
tastes like tender coconut water.'
She would pause for a while
looking into my inquisitive eyes
and then say again,
'Whatever amount of water
you draw, the level remains
the same everlastingly'.

The well's column
would speak to me
in tantalising serenity.

I would speak back
into the mouth,
my heartbeats would echo
in gentle crests and troughs.

Grandma has gone,
her well stays.
And the well's ripples in my mind.
Our friendship and love of our companions would
flow into the later years that come alive.

The restless solitary cell falls
quiet for the rest of the night.

5 November 2018
(Written to Vasantha)

A Bottomless Pit

A bottomless pit
awaits by my side
to engulf me.

I may slip off
my grip any moment.

A pitch-darkness flows
down the ravenous abyss.

The forces of darkness
play umpteen wars
to nudge me down the edge
of the void of helplessness.
The predatory beast of pity
opens its canine-teethed mouth.

I live with a sharp alertness,
the brutal sharpness
of a butcher's knife,
every minute, every second.

I stand guard at the mouth
of the cavernous pit,
lest I be sucked in.

30 October 2018

(Written to Varalakshmi)

A Fistful of Thoughts

Half-waking dream
A fistful of thoughts on you
Mind melts away in agony

Weighed down
by the burden of hopelessness
surrounding me,
while walking along the tree-laned
ancient city of cruel power,
I suddenly stood like an aged rock
under the crystalline rays
of the setting sun
on a rainy August evening

Drizzle-soaked,
the unblemished rays
unclasped my restive mind
I murmured,
why don't you give me some warmth,
and fortify me with your billion
slanting hands?

Here,
I will be again,
waiting for the wings of morning light
to pick up a bunch of warm rays
of hope with my wet eyelids.

28 October 2018

(This is Vasantha's letter, sent back to her rearranging her own words.)

Oh! Cinderella

Oh! Voter,
You are like Cassandra
gifted with the power
of prophecy and cursed
with your prophecies to turn false.

You carry the boulder
on your shoulder
each time over
to the top of the hill
only to see it
rolling down
to the bottom pit.
You are a Sisyphus
blessed with Hobson's choice.

Voter,
You, a faceless creature!
remember,
you are the Cinderella
who breaks her shackles free.

But no prince ever comes
to your rescue;
you are destined to take
the world into your own hands.

* In lieu of an analytical piece on our circumstances of democracy written for your magazine.

25 September 2018

(Written to N. Venugopal)

I Think of Your Evergreen Smile

I think of your evergreen smile
and love sitting in my solitary
prison cell far away from your
shining eyes of hope while my heart

whines and body pains. My life is
like a tree chopped of its branches
and cut off at its roots. My heart throbs
with heavy thuds like a thousand

Himalayas hurled into the Pacific Ocean
from the high skies. It's the pain
of the farmers uprooted from their ripe
golden fields of crops for a high speed

train to roll on. It's the pain of the Adivasis
whose villages are burnt down and their
loved ones are shot dead to clear
the forests for mining the minerals

under their firm feet for the nation's
prosperity to gallop with a double-digit
growth rate. In the Maximum Security
Prison of the nation on this cloudy

August monsoon morning, I think of the pain
of the people and their everyday struggles
for life and death amidst the shooting pain
in my left hand, twirling aches in my shrunken legs
and exploding pain in my grisly gut. I think

of the burning empty stomachs of the millions
as their pain comes to dwell in my each limb.
My heart moans, my body trembles

as there is no treatment for my creaky
heart. The pain kills me, but I still refuse
to die. I wonder what you must be doing
lonely at this hour in our garden of love

even as my pain speaks eloquently
in the solid silence of my barred cell.
My life is strewn across prison, police,
courts, false media propaganda, and stinking

corridors of hospitals with shards of pain
tearing me apart, testing my ultimate human
integrity with a thousand days and nights
of howls of suffering stung by the termites

of penitentiary powers. My face shines
under the flames of burning pains
in the dark entrails of the prison-house
of tyranny and tragic turn of the strangest

times of our history. They have imprisoned us,
me inside the high walls, you outside
in the wider prison. But who has been
spared who dream of freedom, of a hopeful

future? They are scared of our dreams
and frightened of our love for the people
of empty hands and bare feet who love
their lands of hope. I see the moving

August clouds in my mind's eyes
from the closed gates of my cage.
This morning rain is pregnant with
your message of love. The fertile clouds

are pouring down in the sprouting seeds of love
all over the earth. The powers that be
may fell trees of life, but can never hold back
our growing forests of love. My fingers'

grip on the iron bars tightens as my mind
wiggles recalling our days in the fields
of rice freshly soaked with
the morning's honeyed drops of rain.

17 August 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

This Day Too Will Pass...

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness...

In the morning's
glossy sheets of the day,
the colourful maps of my country
blur my vision.

Rich businesses celebrate
their super profits
with discount offers
ranging upto ninety percent.

The GDP is set to take the surge
this quarter to an all-time high,
official estimates foretell.
The markets roar in
one loud and fierce voice
on the holy day against
the sliding economy.

Outside the high walls
of my state's abode,
the destitute children
in uniforms of half-nakedness
asking for alms
parade round the islands
of busy traffic with flags of patriotism
made in China
in their wretched and delicate hands,
it's reported somewhere deep inside the pages.

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness...

The prison doctor has a question,
'Are you taking the capsules every morning?'
Thundering shards of pain throw up
dusty storms in my shaky eyes.
He completes the check-up:
'Your B.P. is under control,
nothing to worry'.

The prosecutor tells the Hon'ble Court:
'His vitals are stable at present'.
The defence counsel raises his voice,
'Which of his vital organs are stable
and for how long for each one?'

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness...

The economists of the regime
point out, 'Markets are charged
with animal spirits',
even as half the people
squirm in the distress of hunger.

Amazon, Flipkart
sorry, Walmart,
Hindustan Liver,
I mean, Unilever UK,
Thomas Cook,
Facebook,
Alibaba, Oppo,
Google, Apple,
OnePlus, PayTM,
Sony, Samsung,
Microsoft, Big Basket,
Big Bazaar, Jio, Jaguar,
Honda, Tata, Bata,
Reliance Defence, et cetra

announce special offers
in flying colours of three
on the solemn occasion.

The bulls roar
The bears jump
The nation thrives
in colourful commercials.
The demagogue declares
in flowery oration,
this nation is not made;
it was born in times immemorial—
the oldest nation on the earth,
the largest democracy in the world...,
the prison radio blurted.

Inside my God's abode,
sacred pakodas come
from His blessed kitchen at 9:30 a.m.,
oily and brown,
but fundamentally entrepreneurial
in look and make
like the ones made
by the nation's unemployed self-employed
outside the rail or bus stations
or on pavements, perfectly
made in India.

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness....

Doctors' advice against oily foods
comes to my mind.
My pancreas ails
like eighteen other vitals.
But you shan't refuse
Independence Day pakodas
lest you be counted for sedition.

Like your caste,
you can never deny your nationalism.

Outside the main gates,
guards salute, honouring
a large flag preceded
and followed by Bollywood songs
of patriotism flourishing
from loudspeakers.

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness...

It's a holiday for free people.
But inside, it's early lock-up
like on every public holiday
or feverish festival.
Special dinner is served at 1:30 pm,
oil-rich *aalupulao*
with eighteen long hours
of lock-up to follow.

I retreat to the glossy sheets
of celebration in the day's newspapers lying down
quietly in my diseased cell
infested with hopes of tomorrow.
This day too will pass...

Dizziness, nausea, breathlessness...

15 August 2018

(Written to Sahas, USA)

Ode to Life

My love,
life of my life,
these days I think of death,
I mean about life.

John Donne the English poet
comes to my mind again and again.
He called death a great leveller.

But death,
my love,
I find it poor or rich,
disgraceful or with dignity—
it all depends on who one is in life.

But each creature on the earth
refuses to die, no matter
how insignificant its existence
is considered to be by anyone.
Each living thing wages
a grand resistance against death.

Even stars die,
say the cosmologists,
after shining for billions of years
and galaxies collapse
spreading over billions and billions of years.

But then remember,
my love,

new stars take birth
and baby galaxies sprout.

My love,
life of my life,
these days I think of death,
I mean about life.

I still feel
I am a young student
of a learning campus
even after turning fifty
and growing grey
behind the bars.

A nation's fear of aging
has its genesis in the dwindling
number of hands to work
for its deathly glory.

The Janus-faced nations
desire the death of
more people than nature can nurture.
Nations imprison life
in their deadly hubris.

Death sentence is easier
than living life a prisoner.
In our beautiful land
eking out a living
has become more difficult
than desiring death.

Nations are prison-houses
encompassing death's desire.
Life is made more difficult
than ease of doing business.
Business has come to be death;

nations are nothing
but businesses in death.

Even the earth dies
one day along with its burning star,
the sun.

But there must be
many many earths
with beautiful creatures like us
floating in the infinite space.
We don't know them as yet.

The world, my love,
goes on oblivious of death
as if it doesn't exist.

The Universe is humanised
for to be history is to be human.
Time is human; and
to be human is to be life.

My love,
life of my life,
these days I think of death,
I mean about life
because
'I have a pact of love with beauty.
I have a pact of blood with my people'.

25 July 2018

(Written to Vasantha. The last two lines are from Pablo Neruda in 'Do not ask me' from his Songs of Protest.)

Resurrection

The story of the Exodus
repeats endlessly in every aeon.

Humans move crisscrossing
the globe in search of living
their lives ever since the first
Homo Sapien set her foot
out of Africa.

The new king Herod
of the new Dream Land
has decreed to kill
the children who came in crossing the borders
or separate them
from their parents.

Separated from their
moms and dads, the chained
little souls smile at the shining
toy democracy, its real guns
and dreadful bombs.

The caged children laugh
at the mighty Empire,
the Superpower that casts
its net far and wide.

The cries of the collective childhood
damning the guns of the super
democracy reverberates through the planet.

The mad power built
on a million genocides
is scared of its own history.
The clay feet of the super beast
begin to dissolve.

‘Every living thing on the face
of the earth was wiped out...’*
But there is no Noah
or his Ark in sight.
There is no flood of the Apocalypse
and no signs of the Rainbow
of the Covenant God
had made with Noah.

There are only the smiles
of the children enveloping
the resurrecting earth.

Child Christ has moved
away from Bethlehem
to Bastar or Palestine
or Kashmir or perhaps
returned to Africa.

Historians are in search
of his footprints.

12 July 2018

(Written to Manjeera)

* from the Bible, ‘Genesis’, *Old Testament*.

