

# The Tihar Players

## Praise for the Book

‘This work is the rare confluence of material of the highest grade handled by a first-rate writer. It is literature in the most noble sense of the word. The skill and distance that has gone into the writing is remarkable. One must thank the prisoner who arranged for that first register and pen for Farooqui, to enable him to start writing.’ – **Aakar Patel**

‘This is a book that poses unanswerable questions both to the reader and the writer. A curious composure coexists here with hurt, with a deep pain and a deeper compassion. The last quality, a certain tenderness for all experience, is essential for gifted storytellers from Aesop to Vyas or Jayasi. For only the disinherited and the exiled among them develop the ironical, unjudging self that can tease out hidden desires and secret practices and weave them into tales for all times.’ – **Mrinal Pande**

‘Over page after evocative page, Mahmood Farooqui makes the reader a companion in his ordeal. That he retained his sanity through it all is achievement enough, but wondrously, the doors of perception also opened for him. In several moving, disturbing and elevating passages, we are with him, sharing his empathy for his loved ones at home, his compassion for his fellow prisoners and his moments of great clarity. Farooqui has transformed a period of indescribable suffering and humiliation into a god-sent opportunity and a gift.’ – **Naseeruddin Shah**

# The Tihar Players

A Prison Memoir

Mahmood Farooqui

 juggernaut

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*For Anusha*



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‘You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.’

– JAMES BALDWIN

‘Two thieves were brought before St Augustine. He said to the first one, do not despair you might be saved. Then he turned to the second one and said, do not presume, you might be damned.’

– THE PARABLES OF ST AUGUSTINE

‘Where was it that I had read, Raskolnikov thought, that man is such a scoundrel that if he were given a choice between death and existing in a place between a cliff top and a rock where he might be stuck for a thousand years without food or company, he will still choose a rock. He thought for a moment and then said, yes and he is a scoundrel who calls him a scoundrel for that.’

– FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *Crime and Punishment*

## Prologue

I woke up in my prison cell on the morning of September 25, 2017, with a knot in my stomach. I rose, bathed, dressed, prayed and then went to my drama class. My students and I began the class with a vigorous rendition of our favourite songs, and then went straight into rehearsals for our Ramleela production.

It was a little while later that I saw a boy, a fellow inmate I knew well, looking for me. 'You have been acquitted,' he shouted from a distance, 'Aap bari ho gaye ho!'

The rest of the day passed in a blur of tears, hugs and handshakes. Finally, it was time for me to leave. My students accompanied me as far as inmates were allowed to inside the jail.

When I turned around to wave them a final goodbye before walking to the gate where freedom lay, tears were running down my cheeks. I had longed for this day for two years, yet it felt wretched to be leaving them behind.

My acquittal by the High Court of Delhi was the beginning of the end of an ordeal that had begun in the summer of 2015. I had been arrested for a crime I had not committed and had been sent to Tihar Jail. After four months in jail, I had been freed on bail, but a few months later, I had been convicted by the Sessions Court and sent back to Tihar. I remained there until my acquittal.

My case, with all its twists and turns, had made national headlines. This book, however, is not about that case.

It is about prison.

It is an account of my time in Tihar, one of Asia's largest prisons. It is about the people I met and the work I did there.

That the world is cruel and arbitrary is a truth a prisoner knows deep in their gut in a way that no one can know if they have not been in prison. The very processes of admission and initiation into jail life are a kind of death. One is forced to participate in ritualistic annihilation of one's previous self.

As a lifelong depressive, I had already died several deaths before I set foot in Tihar. During my first confused, fear-filled days there, I didn't think I would survive. On some days, I didn't want to survive.

And yet, I found that I could live. That I had to live.

I found some moorings in long-lost faith. I found books, paper and pens. I read voraciously; I wrote furiously, keeping a record. I tried to find humour, necessarily black humour, in people and situations around me.

