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BHARADWAJ, SUDHA. *FROM PHANSI YARD: MY YEAR WITH THE WOMEN OF YERAWADA*. JUGGERNAUT PUBLICATION. 2023

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In Indian society, prisons are taboo. They are spaces that evoke curiosity, disgust and fear. Whoever enters a prison, whether convicted or not, carries the social stain of incarceration for life. Society perceives it as a place that needs to be kept segregated, people who need to be punished and locked up. Hence, what goes inside those walls is unknown to most, or to put it differently, ignored by most. Prisoners' rights, or prisons themselves, are absent from election manifestos or legislative actions. Rarely is any active attempt made to rehabilitate, and most changes come by way of public action litigation. But what really goes on inside those walls? Are the people there really so dangerous to be locked away from the rest of society? What makes a person a prisoner? These are the questions that Sudha Bharadwaj's book, '*From Phansi Yard: My Year with the Women of Yerawada'* answers, offering a rare, empathetic window into the everyday realities of incarceration.

Bharadwaj, a trade unionist, human rights lawyer, and one of the accused in the *Bhima Koregaon case*, spent over a year in Pune's Yerawada Jail between 2018 and 2020 under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. However, this is not a book about her own case; instead, it is the lived realities of seventy-six women inmates she met, observed, and came to understand through the bars of *Phansi Yard*, a high-security wing typically meant for death row convicts.

The book is divided into six parts, structured around the passing of seasons, reflecting the repetitive, cyclical nature of prison life. This structure depicts the slow and dull

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movement of time in jail. How the changes are only felt in terms of weather and not in days or hours because of the monotony of prison life where the prisoners are often forgotten and ignored by the world outside. Bharadwaj jots the lived experiences of these incarcerated women with great attention and care, showing how their experiences are a reflection of the larger society than just individual incidents. It lays bare the deeply rooted caste inequalities, structural oppression, and religious tensions that exist, of which prisons are only a small reflection. It shows how despite all these differences, prisons become a site of resilience, solidarity and the human will to find happiness even in the toughest moments. Each anecdote carries profound grief and raises questions about the criminal justice system's efficiency and utility.

The opening section, titled "*Introduction*," begins with the author's own journey from giving up her American citizenship to her days in *Phansi Yard* and after. Her account of working with the labour rights movement and her experiences with the *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* show her genuine commitment to grassroot change. She describes growing up with a Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) professor mother, on the JNU campus, among Marxist study groups and heated discussions over political topics during JNU elections. The chapters following the introduction talk about various aspects of prison life, from food to religion, fights, friendship, tolerance, legal aid, health, education, festivals, children, overcrowding, isolation, menstruation and many more.

The book goes beyond stating the structural limitations of jails; more importantly, it highlights the institutional and systematic failure which criminalises women already failed by social systems. Sudha Bharadwaj portrays these women to make them more than just inmates, but a *'victim'* of a larger systemic failure. It nudges the reader to look beyond their *"offences"* and empathise with their struggles. It lays bare the patriarchal lens of the judicial system and the gendered indifference.

It also brings forth the enormity of caste and class hierarchies in such spaces. Caste doesn't dissolve inside prison walls, but rather becomes an important determinant of

everything from daily life to dignity. It decides what a person eats, wears, what work they have to do, and even how their children are treated. The book makes one realise that prisons are brutal, but it intensifies for those coming from backward and marginalised backgrounds. The author describes how old traditions like *'Kundawalis'*[1] still continue in slightly modified forms. How, even in modern prisons, tasks like cleaning toilets, swabbing the corridors, bathing the disabled prisoners, washing the mats and bedding, carrying out minor repairs, disposing of dead rats or cats, and other odd jobs are always carried out by women from backward and marginalised backgrounds. Anecdotes in the book highlight the strong prevalence of caste prestige in prisons. *Ravikant Kisna* and *Durga Hole* also describe the criminal justice system as a site where caste oppression is most prominent.[2] They point out the *"over-representation"* of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) among the under trails.[3] They bring an additional dimension to this by showing how prison research conducted by *'dwij-savarna researchers'* is distorted, often mitigating the centrality of caste.[4]

Many instances from the book highlight the poor state of legal services in Indian prisons. People from higher classes get access to better lawyers, hence, better justice. However, those who cannot pay suffer. The book shares instances where some women are forced to remain in jail for years, even lifetimes, because they cannot afford bail securities. Those who do not have the money pay with their labour. They have to take up menial jobs, doing someone else's work for basic canteen supplies. Even after the introduction of legal aid reforms and various judicial actions, the condition of legal aid in prisons remains questionable, with significant inefficiencies in implementation.

[1] Dalit women who cleaned and disposed of human excreta.
[2] Ravikant Kisana & Durga Hole (2023). *Yes caste is important, (but)': examining the knowledge-production assemblage of Dwij-Savarna scholarship as it invisibilises caste in the context of women's prisons in India*. Gender & Development, *31*(2–3), 323–337.
[3] Kisana & Hole. (2023) pg. 323–337.
[4] Kisana, R., & Hole, D. (2023), pg. 323–337.