How Beautiful to Wait for Your Visit

How beautiful to wait for your visit
amid my empty days and blank nights
distraught with the news of unnatural
deaths and bitter wars of vibrant democracy

marauding the human passions of everyday
social life. My cage prohibits all relations
and bans love proscribing the language
of hearts, as the woman behind me

reminds, 'Speak only in Hindi', while you
stand on the other side of the opaque
fibreglass window; words fail me, as though
I have forgotten our language of love and intimacy,

and you become a stranger to me from
this world of high walls. How painful to talk across
the window of surveillance over the daggers hanging
on my head from behind seeking to stab

our hearts brutally in cold blood.

I know you travel thousands of miles
to say a few words to comfort my soul
under siege. The few minutes granted to us

melt away in the staggering silence between us
even as I grow grey faster behind the bars
and cling tighter to your evergreen smile
to remain alive and human against all

odds in the strangest of times. Your much awaited

visit each time turns turbulently painful for both of us.
Yet, as Nazim Hikmet says, 'living is a matter of hope,
my love, living is a serious business, like loving you'.

13 June 2018

*(Written to Vasantha after the visit of Vasantha and Manjeera on 13th June
2018.)*

Your Letters Defeat My Solitary Cell

I read your letters
in the glow of my blood
flowing from the chinks
of my fluttering heart
in the darkness of my cell.

I read your messages
of hope between the spaces
of the lines and the words,
staring closely at the curves
of your scribbled letters
that dropped from your
beautiful fingers.

I read the expressions
on your face in the lines
when you scribbled them
inking your love.

You letters smell
of your feeling,
each word conveying
a million messages
to my hungry mind.

Yes, my love,
I like your scribbled letters,
not the typed printouts from the computers.
They speak like you.
They behave like you.

They display the gestures
of your hands when you speak.

I keep your unwritten letters
that escape censorship
under my pillowless head.

I read them spreading them on the table
of my soul in front of my closed eyes.

I defeat the purpose
of the solitary confinement
by drowning myself
in your letters of love.

18 May 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

My New Friends

They move incessantly
disturbing my injured mood
all the time,
day and night
these hot summer days,
working tirelessly
unlike the trains
of my wandering thoughts
in my solidified solitude.

The busybodies
in my damned cell
in lines of stoic discipline
like the monotonous marching armies
carry tiny specks
of food particles
from nowhere,
perhaps
to preserve for the difficult
rainy days.

As I stare at them
with my child-like inquisitiveness
for hours on end
having no work to do,
I find some lines in red
across the walls,
others in brown and black
along the corner, lines in millions.

The tiny creatures seem
to move on with
set premeditated
work targets
shaming my lazy prison life.
It seems their labour
is not wrenched away
by the lords of wealth.
They look to be in
eternal bliss in their
seamless lines of self-confidence.

Occasionally
I get inspiration
from their commitment to work
shedding my preposterous laziness
and jumping at creating
imaginary work for myself
in the empty space
of my unending silence.

I wait for letters
from my beloved friends,
I wait for prison visits
from my loved ones,
I wait for something to happen
in the Almighty High Court,
and I wait for the newspapers
to arrive with good news
for the battered prison-house
of our beloved country.

I set my work schedule
to be an act of waiting
as did a barred poet
in his 'Captive Imagination' *
during his prison term.

And, Chandu,
I thought all this tiring
and endless waiting
is precious industrious work.
Shaming my delusions,
illusions and hallucinations,
the marvellous workaholics
seem to enjoy their work timelessly.
They are unconcerned
by the existence of the prison
unlike my wounded self
under excruciating incarceration.

17 May 2018

(Written to Chandu)

[*Captive Imagination](#) is a book of letters from prison by poet Varavara Rao.

A Nightmare in My Dystopian Prison Cell

The demon rises from the desert.
He moves across the earth
trampling down under his feet
every habitat of living creatures.

The iron vultures blow
hot fiery air from the skies.
The thunderstorms roar
without a drop of rain.
The lightning blinds
the eyes of the earth.

The trees are uprooted.
The rivers have dried up.
The mountains have crashed.
The forests have caught fire.
The earth is ravaged.

This summer isn't like
every other summer.
These dust storms aren't like
other maelstroms.

The ugly beast
dances a macabre dance of death
with his giant arms
wide open.

The music's off.
The muse's been driven away.

The poets are poisoned.
The historians are buried alive.
The scientists are coaxed.
The philosophers are sent to the gallows.

The men unknown
shoot down the known
lovers and thinkers.
The people fall
like the dead birds from the trees.
The villages, towns and cities
moan alike in pain.

The monster chuckles wickedly
stomping across the earth.
The thunderstorms swirl
and sweep away the human footprints
from the devastated earth.

* These are words from a nightmare I had on 14th May 2018 after reading news about repeated thunder and dust storms killing hundreds of people across the country in the first two weeks of May.

14 May 2018

(Written to N. Venugopal)

Declare Yourself a Liberal

Declare yourself a liberal,
if you so wish.
Put on a Gandhi topi
or a Nehru hat.
How does it matter,
till you internalise a sense of equality?

If running to temples brings votes,
your rivals run smarter,
and without any running
every priest would be in a seat of power.

If magic runs the democracies,
wizards should be the rulers.
Why waste public money doing elections?

If your offerings to Lord Shiva
on Mount Kailash
get you to power,
why go around campaigning?

And brother, if your secularism
is on the top of the mountain,
why do we need a constitution?

Kabir says:
Listen brother,
without justice to the people,
who has ever changed the society?

28 April 2018

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

O Justice!

You lived life
a full circle into your nineties.
You remained young
at heart in the battles
for the rights of the people
till you passed away from us.

Many a task at your hand
was crying out for resolution.
If you had lived
for a hundred years,
we would have wanted you to live
more for our sake.
You would have been still young
raising your gentle voice for the rights
of the oppressed souls.

In your short and frail body,
you weren't an individual;
you were an institution.
The bugle you blew
against the laws of injustice
continues to resound in our ears.

The laws of sedition still occupy
the dark statute books.

Draconian laws run amok lawlessly.
Free speech is as elusive as ever,
social justice a mirage.

Muslims still live
in the crib of backwardness.
The macabre dance of the death penalty
has taken the centre stage
of our public life.
And in the land of the 'karmabhoomi',
genocides go in the name of encounters.

O Justice,
the thunderous dust storms
have darkened the skies
over our heads.
People are dying like flies.

You left behind
many of us orphaned.
Now, in these strangest of times
where do we turn to?

When this impending
shadow of tyranny
started looming large
over the horizon of our democratic space,
first Balagopal and Krishna Iyer left us
followed by Kannabiran.
Before we recovered from the shock,
Shankaran and B.D. Sharma too, had gone.
M.T. Khan, Surendra Mohan too passed away.
Now you have left us.

We can't mourn,
or swallow the bitter truth
that none of you are amidst us today.

You launched a thousand battles
to bring down justice
from the ivory towers.
Your frail figure

stood unwavering like a beacon
on the stormy land's
failed gods of democracy.

No forum was too small for you.
No protest was insignificant in your eyes.
With boundless patience,
you walked the streets of protests.
You sailed along the ups and downs
of the road to people's rights.
Your gentle words soothed
the despondent hearts.

We knocked at your door
whenever demonic powers
crushed the lives of the people.
You used to open the doors of your heart
with outstretched arms warmly hugging us.
We never left your presence
without a plan to confront injustice.

We are the proud inheritors
of the architecture of people's
rights, jurisprudence you all
built for us to work with.

26 April 2018

(Written to VV, in memory of Justice Rajinder Sachar.)

A True Story of My Heaven and Hell

This Mahar
didn't do anything
but a crime
against the state
inviting disaffection
by smashing a signboard
of the future smart city
under the intoxication
of self-dignity.
He was confined
under sedition.

This Chamar
didn't do anything
but a crime
against the state
inviting disaffection
by refusing
to clear a dead cow
from the future smart city
under the intoxication
of self-assertion.
He was detained
under sedition.

The hairy magistrate
behind the golden
high table passed his verdict
banishing the Mahar and the Chamar

from the future smart cities
for life and after-life.

The Mahar was taken to Heaven,
and the Chamar to Hell.

Both were entrusted
with the holy work
of cleaning the shit of gods
every morning and evening
for life and after-life.

And in the rest of the day,
they have to only clean the sewage.

12 April 2018

*(Written to Vijay Kumar, based on the stories told by two prisoners who
spent prison terms for petty crimes.)*

At the Clanking of the Keys

As I wake up
at the clanking of keys,
the world of confinement
opens up in front of my blurred eyes
across the trembling bars of my cage.

The air is thick,
dank and eerie.

A sharp-edged
emptiness
drills through my mind.

A mad bird
outside the high walls
yells with ecstatic fits.

A tad bit of a dry breeze
escapes the thick walls
and the rusted bars
touching my locked-up forehead.

I suddenly find myself
deeply longing to be
under an azure sky;
you know I love the open sky
as much as I love you.

I desire to be
in the forests on the eastern mountains
when the sun dawns piercing

the branches of the tall trees.

I want to be
on the high calm seas
as the sun radiates
golden rays on its surface.

This lonely and sad
morning passes on helplessly,
as my mind freezes my heart
in the closed vindictive cell.

The century runs backwards;
silence reigns the troubled times.

An air of awe
and peals of terror
permeate the world.

My love,
my sweetheart,
don't take my words seriously;
I say so much nonsense
out of my pigheadedness
brewing in my loneliness.

30 March 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

My Fellow Prisoners

My fellow

Prisoners,

Don't be agonised,
You'll get free soon.

From the treacherous Facebook,
the high walls of the Worldwide Web,
and the shackles of the conjuring screens.

You'll soon walk out free
into the beautiful morning
warmly hugging your loved ones.

The virtual reigns the world of lives
through the monstrous regimes
and their corporate demons.

The lures of their net,
the baits of their hooks
made you the prisoners
trapped in the data.

My fellow

Prisoners,

Don't be agonised,
You'll get free soon.

The Facebook will be erased forever,
the Twitter will turn off,
the computing Clouds will crash,
the WhatsApp will vanish,

and the Google will be gone.

You'll rise from your chairs,
cushions, beds, and be off
the screens of oppression.
You'll see the world outside
the gates of the prison.

You'll taste the food
without a twinge of the Net
and enjoy your freedom without fidgeting.

You'll love the people again;
you'll be human again.

You'll overcome the databanks,
cease to be the votebanks,
and freed of the digital gallows.

My fellow
Prisoners,
Don't be agonised,
You'll be free soon.

You've nothing to lose,
but the chains of the data,
you've a world to win.

Netizens of the world unite!

* From the High Security Prison cell, Nagpur, to the fellow netizen prisoners
of the global virtual space.

24 March 2018

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

An Elegy Written in a Deathly Prison Cell for a Moving Spirit of Life

Wandering in a wheelchair
you glided through the galactic pathways
across the bottomless paradoxical pits
where light never dared to tread.