In the swamp of misery that is jail, I met men who had been unjustly confined far longer than I had been, with far fewer resources and far bleaker prospects. I saw entire families incarcerated, facing bankruptcy, homelessness and penury. I learnt that behind almost every man inside, there was a family outside, bent and broken by his imprisonment. I met people whose courage and capacity for endurance can only be described as heroic.

As others have done, I sought in books and conversations answers to the questions that haunted me about prison: Is it just? Is it justified? Why, if people are sent to prison *as* punishment, not *for* punishment, are they constantly being punished inside too? Can it be changed? If so, how can it be changed?

I found that it was very difficult to pin down a category called ‘the criminal’. I found that people remained human, even if they had committed a heinous crime, deliberately or inadvertently. I read later that the French writer Jean Genet began to detest progressives when, as an inmate, he once saw a revolutionary refusing to be tied together with a thief, as the latter was a ‘criminal’. I did not feel superior to anyone and tried to connect to everyone in their misery, in their loneliness and, often, in their desire to do better. Over time, I forged intimate connections and received tremendous love and validation.

I immersed myself in theatre. I was lucky to have had some background in it, and also some experience working with non-actors. I faced many hurdles and setbacks, but I did not struggle alone. Men, many of them from bleak homes, who had never been on a stage in their lives, offered themselves to me as actors. Together, we stepped into the worlds of Premchand, Molière and Habib Tanvir. Together, we rose above the daily humiliations of prison life to stage production after production. Men accused of brutal crimes played soldiers and lawyers, hakims and kings with aplomb, gracefully accepting praise from audiences that included Supreme Court judges.

Remarkably, some jail officials came to believe in our project. In an entry in my journal, I wrote, speaking for myself and for my wife Anusha: ‘While the world around us crumbled, with people turning their backs on us because of the disgrace of my conviction, the prison was opening its doors to us.’

I had gone to prison wanting to die. It was prison, unexpectedly, that restored my will to live. That is the story of this book.

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Before taking the reader with me into the vast and fearsome deorhi (vestibule) of Jail No. 3, Tihar, where my prison journey began, I feel I should say something about my life as it had played out until then. It may be hard to understand the prisoner – his frailties, his passions, his contradictions, his inner demons, his sources of strength – without knowing a little about the person.

My story begins in Gorakhpur, where I was born in 1971 – a year of great consequence for reasons that had nothing to do with my birth. A few days after I arrived, India conquered England in its first Test series victory, and before the year was out, it defeated Pakistan in a war that redrew the map of the subcontinent.

My father was the youngest of three brothers and lived in a small house within a joint family, adjacent to a mosque. When I was born, my father had just entered the central government's Information Service as a gazetted officer. The position carried prestige but little money. My mother came from a very different background. She grew up in a large house that had a fridge, a telephone, a gas stove, a car and a flush toilet. My father's house had none of these. Her father, my nana, was a well-to-do hakim and her brother, my mama, was one of Gorakhpur's first Muslim chartered accountants.

My mother was twenty-one when I was born. My younger brother, Masood, arrived two years later and our youngest brother, Rumi, seven years after that. In our early years, we moved back and forth between Delhi and Gorakhpur. My mother, vocal and irrepressible, complained about the work she had to do and the conditions she lived in. My father, literary-minded and withdrawn, preferred to be left alone with his books. He had abandoned his youthful literary ambitions by then, but read widely and had many like-minded friends.

In Delhi, we lived in Batla House, near the Jamia Millia Islamia university, then a quiet middle-class neighbourhood beside the Jamuna. Then we were back in Gorakhpur. For the next twelve years, my family lived in a place called Chaurahiya Gola, near Marwar College. All five of us lived in a single room and shared a toilet with seventeen other people in the house. There was no television, not even a scooter. My uncles cycled to their jobs with the railways. My elder cousins ate and lived poorly, whereas we, somewhat shamefully, had our eggs, butter and, frequently, mutton since my father often lived beyond his means and was not averse to borrowing.

