Of Captivity and Resistance

*Of Captivity and Resistance* offers a historical and political study of women’s experiences of dissent and detention in postcolonial India. Primarily focusing on the Naxalite movement (1967–75) and on the pan-Indian period of Emergency (1975–77), the study traces women’s political participation in revolutionary movements and in dissident politics, and attends to their experiences of torture and incarceration. Simultaneously, by drawing on the varied histories of women’s incarceration before and after the ‘long seventies’, the book provides an expanded terrain for evaluating the gendered dimensions of radical politics and of testimonial literature on carcerality, state violence and impunity. The analysis focuses on women’s transformation from marginal political participants to resistant detainees. By studying the linkages between radical politics, captivity and resistance, the book offers a widened account of women’s political participation, contributes to contemporary debates on political incarceration and strengthens the resistant history of rights and of dissenting literature in India and in the Global South.

*Sharmila Purkayastha* has taught at the Department of English, Miranda House, Delhi University for over 30 years. Besides prison studies, her research interests lie in examining the relations between literature and social movements.
Of Captivity and Resistance
Women Political Prisoners in Postcolonial India

Sharmila Purkayastha
For all those who have struggled behind bars
## Contents

*Acknowledgements* ix

1. Introduction: The Captive–Political Dialectic 1
2. Before the Seventies: From Colonial to Postcolonial Times 37
3. The Turning Point: Testimonies of Mobilization from Srikakulam and Naxalbari 73
4. In Custody: Repression and Torture 110
5. Behind High Walls: Naxalite Narratives 147
6. Emergency Times: Mass Politics and Detentions 185
7. After the Seventies: Political Imprisonment in India Today 224
8. Conclusion: Solidarity Politics and Poetics 255

*Bibliography* 281

*Index* 315
Acknowledgements

The idea of this book germinated in a thesis chapter and the initial groundwork was done during my doctoral dissertation. A Fulbright postdoctoral fellowship in 2016–17 facilitated further inquiries and research possibilities. Finally, discussions with colleagues, friends and comrades sharpened my arguments and enabled the creation of the book.

Over the years, many people helped me in realizing this project. I am grateful to Sujato Bhadra and Uma Chakravarti for their personal interest in the project and for being my living archives. As civil rights activists and historians par excellence, Sujato and Uma have enlarged my political vision and guided my questions. Subhendu Dasgupta, an inspirational archivist of the seventies, shared with me various resources including his priceless collection of prison accounts, his anecdotes and his memories. Sumanta Banerjee, one of the foremost political commentators of our times, encouraged me and clarified many of my doubts. Vivek Chibber, incredible teacher, mentor and friend, activated new passions through his fabulous lectures and discussions on capitalism, class struggle and social movements. Saswati Sengupta’s passionate interest in discovering the unsung stories in history sharpened my searches and ideas. My thesis supervisor Shirshendu Chakrabarti’s commitment towards political and creative literature also enabled many of my initial queries. Finally, this book could not have been completed without the institutional support that I received from Miranda House, and from my friends and colleagues, especially Shampa Roy.

This project has constantly aroused passions and heated debates and I owe much of my interest in the subject to my friends and comrades in People’s Union for Democratic Right, to their collective efforts at raising awareness about political
prisoners and about prisoner rights. Several friends and family members have patiently attended to my harried requests for books and journals, and I am forever thankful to them. I wish to thank my immediate family members for believing in this project and for waiting for me, as always. Within my large community of friends and family, I wish to thank Archana Aggarwal, Ashok Prasad, Asish Gupta, Bandana Purkayastha, Deepika Tandon, Gabriela Fried Amilivia, Gautam Navlakha, Harish Dhanwan, Jinee Lokaneeta, Lali Purkayastha, Mahuya Bandopadhyay, Meeta Gidwani, Rama Vasudevan, Ranu Capron, Safina Uberoi, Sahana Bhattacharya, Shailja Sharma, Soumitra Purkayastha, Sudeshna Guha, Swapan Dasadhiakari, Tanya Mathur, Vindhya Sudhakar and my parents, Sujit and Subrata Purkayastha.

Friends and family members transformed the lonely journey of this book into cheerful events. Be it the ‘happy dinners’ at Vivek Chibber’s apartment or ‘library breaks’ enjoyed with Anugyan Nag and with Sunalini Kumar, or ‘canteen fixes’ partaken with colleagues, or ritual snacks shared collectively after meetings—friends and food were important parts of my writing. At the quotidian level, Damandeep Singh’s encouragement, faith and friendship provided me with the much-needed sustenance.

I wish to thank members of Cambridge University Press, especially Qudsiya Ahmed for her encouragement and interest in the project. To Anwesha Rana and Sohini Ghosh, I owe many grateful thanks for steadily steering the editorial process, and to Priya Das for her amazing editorial skills and for her patience and promptness. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers as their suggestions and inputs helped me to think through clearly.

My interviewees breathed new life and light into this project through their experiential accounts of political and captive lives. I am immensely grateful to each one of them for their time and effort. I owe special thanks to B. Anuradha, Jaya Mitra and Rita Banerjee for their patience and involvement in my questions. My Srikakulam interviews would not have been possible without the help of Aruna Athaluri and Anjaneyulu Madduluru who not only facilitated and translated all the interviews but also shared with me their keen passion for history, people, food and literature.

Many comrades and friends are still behind bars and this project has made me realize the significance of their sacrifices. I look forward to the day when we shall meet and discuss the shortcomings and the unresolved questions in this book.