My cosmic companion,
a heap of bones,
motionless lump of muscles!
Where did you pluck
these fistfuls of falling stars?
How did you get your grip
on the space-time singularities?

Going places
riding on gravitational waves
you visited Black Holes and baby Universes.
Where all did you leave the footprints
of human imagination
from this tiny speck of our dwelling abode?

Time is the history of space
with a beginning and an end.
Space is time spread like a cosmic mat
on your journey through
the heart of the Dark Matter.

Time collapses into space,
space collides with time
in your wicked humour's

theory of everything.

You churned equations
out of your esoteric mind
measuring the life and death
of the ever-expanding universe.
How did you get the energy
in the debris of your body?
I wasn't shocked
to read the bad news.
I know you didn't live to die
beyond your doctors' expectations.
You ripped open the boundaries of science;
You confronted the challenges
of your challenged life.
You have died to live,
the universe your life.

My friend,
You celebrated human capacity
to comprehend a godless,
uncaring multiverse.
You navigated its mysteries
heartily smiling away your way
even as the treacheries in human life
still remained baffling
on this tiny planet.

You are the epitome
of human confidence
in life and death
with a gentle laughter
on your unmoving lips.

16 March 2018

(On reading the news about Stephen Hawking's death.)

The New God

The bears hug,
the bulls roar
as the seamless Sensex
slides up and down.

The speculative riches
fall and rise
soaring up like the crescendo
of the dance and song
of the exorcised spirits
to the tunes of the lashing wands
of the monstrous wizards.

The diamantaries
of the ancient civilisation
polish the vaults of cash,
secret letters, and precious stones
for the celebrity damsels
of the globalised market.

The vampires of democracies
suck the blood from the sweating skins.
The wizards of the global power
exorcise the dead labour.

Data is the new oil,
the digital the new capital.
The software is the new spiritual
and the AI the new God.

Sadguru Jaggi Vasudev Maharaj
extolled the new God
as the world captains of the digital age
prostrated,

‘Invest in ignorance,
amplify the digital,
and disrupt the core.’

The pious mystic exhorted further,
‘Ignorance is boundless,
it offers enormous possibilities
for profit. Explore the new frontiers
of intelligence of ignorance.’

The world captains thundered
in huge applause piously.

13 March 2018

*(Written to N. Venugopal after reading a news report of a meeting of the
top leaders of digital companies from all over the world with the Sadguru.)*

O Joe, My Fellow Indentured Citizen

A gun shoots your irises,
the stars of your dignified body,
the sources for your inner self.

An electronic mould sucks
the images of your forefingers,
the sensitive tips of your outer self.

Digitised is your individual self
solidifying your identity beyond
your material and spiritual existence.

Enshrined is your citizenship contract
with your electronic nation
in the digital temple's sanctum sanctorum.

You are uniqueness,
12-digitated,
eternally nationalised.

Another uniqueness is bestowed upon you, like your own
aeons' old caste to display on your sleeves.

O Joe, my fellow indentured citizen,
let's go in search of bread
on the digital highways of the nation.

7 March 2018

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

The River Flows On

1

This tedious night is endless.
I wait breathlessly to witness
the morning rays
on the dew-wrapped trees
along the mountain's slope
where you look for me
with your smiling eyes
at the foothills.

We talk of freedom
sitting among the blossoming flowers
on the foothills of hope
keeping hand in hand.
As the sun rises up,
we bid farewell to the night's sorrows
and climb up the hills together
to reach the peaks of the mountains
never to look back
disappearing into the misty forests.

2

The bars of the night's darkness
pierce into my memories.
The harsh night prolongs
the pain of my heart.
The dream shatters,
but your songs of hope

linger in the saddened lanes of my memories.

The endless night of pain
melts into my waking dreams
chirping sounds of the morning birds.
Early days of our companionship
come to my mind as the rising sun
breaks on the ocean's horizon.

3

When I first reached the fiery river
where it forked into two mighty streams,
I was awe-struck.
Blood gushed into my adolescent
volcanic heart.
I closed my eyes as the thunderous
river flew into my bursting arteries
taking me into unknown lands.
The gusty winds of the fearsome river
shook my senses and carried me
into the universe infinite.
I followed the enormous streams
reaching the line of horizon
where the river dissolved the earth
into the openness of the ocean and the sky.

4

Not many years later,
when we sailed together
along the river through a moonlit night
in an arc of a tiny boat,
our young hearts swayed to the river's waves.
The wilderness along the river banks
embraced our minds,
with sparkling flashes
the boatman's oars guided our way.

I still remember
the flapping white wings of the seagulls
against the rising red sun
as our boat sailed down
the flow of the river into the ocean.
Soaked in the salty smell
of the earthy river,
we entered the roaring ocean
with our throbbing hearts
merging with it.
We sat under the shade
of the sky-kissing lighthouse
that stood for ages
against the fierce ocean winds
searing the shores.

5

In the void of my prison cell
I long for the touch of the river,
cosmos of life and love.
I have no sun, no moon, no stars;
neither the clouds, dawns, dusks
nor the days or the nights.
A long stretch of darkness
spreads like the unseeable emptiness
in the space between galaxies.

Tonight, there is no one
at the side of my pining heart.
Like a fish out of water,
I gasp for freedom, love and friendship.
I have no idea of living without the shelter of your love.

Life is shorn of life.
Thought is separated from thought.

My eyes refuse to acknowledge

the high barren walls
that barricade my existence.
Life survives in no isolation,
Life thrives entwining life.

* Recalling our river journey, wedding anniversary on 2nd March and our long and enduring companionship.

2 March 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

You

Outside the village
on the bank of the Tank
awaiting the rising moon quietly
in the blossoming
water lilies
I saw

Along the verdant
border-bunds of the fields
when the tiny grass flowers
fully bloomed
tossing their heads
in the gentle wind
I saw

Idling away
long hours
on the shores of the river
in the gleeful moments
of the jumping small fish
I saw

In the ripe
golden panicles of paddy grains
tended by my father
in his patches of fields
I saw

In the leaping
ecstasies of the playful

joy of the unweaned
suckling calf
feasting my eyes
I saw

In the thin and slender
slanting morning rays
darting down
the high branches
of trees in the thick forest
I saw

In the rapidly
surging torrents
of the flooding river's
stormy speed
I saw

By the dusk,
when labour
turned into
drops of sweat
and made
the hunger vanish
I saw

But
when all these landscapes
ceased to exist,
oh my dearest Liberty!
now, where do I
look for you?

2 March 2018

(Written to Vasantha. Translated from the Telugu by Rajendra Babu Arvini.)

A Letter to Dear Students and My Fellow Teachers

I dream of being in my classroom
day and night fettered behind
the strong iron beams
of my tiny solitary prison cell.

I see you, talk to you
and hug you by the force
of my frail and challenged life
in my unchained mind's eye
as the desire for freedom
flows through the sinews
and veins of my bloodstream
even as I am caged
far away from you.

Teaching is my forte,
breath and life, you know
I embraced literature
for it clasps us with
our troubled histories,
philosophies and economics
of pangs of pain, tears,
fears and hopes
for a bright new day.

The cage of lies,
seditious clauses of law
and conspiratorial confabulations
confine and keep me away

from your intimate and critical
engagement with knowledge
and warm affection for the liberty
of the trampled earth.

Dear friends,

I have lived all my conscious life on the campuses of learning and teaching in search of knowledge, love and freedom. In the course of this search, I learnt that freedom for a few was no freedom. I began to study histories, philosophies and literatures with more eagerness and critical engagement. That led me to look around myself closely. I travelled across and met people living in sub-human conditions. I realised that they never tasted freedom very much like me. I understood that castes and freedom can never co-exist. I began to speak to myself. Then I slowly started to speak to my fellow beings on my journey. I grasped of a great void of silence around me. I saw a society of silence. I dashed myself against the boulders of silence. I brutally wounded myself. A vast majority of the multitudes have never been allowed to break their silence. Centuries of silence solidified in our lives below the high and barren rocks of argumentative India. I desired to break the prison house of silence. I struggled within myself. The rocks were hard to move. I realised that I carried within myself our silent society. It wasn't an easy journey.

It was such a long journey, strenuous and painful. Eventually, I thought I gathered a voice myself. I wanted my fellow beings also to have a voice of their own so that we could converse. In the process, my voice gradually began to emerge. I was bewildered to see that my voice was heard. After some time, my voice even started to rise a bit. Then suddenly fell an axe on my throat. My voice was silenced in one stroke.

Friends, today, I reel under excruciating relentless pain. One after the other, my organs started bursting. The closure of my voice within me explodes into shooting pain. My vocal chords acquired lesions making my voice a thin and inaudible squeak. My heart broke with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. My brain has started having blackouts with a condition called syncope. My kidneys are silted with pebbles; my gallbladder gathered stones and pancreas grew a tail of pain called pancreatitis. Nerve lines in my left shoulder broke under the conditions of my arrest, known as brachial

plexopathy. More and more organs of silence replaced the original. I have been living with explosive and shooting pain day in and day out. I am living on the margins of life.

My pain, a voiceless song,
my being a nameless mote.
If only my pain could speak,
I'd know who I am.
And if myself could find its essence,
I'd unravel the mystery of this world.
If I could seize this hidden mystery,
my silence would find expression.

—Faiz Ahmad Faiz

(Translated by Shiv K. Kumar)

Eleven long months have passed. I continue to languish under the brutal conditions of incarceration without any relief. I am forced to live without any human dignity and bodily integrity. The conditions under which I am living have reduced me to sub-human and inhuman levels. You think of the crime attributed to me: I have lived for freedom, I have tried to find the voice of the voiceless and I tried to find my voice. I wrote about them, I spoke about them, those my fellow beings who are not allowed to have a voice of their own for centuries. This is my crime. Degrading my body and mind is not simply removing humanity from me alone, it is an act of dehumanising our entire society; our civilisational existence.

I hope none of you should feel sympathetic to my condition. I don't believe in sympathy, I only believe in solidarity. I intended to tell you my story only because I believe that it is also your story. Also because I believe my freedom is your freedom.

Nagpur, 7 February 2018

(Written to my students and colleagues.)

Koregaon's Heart of Bhima

When a clay effigy
collapsed two hundred years ago
by the touch of the untouchables,
it wasn't by the Empire's army.

You can never understand
Koregaon's heart of Bhima.

Love, liberty and freedom
of a million mutinous minds
singing a dirge to two empires
for a glorious day to dawn
today infuriates
the dying Brahmanical empire.

Armies of ants;
Armies of toilers;
Armies of lovers;
Armies of the soil;
Armies of the untouchables.

You can never understand
Koregaon's heart of Bhima.

Nations don't grow
feeding on caterpillars
castes, creed and cancerous hate.

