

A Reporter in Prison

IFTIKHAR GILANI

It was a relic from the World War II era, but it proved a comforting companion in New Delhi's Tihar Central Jail. And it was this outmoded, single band radio I purchased while an inmate that, on the night of January 10th, broke the news: I would soon be a free man again. It was unbelievable. The government had decided to withdraw the case against me.

It was a little after midnight on June 9th. I had finished my column for Pakistan's prestigious weekly, *The Friday Times*, and gone to bed. Some two hours later my wife, Aanisa, woke me. "Someone is knocking at the door", she said worriedly. I ambled out of bed, trudged to the door and found myself confronting two uniformed men armed with SLR rifles. In a flash the two men pushed me aside, entered my home and pointed their weapons at me. Another ten to fifteen others stormed in behind them.

"We are from the Income Tax department", one of the officers said. "We have been authorized to search this house". The next eighteen hours were interminable. The three bedroom apartment was turned inside out, upside down, in search of what, I was not told. At around 7 am, one of the members of the raiding party flicked on the television and there it was.

One of the networks said a defence document was found on my hard drive in breach of national security. (The document in question was taken off the internet and was readily available to anyone interested). Other networks claimed that Aanisa and I had gone into hiding. I was taken to the Lodhi Colony police station and kept there for almost a week. I was grilled by the Intelligence Bureau in the day and left alone at night. Subsequently I was moved to Tihar.

Shackled and chained, I was escorted to my cell in Tihar Jail. A din erupted as I made my way. "Here he comes! There he is!" inmates shouted. Men in plain clothes, jailers and some convicts then pounced on me. I was beaten up badly, taunted and jeered for being a "traitor", a "terrorist". An inmate convicted on triple counts of first-degree murder ordered me to clean the jail lavatory with my shirt. After the reception I had received, I felt I had little choice but to comply. Once these initiation rituals were over, they took me to the cellblock for high-risk inmates. It was only after I protested against this in my formal meeting with an officer that I was kept with other first timers.

I barely slept the next two months. Accounts of my 'treachery' were splashed across Hindi newspapers, and so the hostility of the inmates persisted. My incarceration is a lesson for our crime reporters, who tarnish the image of a person and rely heavily on the police version. They must introspect and have a look at the implications of their reports. I saw many people inside the jail suffering due to one-sided representation in the press.

The mother of all mischievous reports about me was by a Neeta Sharma, crime reporter of *The Hindustan Times* and now with the NDTV. She reported that I had admitted before the court to having ISI links. The report said, "Iftikhar Gilani, 35 year old son-in-law of Hurriyat hardliner Syed Ali Shah Geelani, is believed to have admitted in a city court that he was an agent of Pakistan's spy agency". She went even further, and reported that Syed Ali Geelani was so happy with Iftikhar's working with the ISI that he gave his daughter to him in marriage. What a ridiculous report! Thanks to friends in *The Hindustan Times*, and its Deputy Chairperson Shobna Bharatiya, the paper corrected itself.

The Hindi daily *Hindustan* reported, *Geelani key damad key ghar aaykar chhaapon mein behisab sampati wa smwaidansheil dastaweiz baramad* ("Huge property and sensitive documents recovered from the house of the son-in-law of Geelani during Income Tax raids"). This had not even been claimed by the police in their charge sheet. They had merely shown a recovery of Rs 3,450 from my house. This newspaper carried a series to malign me. One of its reports said that I was in constant touch with international Islamic terrorist organizations. It made its case quoting a neighbour who had said that I used to work in my study till the late hours. Pramod Kumar Singh wrote in *The Pioneer*, "Iftikhar Gilani was the pinpoint man of Syed Salahuddin of *Hizbul Mujahideen*. Investigations have revealed that Iftikhar used to pass information to Salahuddin about the moves of Indian security agencies. He had camouflaged his real motives behind his journalist's façade so well that it took years for security agencies to unmask him, well placed sources said".

The Statesman reporter described me as the owner of a company called Wall Media Productions. There were scores of such stories. Since I belonged to the media and my friends know how things work, they were able to make editors see the truth, and stop such malicious campaigns. But this is of little consequence to the lives of hundreds of others who are the victims of such irresponsible reporting.