There is only 1 lawyer for 161 inmates on average, with the number going as high as 1 over 500 in states like Kerala and Bihar.[5]

Bharadwaj's account of how femininity is strictly imposed on women inmates to prevent any "*lesbian*" incidents reveals the deep roots of heteronormativity in the criminal justice system. Clothing, bodily expression, and intimacy inside prison become sites of control and oppression. As *Arvind Narrain* argues in *"The Articulation of Queer Rights: The Emerging Right to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity,"* Indian law has historically functioned as a tool of moral regulation, policing bodies that deviate from heteronormative expectations. The prison becomes an extension of this moral control, where strict monitoring is done in the name of "*discipline*," but in fact enforces conformity to a strict gender binary. The fact that men are not allowed to keep children with them in male prisons, even if it's a male child, shows the deep-rooted heteronormativity embedded in the justice system. One doesn't have to scratch below the surface to see how patriarchal the justice system is. A report by the International Commission of Jurists in 2017 shows the role of police in harassing queer individuals in society and prisons.[6] It states that the police is one of the biggest barriers for queer individuals to access justice.

The strict gendered norms of punishment extend to how women are treated on release. She notes, "*If you are a woman prisoner without a respectable family receiving you on your release, you may not be released at all but sent to a sanstha*." In some cases, women are incarcerated not for their own crimes, but because of their relationships with

[5] Dhananjay Mahapatra. (2020). *Legal aid little help as 1 lawyer for 161 inmates*. The Times of India. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/legal-aid-little-help-as-1-lawyer-for-161-inmates/articleshow/73749128.cms

[6] International Commission of Jurists. (2017). *Unnatural Offences: obstacles to justice in India based on sexual orientation and gender identity*. https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/India-SOGI-report-Publications-Reports-Thematic-report-2017-ENG.pdf

men, as the author points out, "*many women are held here almost as judicial hostages for their criminal husbands, fathers and boyfriends*."

Parts of the book at times feel as though Bharadwaj is observing these incarcerated women as case studies rather than as humans with complex, real emotions and non-linear challenges. She tends to oversimplify the problems they face, problems that may not be visible by distant observation alone. Her limited interaction with some of the inmates she writes about gives an incomplete picture of the other side, *their* side. At times, it takes the *"I"* out from the person and otherizes them. *Mahmood Farooqui*, who writes on Indian prisons, critiques Bharadwaj's depiction of *"criminals"* or people convicted of crimes as being somehow different from *"normal"* people.[7] *Farooqui* mentions that greed, lust, anger, or envy are not emotions exclusive to *"criminals"* but are just as present in anyone else. They point out that these criminalised behaviours are prone to change with time as the understanding of *"crime"* changes, and some are punished for it while some escape the garb of the law.[8]

Why is this important for people interested in law and policy? The book is an essential read for those working in law and policy. The struggles these women face, and the system that repeatedly fails them, are shaped, and often worsened, by the actions of lawyers, judges, and the law itself. Sudha Bharadwaj draws attention to the impact of poor and negligent legal aid on human lives. Too often, lawyers and law students forget to assess the human consequences of their work. This book offers a hard reality check. It shows that legal arguments are not just about theory or precedent; they have direct consequences for freedom, dignity, and survival. It is not only important for people in law and policy, but for society at large, to recognise that prisons are not what Bollywood or popular imagination makes them out to be. The real prison is shaped by class, caste,

[7] Mahmood Farooqui (2024). *Review: From Phansi Yard by Sudha Bharadwaj*, Hindustan Times. https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/review-from-phansi-yard-by-sudha-bharadwaj-101712943766530.html.
[8] Farooqui (2024).

gender, bureaucracy, and everyday cruelty, and unless we look closely, we remain complicit in its silence.

To conclude, *From Phansi Yard* is an essential reading. It reveals the *'secret'* world of prisons, the lives of women who live there, the lost childhoods of their children, and the systemic oppression they face, both within prison walls and outside them. It is, at once, a joyful account of resilience and strength, and also a cry of helplessness and frustration. Bharadwaj does not sensationalise; she listens. Through her words, we are asked to see prisoners not as numbers or offenders, but as people failed by institutions that were meant to protect them. The book reminds us that legal work is never neutral, it has consequences, and that prisons are not simply sites of punishment, but mirrors of the society outside. It lays bare the truth about caste, class, money, power, and gendered bias. As Bharadwaj reflects from her own experience: "*It is not as if I was unaware of the injustices prisoners were subjected to, and their suffering... I knew many laws were unreasonable, even draconian... But being imprisoned made one understand the enormity of it all, the serious implications of these things on real human lives. And above all, the urgency for reform*." Empathy is essential to justice, and that is what makes this book so important.

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