Patriotism can't flow
through the diarrhoeal bowels
of demagogues.

You can never understand
Koregaon's heart of Bhima.

3 January 2018

(Written to Vijay Kumar after reading news of violent attacks of Hindutva fascists on a massive gathering of people at Koregaon-Bhima memorial, near Pune, on 1 January, celebrating the 200th anniversary of the first-ever liberating experience of resistance against the Brahmanical forces by Dalit Soldiers even as the army of the East India Company was hesitant to fight the war.)

My Love, My Freedom

My love,
These insults, censures, rumours,
oppression, tearing pain and tears—
endure a little longer.

I know how free your mind
and burdenless your thoughts
were before this shadow of tyranny took us over.

I know how you wear liberty
on your black eyelashes and pride of self-dignity
on your lovely eyebrows.

We will have a life ahead
before which you may forgive me
for dragging you into this shadow.

First they came to steal our freedom;
then they came to rob us of our courage.

We are made helpless,
our emotions shackled,
love imprisoned, thoughts fettered,
and our words chained;
our language is stolen away from us.

In this pain of separation
and shackled existence,
I feel the sounds of your helpless
heaving heart.

Have a little patience;
our courage alone keeps us alive
to a bright breaking dawn.

My love, my freedom,
raise the burning torch
in your hand a little higher.

2 January 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

Solitary Hope

This solitary dark night
I have an undying desire
to share a thought with you.

I have no sky above,
no earth under my feet.
My hands and legs are fettered;
only my unchained heart
yearns to whisper a little thought.

They threw
our hearts which lie shattered
a thousand miles apart.
But this dark night couldn't
impede the rays of our
imaginations meeting.

The twinkling star of pain
is hidden behind this night's
dark clouds;
I am sure you feel its presence.

1 January 2018

(Written to Vasantha)

When is the New Year?

The prison clock
ticks far away
on the high walls
disturbing
my mood of solitude
at midnight
when I sit quietly
with my back against the wall
in my lonely cell
counting the number of genocides
across the world
that ensure the sustenance of democracy.

Behind my closed eyelids
appears the whole tiny universe
with all its planets and stars
of galaxies passing slowly
in my fast moving
gargantuan eyeballs.

In the tiny cell of my head
no more time can be measured
by clocks.

My love, when is the new year
amidst my exploding pain?
Call Jesus,
summon all the prophets.
When is the new year, my dear?

Millions of skeletons
roll down around me
from thousands
of genocides
in Asia, Africa, Madagascar
Australia, New Zealand
North-East, Sri Lanka
Latin America, Bastar
Iraq, Syria, Kashmir
Palestine and everywhere.

The fumes
of the mother of all
nuclear bombs
rise higher and higher
like the shooting pain in my left hand.

Time explodes
into pieces of peace.
The mass of time gathers back
to summon all the suffering
in the world.

Let's revisit Jerusalem.
Now, where is Bethlehem?
My love, call Jesus Christ,
summon Prophet Mohammed.
Let's count time all over again
from the beginning.
When is the new year, my dear?

Thoughts twirl in my mind
defying the laws
of life and death
orchestrated
by my tiny prison cell's
monstrous machine.

Thoughts and ideas
march into my cell
like the columns of soldiers in a nuclear war
heralding nuclear genocides.

Dear friend,
even the darkest cloud is
sans a silver line in this season.
The monsoon of democracy ended long ago.
Why do you wait endlessly for rains of liberty?

Now, democracies breed fascism
Nazism, majoritarianism.
They set in automotion self-destructing human machines.
Democracies love a good many genocides.
End of history!

Democracies spew out nukes.
The greatest democracies
spew out the greatest nukes.
End of imagination!

My friend, when is the new year?

30 December 2017
(Written to Vasantha)

Now We Have More Freedoms

On that day
when Rohit Vemula
hanged himself
and declared:
'I can't be reduced to my identity',
my heart missed its beats.

On that day
when Perumal Murugan
announced:
'The writer in me is dead',
I was afflicted with sleep apnea.

On that day
when Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar
pronounced:
'The Adivasi Will not Dance',
my muscles contracted.

On that day
when Hadiya
standing on her ground
in the courtroom was compelled to
beg:
'I want freedom',
I ceased to breathe
in my prison cell.

25 December 2017

(Written to Manjeera)

A Terrible Void

A blankness in my mind
freezes memories and histories
shrinking like a black hole.
An emptiness roars
opening its monstrous teeth.

A void occupies my mind
and chews the sinews of my life.

It grows cataclysmic as
nations march backwards;
countries count genocides;
people live holocausts.

Philosophies fail,
economies collapse, and
hatred flourishes.
Civilisations creak and moan
like glowing insects crushed
under iron feet.

Jerusalem is a city of peace.
There, three Abrahamic
faiths clash and crumble;
Bethlehem crawls to vanish.

No, don't look for Jesus there.
He isn't rising.
Don't search for the Prophet.
He isn't in the caravan.

Neither Buddha is walking
nor Mahavir going about naked.

No, the old order
isn't changing to yield a new one.
No signs of the apocalypse in sight.
No revelations are unfolded.

Yet—

A terrible void is born
A terrible future awaits us.

24 December 2017

(Written to Vasantha)

A Sparrow in My Cell

A sparrow
flew like an arrow
into my cell
through the bars
on a chilling desolate
midnight.

He perched
on the parapet wall
of the toilet
with little jumps
waveringly.

I tried to whisper
deliriously something to the bird
through my half-closed,
sleepy and hallucinating eyes.

A fat officer giggled
with his rocky grim face
hurrying through
his midnight rounds
behind a bony guard.

My gaze flew back
to the little creature
in my waking dream.

Trying to fly out,
he narrowly hit a bar

and fell to the floor
with a sound of susurration
like the moaning of my numb heart.

A night train
whistled at a faraway station
like a ghost of a fallen civilisation.
Gaining consciousness and courage,
the bird walked around
the floor of my cell
pecking at tiny spots.

The guard returned
to the yard rubbing
his tired eyes of surveillance
taking long strides up and down.

The little bird
climbed on to my bed
and sat at my painful
and trembling feet.
I held my breath.
Slowly, he started walking
on the corners of my bed
moving his eyes
this way and that way
as if saying something to me
or measuring my heartbeats.

An owl outside
the high security walls
howled a horrible shriek.

Perhaps, the little one
lost his way,
or his nest
or his loved one,
I thought.

Suddenly,
he fluttered his wings
flying to the ceiling
and dashing down to the floor.
An ugly siren shrilled.
The guards changed their duties.
The lifeless night groaned once again.

I felt my throat parched;
but how could I take water
with the bird around in my cell?

Slipping back
into my distant dream,
I whispered to him:
My friend,
come every night
I am terribly lonely.

23 December 2017

(Written to Chandu)

From a World of Forbidden Things

I breathe hard
fluttering my lungs
in a world shorn of love.

Banished for life
from my life away
from the beautiful people
I love and cling to
like the ones who flock
at your Jannat Guest House.
I am cursed to live
in a hell of forbidden things.

To talk to my love,
to my daughter, mother
or brother without a meshed wire,
a fibreglass screen,
and a pair of surveilling ears
in-between—
forbidden.

To seal a letter to post
or to receive a sealed envelope
from my loved ones;
to speak, read or write
in my mother tongue;
and to read uncensored books,
letters or newspapers—
forbidden.

To switch off lights
before going to bed
where there is none,
to turn on music
where there is no rhythm in life—
forbidden.

To attend to the calls of nature,
brush your teeth or bathe,
and change your clothes
without a pair of eyes watching—
forbidden.

To see your face in a mirror;
to talk to ants, prison birds,
ghosts of people who died within the four walls
or to fallen leaves brought by a stray wind—
forbidden.

To pour out the burden
of your heart to someone close;
to express a feeling of your
hunger, anger or pain;
or to share a dream
you have had last night—
forbidden.

To smell the cheeks
of your child;
to care for the nape
of your love's neck, and
to shake the warm hands of a friend—
forbidden.

This winter,
a sweater with green
stripes of affection
brought by my daughter;

a white shirt with tiny spots
of red brought by my love—
forbidden.

I am told
I should only wear white clothes
spun on Hell's looms
like a Hindu widow
forbidden to touch the colours of life.
After all, the sentence is rigorous,
albeit without evidence,
under the holy laws of national security.
You are reminded
time and again:
You aren't like all other captives.

* This letter was written long ago, on 22nd November 2017. It seems to have never reached you. I am sending it again now with a hope that it will reach you this time.

22 November 2017

*(Written to Anjum, a character in The Ministry of
Utmost Happiness, a novel by Arundhati Roy.)*

Mother, Weep Not for Me

When you came to see me,
I couldn't see your face
from the fibreglass window.
If you glanced at my crippled body,
you could truly believe that I was still alive.

Mother, cry not for my absence at home.

When I was at home
and in the outside world,
I had many friends.
When I am incarcerated in this prison's
Anda cell,
I have gained many more friends
across the globe.

Mother, despair not for my failing health.

When you couldn't afford a glass of milk
in my childhood,
you fed me with your words
of strength and courage.
At this time of pain and suffering,
I am still strong with what you
had fed me.

Mother, lose not your hope.

I realised that jail is not death,
it is my rebirth,
and I will soon return home

to your lap that nurtured me
with hope and courage.

Mother, fear not for my freedom.

Tell the world,
my freedom lost
is freedom gained for the multitudes
as everyone who comes to stand with me
takes the cause of the wretched of the earth
wherein lies my freedom.

* Mother, I hope someone translates this letter in Telugu for you. Mother, pardon me for writing this in a foreign tongue that you don't understand. What can I do? I am not allowed to write in the sweet language you taught me in my infancy in your lap.—Your child, with love. (After mother came to see me at the mulakat at the prison window on 14th November 2017.)

14 November 2017

(Written to his mother)

I Refuse to Die

When I refused to die
My chains were loosened.

I came out
into the vast meadows
smiling at the leaves of grass.

My smile caused intolerance in them;
I was shackled again.

When I defied death again,
tired of my life,
my captors released me.

I walked out
into the lush green valleys
under the rising sun
smiling at the tossing blades of grass.

Infuriated by my undying smile,
they captured me again.

I still stubbornly refuse to die.
The sad thing is that
they don't know how to kill me,

because I love so much
the sounds of growing grass.

26 October 2017

(Written to Vasantha, remembering the October Uprising of 1917.)

The True Prison

It's not the high walls
nor the solitary cell.

It's not the clanks of keys
nor the sounds of surveillance.

It's not the monotonous food
nor the cruel hours of lock-up.

It's not the pain and suffering in isolation
nor the fear of death.

Neither the emptiness of days
nor the blankness of nights.

My friend, it's the lies that spread
on the high tables of justice.