Such appearances of motivated news items compounded my misery. My wife Aanisa was allowed to visit twice a week, and it was this alone that kept my spirits up. I had told her to leave Delhi and go back to Kashmir with the children. She stayed put, and with support from *The Kashmir Times*, where I work, continued to fight for my freedom and ensured that the lives of our children were not disrupted. Colleagues and friends kept up pressure. National dailies ran lengthy pieces questioning my detention. In the dark jail cell where I lay sleepless night after night, all this comforted me.

The day would begin at 5:30 am with the welcome coarse bellow of the warders because it signalled time for morning tea and the two slices of bread. "Everyone is destined to have a fixed quantity of food while in jail", went one jail myth. "The sooner you eat and are done with this fixed amount, the sooner they'll be done with you". These words would come to mind at every meal and I would not know whether to eat or fast. Mostly I ate.

After a month, they let me subscribe to a newspaper as part of the jail's reforms programme. I chose *The Indian Express*, and it would reach my cell carefully censored by the jail authorities – effectively only the sports pages. I could not complain. There were also mandatory classes from 8 am to 10 am. I was in the programme for literate inmates. Since this was territory no free man wished to enter, inmates imparted their specialized knowledge to other inmates.

White-collar crime convict Yogesh Chowdhry taught us how to defraud banks. A pick-pocket gave lessons on filching wallets. A swami gave legal advice on how to avoid getting convicted for multiple rapes – he would often ask his ‘students’, booked under Section 376, to narrate their lascivious tales. This titillated the inmates no end.

Another time, a first-timer complained that his prized Honda had been stolen from Karol Bagh. The teacher, a car thief, asked this student what model and colour the car was. “White”, the student replied. “And this was the same day that an Esteem too was stolen from there, correct?” the teacher asked. “Why, yes”, responded the first-timer. “How do you know?” The teacher cocked his head and said, “Yes, I sold each of them for Rs 150,000”. The two men had to be separated.

I was soon shifted to another cellblock, the IGNOU ward – home to corrupt captains of industry. Life was a Sunday here. There was a library, a few computers (which never worked) and a television. It was this section of Tihar Jail that the warders showed off to a delegation from Afghanistan. “Don’t do it”, I murmured to one of the warders during their inspection tour. “If you show them all this, they’ll want to come to India, get arrested and hope to live in this paradise”. It’s hard maintaining one’s sense of humour in jail. I was trying.

When I took ill, I was enrolled in the jail hospital, where I found it difficult to reacquaint myself with a mattress and a pillow. The doctors who treated us had become hardened and cynical and wrote down reams of prescription simply by gazing at the patient, how he looked and walked. Other inmates, tasked with the duty of cleaning the hospital, would not appreciate the easy life the sick were spending. Two patients breathing through oxygen masks were made to get out of bed and make the lavatory sparkle. Perks included milk. A man would bring a jug of milk to the hospital and place it in the middle of the room. All five of us recuperating, two from tuberculosis, would leap at it and polish it off sharing a single plastic glass between ourselves.

We had our own exchange system in Tihar. Coupons in Rs 5 and Rs 10 denominations were used instead of real currency to purchase contraband and to grease palms. If a Gandhi (a Rs 500 note) was smuggled in, it could yield slips worth Rs 750 or more. These slips came in handy. A bag of tobacco that costs Rs 2 in the world outside could go for as much as Rs 400. The rolling paper, incidentally, was free. Thank you, Father Paddy.

Father Paddy was one of many counsellors who would visit the jail weekly. The Holy Bible that he gave away for free was a most sought after commodity. Printed on fine white paper, the bible was most suitable for rolling tobacco and making bidis. I had to guard my Collins dictionary with my life the days Father Paddy was late!

When I became a journalist I never expected to land up in jail. Now, as I walk in the open again and have my liberties restored as a free citizen, I cannot help but think of Tihar and all my friends there. I shall never forget them. I shall never forget Tihar.

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