It's not the canards thrown at me
by the enemy of the people,
nor the intrigues of criminal jurisprudence,
nor the demagoguery
of the political establishment.

My friend, it's the silence of voices
against injustice done to the vast multitudes.

Some silence is imposed,
rest is self-imposed.

Some censorship is ordered
rest is self-practised.

It's this web that is cast around us.

It's not the fear for the powers-that-be,
but it's the fear in the voices
to give voice to the voiceless.

It's the moral decrepitude.
It's the hubris of a civilisation.
It's the amnesia of our combined
histories in struggles for a free society.

Dear friend, it's it
that turns our world
into a true, dreary prison.

24 October 2017

(Written to VV, after reading news articles on the culture of silence.)

A Clarion Call

Armed with bows and arrows
hundreds of that ancient community
marched on the banks of their river Nag
and blew their clarion call:
'Who dares to burn our philosopher king
on your Dussehra?'

Gleaming under the morning sun
the black diamonds of their muscles
and the spotless white turbans
outshined the saffron-clad city.

They walked on to the heart
of their ancient city
as though reclaiming it
and installed their philosopher king
challenging the immoral deities
that molested their king's sister.

We have come to accept
your call for the war
you choose to begin;

But molestation of our king's sister
and abduction of your god's wife
can no longer be the terms of this war.

We are here to take back our lands
forests, mountains, hills,
rivers, streams, trees,

plants, animals, insects
and our cities you robbed and occupied for aeons.

30 September 2017

(Written to VV, after reading news reports about Mahagongo, a kind of worship of Ravana by Gond Adivasis performed this year after centuries in Nagpur city. The Gonds declared that no one should burn the effigies of their philosopher king, Ravana on Dussehra. As per the legend, Nagpur was the capital city of Nishada (Dalits) and the Adivasi Kingdom in the classical/ mythical period. Ekalavya was given shelter in this city of Nag river when he was witch-hunted by Krishna, Drona and the Pandavas for learning and excelling in archery with his left hand after his right thumb was given to Dronacharya as 'gurudakshina'.)

Gandhi

He had left behind
his round spectacles
and bald head
on our currency notes
like Lord Ram
did with his wooden chappals
on his abdicated throne
to rule his Kingdom
through his weeping brother.

The nation
mints his toothless face
in zillions
with heavy thuds
of the machine's vengeance
for his experiments with truth.

He stands still
at every crossroad
with a cane in hand
guarding our prison-house
of a nation without a blink
in the post-truth era.

15 August 2017

(Written to Chandu)

Penance in Prison

The prison doctor
issued verbal pills
to hegemonize my pain:
'The prison didn't choose you,
you did the prison;
life means suffering any way;
let the pain be.'

Life in prison
is an ointment tube;
the gel exhausts
but the germs of the dermatitis
proliferate.

The prison's gendarme
walks the guard
along the corridors of lashed out
sentences like the elite master
of a smart city walks
his dog in the mornings
on the pavements strewn with shit
preaching:
'Security is next to Godliness.'

Hope and despair
vascillate between
the changes of benches
at the High Tables of Justice.
The prisoner lives

a life of a beetle
performing penance
in supine topsy-turvy position
waving his legs and whiskers
against the dark high ceiling.

17 July 2017

(Written to Manjeera)

This Frightening Dark Night

This frightening dark night
has ravished my heart.

But the forests and hills afar
are bright under a million stars.

My friend,
I still remember
how we have dreamed
to reach them one day.

This night,
the stars are behind the dark clouds.
The raging storm can't be subdued
for the waves rise mountains high.

My heart aches this night,
I have no more tolerance,
for how can we not dream together?

25 June 2017

(Written to Vasantha)

A Solitary Day in My Cell

Again,
today,
the day sat
in front of me
like a desolate,
blighted, mad dog
with stark emptiness
in his eyes.

Where did these friends go,
while the rest of them
are so far away?

You came all the way
but you did not knock at my door
before turning your feet away.

Perhaps, I fell unconscious
or I was in a waking dream.
Maybe, I was listening to your song
in my numb mind.

My life is short,
only a few moments still blink.
I have not much time left
to lose or gain friends.

My solitary cell
counts no time.

The future looks

like faint light
from a dying star
in a distant galaxy.

You came all the way
but didn't knock at my door
before turning your feet away.

5 May 2017

(Written to Anjum)

Ode to a Prison Guard

He smiles,
he laughs
through the bars
to shake me up
from my early morning dreams
with a hug
of a good morning
clanking a huge bunch of keys
into the cage of my life sentence.

A dark blue Nehru topi
on the scalp,
brutal khaki robes
from top to bottom
girded with a snake-like
black belt around the waist,
he stands and sways
in front of my sleepy
half-opened eyes
like a devil
guarding the gates of hell.

He appears like an apparition
from an enemy's army
but with a warm smile
and friendly face,
checking if one were alive or dead
as the day breaks,
counting each live head.

He opens and closes
the locks of the iron gates
a thousand times a day
without expressing pain
or complaint.

He demands no tips
or favours
for his untiring services.
He calls the unattending doctor
repeatedly on his wireless set
patiently
when I am sick and unconscious.

He hides
his own sad stories
lending his patient
and compassionate ear
to the voices of the chained
melancholic souls
never bothering for their
crime or innocence.

He listens,
debates,
and damns
the evil forces in power
with scorn
and a frown on his brow
when the bosses
are away into their offices.

He stomps
on the dark steps
of the devilish state
all night long
with his eagle eyes

of surveillance.

He comes from
the deepest well
of our social misery.
He has no time for his beloved ones
languishing outside the gates.
Imprisoned by his duties
day and night
behind the high four walls
and closed gates,
he spans away
a lifetime in prison
for a pittance.
The cursed souls come and go,
but he is a permanent prisoner,
he has no holidays
or holy days and weekends.

He is a nun,
a nurse,
and a priest,
a pious perseverer
of patience.

A tireless slave
sticking everlastingly
to the bars of my cage,
he is a friend,
a cousin, and a comrade.
He is the guard,
and the guardian
of my life's sentence,
phrases, words and syllables.

1 May 2017

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

The Beast Slithers Violently

The beast slithers gingerly.

You and I are caught unaware
in its web of claws.

Like the Gila monster,
it shakes its humungous body
spewing venom.

It's omnipresent like God
making the world of humans babel.*

Its arms have grown long, ugly
and gigantic over the aeons.

The beast has replaced
God, you and I
helped it come into existence.

The beast slithers violently.
There is nothing left uncovered;
it occupies every inch of human life,
earth, water and the sky,
and every form of life.

We are moved into its underbelly.
We grope breathlessly and helplessly.

The ginormous beast slithers violently.

*The Bible, Genesis 11:1. When God observes the people of Babylon building a city and a tower high enough to reach heaven, He disperses them from Babylon to different parts of the earth, cursing them to speak in different languages or 'babel', so that they can no longer understand each other.

* In lieu of a long letter that I wanted to write.

10 April 2017

(Written to Sanjay Kak)

A Storm Rages

A storm rages
in the layers of my mind.

A devastated island
in my thoughts
massively collapses
in the middle
of the stormy ocean.

An unquiet calm reigns
the graveyard of my incarceration.

The enforced silence
in me cries out madly.

The daily newspapers
carry holes in the place of news.

The diabolic rumours
and hearsay pass for justice.

The prison roses
bleed sad red blood
outside the closed gates
of my solitary cell.

The lynch mobs
roam around with
blood-smeared swords
of hatred
in their deadly uniforms.

The pestilent silence
spreads like a wild plague
around me.

A storm rages
in the layers of my mind.

7 April 2017

(Written to Vijay Kumar)

Images of My Cage

The Mahatma
at the main gates
stuck on the wall
with a cane in hand
cries out in silence:
'Repent the sins of your crime.'

A newly admitted prisoner
shouts fighting his tears back:
'My trial is still pending.'

Bhagat Singh
flattened on the wall
inside the red gate
like leaves and moths
between the pages
of the notebook
in my school days, welcomes:
Inquilab Zindabad.

Six prisoners
with freshly dished out
life sentences
marching for *mulaiza**
greet him with salutes:
Zindabad, Zindabad.

The drying earth
of the early March
prison gardens

mockingly smiles
at the new inmates.

The roses
bloom ebulliently
sucking profusely
from the vessels
of the convicted slave labour.

The gallows
hang everywhere
from the branches
of the outgrown colonial trees.
The dilapidated stumpy walls
make prisons within prisons
in the medieval barracks.

The food eats
the prisoners
in tasty meals.

Silence
rustles
like fallen leaves
tossing on the dusty back
of the deadened leviathan.

After lock-up,
walking up and down
behind the cage's rusty bars
every prisoner
appears to be a wild beast.

A high-ranking gendarme
of the Maximum Security Prison
enters like a nuclear submarine
with a vulture's sharp eyes
while another dashes out

like a nuclear-tipped missile.
Both of them wear
empty hats of prison reforms.

The hard-earned books
in my cell
stare at me.
I am frightened to read them
by opening my eyes.

10 March 2017

(Written to Manjeera)

* The practice of freshly admitted prisoners being checked, identified and interviewed by the prison officers every morning.

My Love, Are You Tired?

My love,
are you tired
and gasping for moments
of consciousness?
Haven't you felt
my breaths of solace
under your drowsy eyelids
drooping with dreams?

Are you caught
in the wilderness
of solitude
as the iron feet of tyranny
have been crushing
the communities of people?

This pain of loneliness
is also part of the struggle
of the multitudes
even as you and I
suffer a long separation
of a thousand miles apart.

Forbearance to withstand
this season of aggressive tyranny
is part of that beautiful struggle.

This is the season of fetters
on love, affection and intimacy of hearts.
Have no doubts, my sweetheart,

this season of hate collapses in no time.
Mere time is no history.
History is what changes the times.

For us, despair has no space,
hope alone creates a new history.
Mistakes or no mistakes
when revilers are thrown about,
hold them in your cupped palms
with grace and dignity.

Sheer injustice it is
to say no errors
should be committed.
It's an excuse
to stop us embarking
on our enduring tasks.
To err is to be human,
the old saying stands.

Fear not to stand in the dock,
if need be.
Never feel small
or allow despondency,
the squeamish helplessness.

Cross the bar,
move on
with the same evergreen smile
on your red wet lips.
What we have dreamt together
must move on.

Tyranny's end isn't far off.
Lives will take wings
of freedom again.
Soon I'll melt like snow
in your warm arms of love.

(Perhaps written in March 2016, weeks before the Supreme Court released the poet on bail. It was a reply to Vasantha's gloomy letter that narrated a web of canards and revilers she faced during that time.)

(Translated from Telugu by Uday Mitra.)

Don't Shut the Windows of Our Dreams

Don't shut the windows of your dreams
I am coming to see you like a whirlwind

The bars can't stop this blossom wind
It passes through touching your forehead
Leaving my presence near and dear to you

The barbed wires can't bruise our world of dreams
A fistful of feelings and memories fill your heart
Leaving my warm breath caressing your eyes

The cages can't stand this blossom wind
It breaks through soothing your memories
Leaving my life of dreams on our future

Don't shut the windows of your dreams
I am coming to see you like a whirlwind

Wish you a new world in the future
A life free of chains of all kind
Wish you an entire world of dreams

Don't shut the windows of your dreams
I am coming to see you like a whirlwind

December 2014

(Written by Vasantha to Saibaba)

BOOK THREE

The Letters of Saibaba



Illustration: Narendran R. Nair

Letter from prison written by Saibaba to Vasantha on her birthday.

25 July 2017

Dear Vasantha,

I hope this letter reaches the day of your birthday. Many happy returns of the day. I know how bad you feel without my presence on this day. The state has determined to separate us. It has even determined to destroy us. In twenty-six years of our married life, we have not looked forward to individual comforts and growth. In thirty-six years of our companionship we have only hoped and worked for the society. In this context, I can only say you should continue to hope and work for the rights of the people in my absence. My imprisonment and my absence should not discourage you. On your birthday today, you take a resolve to face this adversity, this brutality inflicted on us, this violence perpetrated on us.

This case, this judgement and my incarceration in this prison are not a shame for us. These acts of the state are really a shame for democracy. We dreamed of a better society, we hoped for an end to the inequalities, for human rights freedom, civil and democratic rights of the oppressed people, Dalits, Adivasis, women, the disabled, the minorities. We continue to uphold these values and work for the betterment of the marginalised sections of the people to bring real democracy in our society.

They can try and crush our hopes, our dreams, but they can't stop us still dreaming, still nurturing hopes in our hearts. The false case, the fabricated judgement, and the dubious ways to keep me in prison should not discourage you, should not force you to lose hope. For me, your birthday is always important, always brings cheer to me. You should feel happy on this day. We are small people working for small people's rights in small ways. Why does this gigantic state fear our hopes, our love, our dreams? Have we done anything wrong to anyone? Did we harm anyone? Why are our lives

violated? Why are our dreams criminalised? Why are our hopes crushed? Can we live in our own world, in our little dreamy world on our own, dashing against the brutal and inhuman violent attack on our dreams? What gives strength at this hour to you and me?

On the day of this birthday this year, what can I give you? What do I have left with me? The same love. The same love that sprang between us when we met first in our school days. You have given more love than I could ever extend to you in all our lives. I can still give you the same dreams that we shared since the days of our adolescent love.

Don't get disheartened in these dark days. We should not lose our hopes and dreams for the darkness can't permanently overshadow the light. These are not empty words. These are not rhetorical phrases. History has proved several times over that our dreams are not empty ones. Our hopes are not idealistic nonsense. We will win.

On your birthday this year from behind these bars, I re-dedicate myself to your love. I sustain my courage, my hopes, my dreams because of your love. Whatever I did in my life so far I could do it because you stood like a lighthouse showering love all along me.

WISH YOU MANY RETURNS OF THE DAY

Yours,

With lot of love,

Sai

Letter to Anjum, a fictional character in Arundhati Roy's novel, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness. In the novel, Anjum is a Muslim enuch who lives in a graveyard.

31 August 2017

Dear Anjum,

How are you? I hope you are doing well along with the entire Ministry in Jannat Guest House. I hope you still remember me six months after my disappearance from Delhi. I know it is easy to forget people who go to prisons or the otherworldly worlds. Life outside on the earth has to go on.

I have been thinking of writing to you for the last two months. I couldn't really figure out for myself clearly what all I should write to you. But as days and months slip by in my solitary cell, I find that no one is interested any longer in reading my letters and responding to me. I would have written to you as one of my best friends but indications from your latest life show that you are getting busier and busier with your team ever growing. I suddenly felt that you are the only person who would really take my letters seriously and do something concretely for my freedom. When this thought dawned on me, I had no doubt that I should write to you. Hence this letter.

Then another problem rolled out like a boulder in front of my eyes. In what language should I write to you? I know it is ridiculous to write to you in English. But what can I do? I don't know the language you know well. One of the biggest blunders I committed in my life was not to learn Urdu. I tried to learn Urdu when I was in this very anda cell as an under-trial prisoner in two spells in 2014-16. I seriously tried to correct my mistake in life. But I could not really become proficient in the language to write a letter on my own (with bail orders that pushed me out and in again into the cell playing with my life). The prison authorities allow me to write letters either in Hindi or in English. I don't know how to write in Hindi, though I manage to read in the language. I

am not allowed to write in my mother tongue as there is no one in this prison staff to censor my letters in Telugu. Therefore, I am not fortunate enough to write to my love in Telugu. She can appreciate my letters only if I write to her in our mother tongue. She also wants to write letters to me in our language, but again they are not allowed. We use aunty tongue or uncle tongue. Finally, I decided to write to you as well in our great legacy of Colonial Aunty's tongue. I hope Zainab or Tilo the ustaniji or Dr Azad Bharatiya will read this letter for you and interpret it in Urdu without missing a single word of mine.

I sincerely feel awkward to write to you about my deteriorating health condition. You must have already come to know about my failing health and serious ailments totalling twenty now. Earlier the High Court of Mumbai counted them as nineteen when I was granted bail on medical grounds. The count was accurate at that time. But in the last two years I acquired one more ailment called sleep apnea. The doctors in Hyderabad who discovered this new ailment in my body advised me to insert my nose into a machine that pumps air into my throat, opening it all the time. I tried that in a Hyderabad hospital, but totally failed to sleep throughout the night. I won't go into all the earlier nineteen ailments here, because Vasantha must have sent a WhatsApp message and FB post to Saddam Hussain. Vasantha and Muralidharan had already submitted a detailed report on my health condition to the NHRC* and it was later circulated. I know you don't like to use WhatsApp or FB but I am sure Saddam must have shown you these details on his Smartphone. Zainab must have translated every detail in Urdu for you. These days I am so conscious of my severe ailments that I tend to write about them elaborately to anyone whom I choose to write letters. I sound to myself these days very much like my maternal grandmother's younger sister. She used to talk about her health issues for five to six hours to any visitor in our childhood. We used to run away from her. But she survived well into her nineties though she started complaining about certainly more than nineteen or twenty ailments for over five decades. I hope I inherit her qualities and ultimately acquire the legacy. Though my ailments of very severe nature sound ridiculous when I go complaining about them, but they are real. Believe me.

Now you have been living in a graveyard, I am in a cell called anda cell in a prison far away from the 'dignified' society (the Duniya). Both of us are banished from the larger society. Ironically both of us love the larger society.

However, there is this main difference in our conditions. You are absolutely free. But we are told all fundamental freedoms including the newborn right to privacy have reasonable restrictions legally ordained on them. However, you seem to enjoy unlimited freedoms without these restrictions. I am absolutely un-free, totally living in a prison within a prison. There are no reasonably delimited freedoms ordained by law for me. I am treated as a convicted terrorist under five sections of the famous UAPA**. No. No. I forgot. I am not treated as one. I am really convicted as one.

You enjoy absolute freedoms and happiness that the rest of humanity lost centuries ago. You are a unique human being in the history of human society. That is the reason why I ask you to work for my freedom. Who else can be the befitting person to campaign for my release? I am also sure that you will definitely take up my cause. Before I end this letter here I have a special request to you. If you happen to meet our common friend Ms A. Roy, please do convey to her, my greetings. My friends in Hyderabad have been looking for her to launch a book I translated personally two years ago. Please inform her that she should find time to go there and release the book. I hope you will also go for the release of the book, for the release of Dr G.N. Saibaba. Before I forget, my love to Miss Udaya Jebeen.

With lots of love
G.N. Saibaba
(Dr. G.N. SAIBABA)
C 9556, Anda cell,
Central Prison
Nagpur—440020

P.S. Convey my greetings to Tilo, Zainab, Saddam, Saeeda, Nimmo, Dr Azad Bhartiya and all others at Jannat Guest House.

P.P.S. Convey my greetings to Musa, if he is still alive.

P.P.P.S. I hope to look for your early reply. You understand well how the people in prisons wait for letters. Even if you don't reply, I will still write to you, please mind it.

*NHRS: National Human Rights Commission

**UAPA: Unlawful Activities Prevention Act

Letter to N. Venugopal, a friend of G.N. Saibaba.

Date: 23 March 2017

Sr. No. 1

Dear Versus Hyd 'I2' - Bhagat Singh's

I never suspected that I would return to the anda cell of Nagpur prison for a third sojourn. This time, I entered the cell in a convict's attire. These robes don't go very well on my crippled body. There is no air flow in the anda cell, therefore, I am free from air pollution. The only big news that I ^{can} convey you from my cell is that I haven't yet fallen unconscious, though virtually days are passing without being able to consume almost any food. No, don't misunderstand me. I am not on hunger strike! As I landed up in the anda cell even before I could recover from my attack on pancreas, I am not able to digest any food.

Night or day, I have the privilege of dead silence in the closed structure of my home. Now it's 10 in the night. At regular intervals of 30 minutes, I hear the sounds of the boots of the centry guards ^{on duty}. Some times I can smell the faint song of a bird, perhaps flying over ~~the~~ ^{my} cell. In the mid night I can touch the long horns of a train moving at a far away distance in the city.

The iron rods of my cell pierce my eyes blind. The morning newspapers bring flying colours of saffron. At 6 in the morning a guard ^{up} awakes every prisoner to check if one is dead or alive. That is his duty.

Enclosed

Signature _____

As I wake up I still want to dream of another world. But then, the guard returns with a key and kindly opens the lock of my cell for morning ablutions. The watchman comes behind my beloved guard with dark tea. I get attempted to hold out my plastic glass before him. Suddenly I remember my doctor's warning. I hold back my tumbler.

Hours, minutes and seconds tread breathing heavily. The only news that ^{invokes} interests ⁱⁿ the prisoners is the news of different courts passing orders on bails, imprisonments, acquittals or Supreme Court proceedings, say, like the one on out of court settlement for temple-masjid issue. A jail bird wishes that the apex court should also pass orders for out of court settlement on bail matters as well.

My dream shatters, even as I try to go back to my sleepy world. The flying colours of Saffron Strands my vision. The dream dissipates. I move to the 19th century. Ghilil walks through the narrow lanes of Jama Masjid reciting verses indifferently:

My despair does not know
The turnings of the wheel of Time
The day turned disastrous
Knows neither dusk nor dawn.

The only place in Delhi I like most is the lanes and

by-lanes of Jama Masjid and Chandi Chouk. Vasantha and Manjeera also love the place. Life there brims with activity. A tough place to navigate my wheelchair. But Manjeera is an expert. She can move the chair between the cycle-rikshaws. No harm is done at any time. We reach Galib's house in Ballimaran. We ruminate the 19th century. It's a defining century for us. Good or bad -- everything took shape for the 20th and 21st centuries for us. Vasantha misses her way, not able to catch up with us. Manjeera leaves me in Galib's poetry ^{house} and goes in search of her mother.

I have to anyway get up now. The day of the 'round' you should get ready, take bath, arrange your cell neatly. The two adivasi boys clean the cell. They give ^{me} a bath. I put back my unfit jail robes on my abled body. We wait for the officers to come on the 'round'. I quickly take out my request application. The 'round' leaves as the heavy sounds of the boots fade away slowly.

I see the flying colours of saffron again. But I love the fields of saffron in Kashmir. I still remember the saffron field of Bonamulla when I visited Kashmir in 2000.

I blind my eyes with the heavy images of my cell's iron rods. The flying colours of saffron in the morning newspapers blur my vision. Bahadur

P.S: Please send the books through Speedpost to my lawyer's address at Nagpur. Swarnendra Gadgil will give me the books at midnight. — Swarnendra

Date: _____

S. No. 4

Shah Zafar of the long 19th Century comes to my vision sitting across the table of Ghalib. I try to take upma. I fail. The adivasi boy removes the plastic plate. I slip back into my sleepy world. Bahadur Shah sings sorrowfully to Ghalib from his Rangoon Prison:

Ravished were the people of Hind,
So unenviable their fate
Whoever the ruler of the day saw fair
And free was put to sword.

In my shattering dream I see again and again the flying columns of saffron. A dream of another world dissolves into a nightmare of saffron as I ~~wake~~ wake into my ^{calls} world.

Note: Can you make a copy of Niyogi's three volumes of autobiography and send by courier to my ^{lawyer} ~~me~~ The first two are with Vasant in Delhi. I think you have all the three. Please send all the three in one set - photocopy.

I also want three volumes, Capital published by Penguin. If you can buy this for me and parcel it along with Niyogi I feel happy to read them. Any other books as well? I

wait eagerly for these books and a message from you and other friends. I would like to request you to go through the translation of Niyogi's autobiography part 1. The language flow and comparison with the original is required. I hope you get time to quickly go through it before sending it for printing.

I feel more satisfied if you could do this task rather than giving it to anyone else

with love,
Swarnendra

Signature _____

Letter from G.N. Saibaba to Justice Markandey Katju, former Supreme Court judge who served as Chairman of the Press Council of India

Dear Shri Justice Katjuji,

Today I received a copy of your open letter to the President of India from my wife through the post. I am thankful to you for your concern and seeking justice on my behalf. You had also intervened earlier before my conviction in the case and gave moral support to my family. I have no words to express my gratitude. Our judicial system still has retained credibility in the eyes of the people of our country because Justices like you have served the institution instilling hope for the people.

In your public letter to the President of India you have stated that you have not read the evidence on record in my case. It is unfortunate that no one gave you a copy of [this]. Kindly have a look into the evidence on record and the arguments placed by my trial lawyer before the Gadchiroli District court in writing after the oral arguments were presented. *Indra Das vs State of Assam* was also cited and argued for its relevance in my case. The district judge rejected all the Supreme Court judgements cited by my trial lawyer arbitrarily and passed life sentence three times in three sections under UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act).

There is not an iota of evidence against me or others that could stand for judicial scrutiny in the false case, and the fabricated allegations and charges totally collapsed without any support of evidence. Yet, the judge cooked up arguments and went far ahead of what the prosecution alleged openly flaunting all principles of criminal jurisprudence. The judgement is a shame for our judicial system. It's clearly an 'embedded' one. Here I would like to present a few aspects of the evidence on record and I hope you will kindly go through the records:

1. The entire judgement is based on electronic documents supposedly recovered from my house on 12th September 2013. The single panch witness accepted in the cross-examination that he was not present when the supposed seizure of the electronic devices was done. He further clarified that none of the seals, covers and packages of the so-called seized items had his signatures. He also accepted that he was called by the police days before he was asked by the court to come and give witness evidence and was kept for seventeen days in the police guest house. He also revealed several other things before the court that made the prosecution's case totally collapse.

There is no other witness in the case as far as my role is concerned or the electronic devices are concerned at the time of their seizure. The investigating officer in his evidence claimed that he sealed the devices in front of the panch witness and me at my home but later on he lost the seals, covers and a plastic box in which the devices were sealed and hence he could not produce them before the court. He also made his statement on oath that the video [camera] recorded the entire seizure process and sealing process, but he lost the video tape for technical reasons and hence he could not bring it on record before the court.

2. The IO claimed that the seals of the seized devices were opened before another panch witness in Aheri Police Station and resealed by categorising the devices. This panch witness could not even distinguish a CD from a DVD in the court. The IO could not give any reason for already categorised devices to be categorised again. When the devices were sent to the forensic lab in Mumbai, they were not accepted immediately. They wanted all devices in one sealed packet. The constable who carried them to the forensic lab said in his statement that he reopened all the seals and put them in another plastic box and sealed them again with Aheri Police Station wax seal outside the forensic lab's office in Mumbai. He could not answer how he conjured up Aheri Police Station seal in Mumbai. There is so much to the story of these so-called seized devices. At every stage of handling of these so-called seizures, there is good and sufficient evidence on record of how they manipulated and fabricated electronic documents, which were the only basis for conviction.

3. The forensic lab's complicity is even more glaring. The printouts of 262 pages selected as incriminating material as evidence was provided by the IO to the forensic expert, not the forensic expert providing them to the IO.

The expert said in his statement that he put his signature and office stamp on all 262 pages provided by the IO, though there was no way he could check if those sheets were present in the electronic device before the forensic report was done. The expert who did the forensic test is not even qualified. He was only a contract/temporary employee of the lab under the home ministry of the Maharashtra government now and then. He was called three times to the court to provide his appointment order to prove that he was serving as a temporary employee during the period the devices were tested. He failed to provide the document. He failed to show on which version of the software he conducted the test. He could not explain or give reasons why he submitted a manual report instead of the original report generated by the software. He was called by the defense lawyer again to produce the original report generated by the software he claimed to have used, but he again failed to submit it. (Appeal pages 206-215, 216-230.)

The mandatory 65B certificate was submitted more than two years later from the date of submission of the forensic analysis and report. According to the three-judge bench in the SC (Supreme Court) in Anvar P.V. vs P.K. Basheer judgment, 65B certificate should be submitted along with the report. Even this certificate submitted two years later does not fulfill any of the six conditions mandated by 65B section of the Evidence Act as modified in 2000. The Anvar judgment clearly mandates that 65B certificate be drawn with the six conditions under the section mentioned under it. It does not follow the Act.

The fabricated electronic documents have clearly lost their legal validity at the level of the panch witness, opening and reopening of them before submitting them to the forensic lab and also at the level of false forensic analysis and the mandatory level of the law of the electronic evidence.

In addition, the documents are available in the public domain on several websites. The IO (PW-II) accepted this fact in his cross-examination. All of the above points clearly came on record in the evidence.

4. The sanction under UAPA was faulty, without application of mind and falsehood stated under oath by the sanctioning officers as recorded in the evidence.

(i) On oath, PW-19, Dr Amitabh Ranjan said that he gave sanction based on the CFSL report, 267 pages, CDR and SDR call recordings of the

accused. Facts that came on record show that these documents were not available at the time he granted sanction. (Appeal pages 187-193.) These documents were generated and came to the IO much later. They were not even in existence when the sanction was granted supposedly based on them.

(ii) Sanction was not granted in my case at this stage though my name was in the list of the accused of the sanction order. The prosecution assumed that the sanction was granted against me. But later they realised that sanction was to be obtained, a second order was passed, more than a year later after the charges were framed and the trial started under UAPA. This was to be seen as illegal by the trial court. But it didn't. The sanction passed the second time was also without the above documents as provided by the defense by calling all the files from the home ministry of Maharashtra State. Here I add a separate note to detail this further.

The judge argues that there was no intention of the government/sanctioning authority to reject sanction but because of their misunderstanding on technical grounds they failed to accord sanction in the first instance in my case.

Unfair Trial

a) PW-I was disguised as an independent witness, as an agricultural labourer, though he is a home guard under the same police station. He impersonated under oath. The court did not agree to reject him as an independent witness though the defense proved his identity and his impersonation in several other cases as a habitual and stock witness.

b) None of the electronic documents supposedly seized from G.N. Saibaba's house were displayed in the court or tested through any witness or made part of the course of evidence. All these electronic documents were directly brought only as part of 313 statement. The judge rejected all SC judgments regarding bringing these documents which were not part of the course of evidence as part of 313. These documents used were not a part of the trial.

c) Without sanction being granted under UAPA, charges were framed under its sections 13, 18, 10, 38 and 39. Section 120B of IPC was invoked, withdrawn and reinvoked. Trial started without sanction and restarted after bringing one sanction order even after objections were raised by the defense.

d) 65B certificate under the Evidence Act was not produced for the call records of my phone number.

e) None of the procedures were followed in house search, seizures, arrests, handling of devices or keeping them in appropriate custody, et cetera.

Not a single allegation made by the prosecution could be proved even remotely, forget 'beyond reasonable doubt'. The prosecution's story completely collapsed without an iota of evidence. There are many more points to state here, but for the sake of keeping it brief, I will not go into the details. Kindly look at the documents.

1. Evidence recorded in the trial court along with the appeal filed in the High Court.

2. Written arguments submitted to the trial court by the defense.

3. My 313 statement, any other document required to be examined.

The trial court ignored most of the arguments placed by my defense lawyers and also ignored all the SC judgments cited including Indra Das.

As a 90 per cent disabled person with multiple ailments of severe nature I have been reduced to a sub-human level in the conditions of my incarceration. You may know that I can't stand or walk and I am totally bound to a wheelchair. During the time of my arrest, the police dragged me by my left hand. Due to this, my left hand nerve system was broken (left plexopathy) and since then I have been living with only one functional hand.

I have been degraded by the circumstances of the 19th century prison environment to the level of an animal. I have lost my bodily integrity and human dignity. I have been also suffering from sixteen serious ailments including that of a life-threatening heart condition, acute pancreatitis, Anterior Horn Cell Syndrome, post-polio syndromes, Brachial plexopathy, et cetera.

Kindly study the judgment along with the evidence on record. All the allegations levelled against me are factually false. I have been a defender of human rights in the past thirty years since my college days. I am an independent and autonomous person despite my 90 per cent disability and wheelchair-bound condition. I have been targeted deliberately by the state for my uncompromising work to protect the rights of tribal people and for my consistent work for the rights of Dalits and other marginalized people. All my work in the past thirty years is in the public domain. I need your effective intervention to protect my life.

With kind regards,
G.N. Saibaba
From Anda Cell,
Central Prison, Nagpur.
19.8.2018

Present health condition 27th July 2018

Since 12th July, I have been getting fever again every day. I am vomiting and not able to eat anything including tablets. The prison doctor gave me Pan-D tablets with omperidone, but the vomiting situation has not been controlled. I have been taking paracetamol 650 mg (Dolo) every day but still fever has not gone. By evening, fever is coming back. I am feeling extremely weak. The pain in the left side of the stomach has increased. The pain in my damaged left hand has also increased extremely. As a result I am not able to sleep. For the last twenty days I have been taking sleeping pills—Restyl—without which I am not able to sleep at all due to the severe pain. Since 12th July, I have fallen unconscious three times. Before that, total eight times in one year till June. I have lost appetite. Not feeling [the desire] to eat anything because vomiting sensation keeps coming back. I informed advocate Mr Barun Kumar to tell you all this on 17th July.

It is important to show how the case was false and the judgement is completely against law and against the Constitution and against the Supreme Court judgements. No one in the government also knows these facts. They only follow the police reports and what their officers tell them. There may be some sincere officers, when they come to see the case documents, they understand how the judgement is wrong and against the law. They clearly establish that there is no case against me. There is no evidence on record against me or other co-accused. The judgement is bad in law and totally misleading and against the laws of the land. The government should know the facts of the case and the falsehood of the judgement.

Documents

1. A copy of appeal filed in the High Court along with the documents of evidence on record.

2. Written arguments submitted by my defense lawyer to the trial court at the end of the trial.

3. All arguments recorded by the trial court.

Open letter from Vasantha to the supporters of G.N. Saibaba

Dear friends

Today is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Professor G.N. Saibaba, wheelchair-bound, 90 per cent disabled, is still in the jail since 2014.

After conviction (without evidence and crime) on 7th March 2017, his health deteriorated further in an inhuman and a cell, Central Prison, Nagpur. After fourteen months of prolonged adjournments and arguments, the bail plea on medical grounds was rejected on 25th March 2019 by the Bombay HC at Nagpur bench.

India is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN Resolution 70/175 on Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Nelson Mandela Rules), all of which reaffirm the right of prisoners to a life with dignity. The Nelson Mandela Rules specifically state that the provision of health care of prisoners is a state responsibility, and those prisoners 'should enjoy the same standards of health care that are available in the community' without discrimination. It also provides that prisoners who require specialist treatment must be transferred to specialised institutions or outside hospitals when such treatment is not available in prison.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, specifically guarantees that the appropriate government shall ensure that the persons with disabilities enjoy the right to equality, life with dignity and respect for his or her integrity equally with others. Further, Section 7(1) empowers the authorities to 'take cognizance of incidents' and further facilitates the authorities to 'take steps for avoiding such incidents' and to 'take steps to rescue, protect and rehabilitate victims of such incidents'.

Further, UN experts had urged to release Dr Saibaba on health grounds and had stated that ‘any denial of reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities in detention is not only discriminatory but may well amount to ill-treatment or even torture. In particular, solitary confinement should be prohibited when the conditions of prisoners with disabilities would be made worse by this measure.’

The honourable Supreme Court of India, in many cases held the ‘right to health care’ as an essential ingredient under Article 21 of the Constitution. In *Pt. Parmanand Katara vs. Union of India & Ors.* (1989) 4 SCC 286, the Supreme Court had held that Article 21 of the Constitution casts the obligation on the State to preserve life.

Whether an undertrial or a convicted, one is entitled to his right to life, as guaranteed in the Constitution of India. Denial of these rights is tantamount to gross violation of human rights and prisoners’ rights, as is being faced by Dr Saibaba.

Despite all of these laws and provisions, Sai did not get bail. Now he is in a position where he cannot move without the help of two persons and suffers from frequent blackouts. All the ailments/diseases have aggravated and intensified due to a lack of any treatment. His spine and left-hand muscles have degenerated further according to the medical tests conducted in the Government Hospital in Nagpur. He lives in extreme pain and mental stress, where his remaining limbs are losing functionality. There is an alarming bulging in his abdomen with frequent bursts of severe pain, which has not been investigated. The Jail authorities cannot provide him with the regular physiotherapy he requires. His wheelchair has been damaged in the harsh environment there. Despite all of these ailments, Saibaba has failed to qualify for an emergency medical bail.

Recently I received a letter from Sai in October 2019. I had lost hope in the wake of the latest developments in the Indian judiciary. This letter Sai wrote inspired me a lot. I feel the message the letter contains is not only for me but for everyone. I wanted to share it with all of you.

‘Dear Vasantha,

I am not in a position to write and read because of my ill health. All the ailments/diseases have aggravated and intensified due to lack of any treatment. Don’t lose hope. You must be more active. Do not limit yourself to the house. You should meet people widely. Be very creative and energetic.

You do all that you can do for my release. You see me, how I am still alive and surviving with so many diseases and so much pain in a closed Draconian prison. I have been trying my best to be active within the confines of my highly restrictive prison space. What little exercises I can do, I am doing every day in the morning. According to a schedule of my own, I am reading and writing every day. Thinking positively and living with the hope that I can get my freedom on the next day. After all, I have never committed a crime. I have contributed to my society and my country even though I am a 90 per cent disabled person. I did not live for my own sake. I lived for the people. The case in which I am falsely implicated is a political case. It has no criminal content in it; though they tried to impose one on me.

You think: Why should we suffer? If you are mentally tired and feel dejected we both get defeated. We should not be defeated. You should be active. You should always smile like you have been all your life smiling before my arrest and this tyranny pounced upon us. You should be brave. You must think positively. You have been very creative all your life. We may die as long as we are alive. This is the meaning of human life. We are creative because we live for the people, not just for ourselves.

Yours
with love
Sai
18.10.2019'



THIS CHAMAR
DIDN'T DO
ANYTHING
BUT A CRIME
AGAINST THE
STATE INVITING
DISAFFECTION
BY REFUSING TO
CLEAR A DEAD
COW FROM THE
FUTURE SMART-
CITY UNDER THE
INTOXICATION OF
SELF-ASSERTION.
HE WAS DETAINED
UNDER SEDITION.
-GN SAIBABA

Illustration: Jit Natta

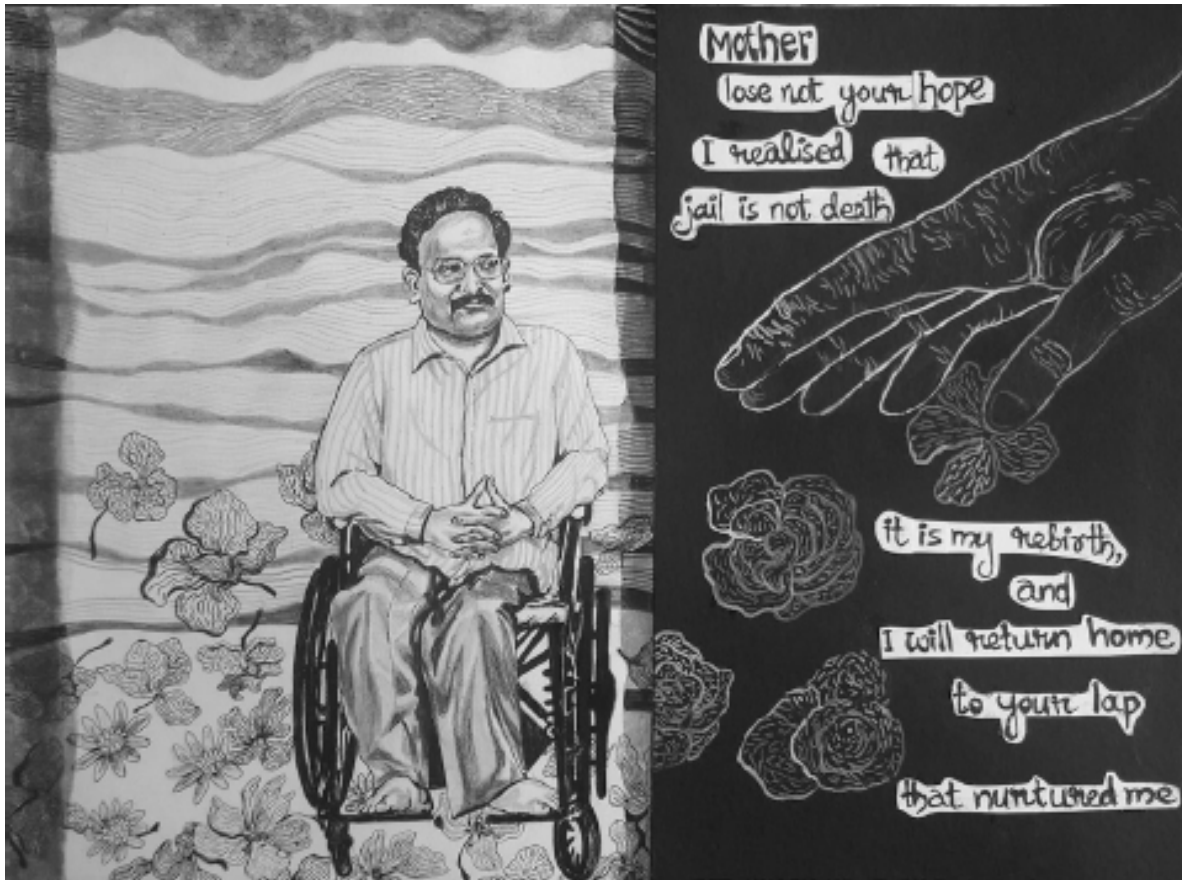


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Dr G.N. Saibaba was born into a peasant family in Amalapuram, Andhra Pradesh. He was struck by polio in early childhood which left him paralysed in his lower limbs. Despite his disability, he obtained his M.A. in English from Hyderabad University and his PhD from Delhi University and became a professor of English at Ram Lal Anand College. A human rights activist since his student days, he was arrested in May 2014 for alleged Maoist links and lodged in Nagpur Jail, before being sentenced to life imprisonment in March 2017. Ram Lal Anand college terminated his services in April 2021.

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Back cover illustration courtesy Blaise Joseph



'I keep your unwritten letters
that escape censorship
under my pillowless head.
I read them spreading them
on the table
of my soul in front of my
closed eyes.'

—G.N. Saibaba, 'Your Letters
Defeat My Solitary Cell'

'Once you wrote to me that you
were not sure how long you could
survive in these conditions...
You said that we might hear the
news of another Stan Swamy if
no treatment is provided to you.
Whenever I think of these words,
my mind goes to a dark place and
a heaviness that does not leave
fills my heart.'

—Letter from his wife Vasantha
to G.N. Saibaba



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