I was generally regarded as a problem child. I spent hours playing cricket and gulli danda, which was a street game played with sticks and a peg. I tried my hand at kancha (marbles), kite-flying and a card game, chippi, that we played with discarded cigarette packets. I played cricket, hockey, badminton, kho kho – a tag game – and hopscotch. At the age of ten, I lost my left eye to gulli danda. I spent months in the hospital, and was even taken to Delhi, but the damaged retina could not be repaired. I also read obsessively in Urdu and Hindi, children's magazines like the Urdu *Noor*, comics and pocket books in Hindi about a pair of detectives called Rajan–Iqbal. By twelve, I was reading adult fare like the novels of the Urdu writer with the pen-name Ibn-e-Safi, Urdu digests such as *Mashriqi Aanchal*, Hindi translations of potboilers by James Hadley Chase and Hindi pulp fiction by Ved Prakash Sharma. I stole money from my parents, and even relatives, to buy books or treat my friends to chaat in school. My father took me to Delhi for my eye treatment. I first saw there my legendary uncle, the Urdu writer and scholar Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, up close and personal. I spent nearly a month in his house. His pipes, his study, his moving trolley of food, his

books, his stationery – everything fascinated me. During that period, I did reasonably well in studies, but teachers always felt I could do better.

My father had been posted back to Gorakhpur to start a local radio news service. He had influence and used it deftly, though never to improve our material conditions. He was a stylish man who rolled his own cigarettes, always made the morning chai in elegant teapots, had a beautiful smile and lived up to his name, Mahboob, by being universally loved. I was headstrong and emotional. On more than one occasion, I refused to return home from school. I fantasized about running away and returning prodigally in a Chevrolet Impala. My mother, exhausted by my waywardness, engaged a series of inexpensive tutors.

One of these tutors, Saeed Akhtar, enrolled me to prepare for a government scholarship scheme. For a hundred rupees a month, I joined a group of students preparing for an examination I did not understand. I somehow cleared the first test. Saeed saheb persuaded my mother to let me take the final exam in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) and insisted I write it in English. Before the exam, I sat with a group of students, chanting last-minute tips with their teacher. I remember them rattling off the names of Indian airports. I returned home dazed and forgot about it. I was looking forward to my promotion to senior school, which ran from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., giving me ample opportunity to bunk and watch films.

A few months later, one evening, the postman brought a letter announcing that I had been awarded the Government of India Merit Scholarship to study at The Doon School in Dehradun.

My achievement was not immediately hailed as a success. I was being offered admission in Class Seven, while I was soon to

be promoted to Class Nine at my own school. My grandfather and others were opposed to my going to Dehradun. There were also rumours about the excesses at Doon, about alcohol-filled refrigerators and ayyashi (decadence), and that it was only fit for children from rich families. It was my maternal uncle who finally told my father to drop his nonsensical hesitations and take up the offer. He had heard that Rajiv Gandhi, then a new entrant into politics, was from Doon.

Once the offer was accepted, the school sent a three-page list of requirements that included six pairs of night suits, a dressing gown, singlets and Oxford shoes. These were things we had barely heard of. My father liquidated an investment in a Delhi housing scheme to pay for all this. That flat could have made our lives more comfortable than all my education did, in the end. My failure to provide for my parents in their old age would haunt me in prison.

The Doon School was a world of rich kids with Wrigley's chewing gum and Pringles chips and holidays 'abroad'. It took me some days to understand that 'abroad' was not a place. I could not speak much English, had never used a western toilet and did not know how to use a knife and fork. The initial years were traumatic and left me with deep insecurities, low self-esteem and a self-consciousness that would never quite leave me.

At the same time, the school offered opportunity. I thrived as a debater, a sportsman, a mathematics whiz and, above all, as a precocious student theatre director. The school attempted to efface differences of background, fairly successfully, and had a way of celebrating merit. I found my place. I became a minor celebrity in my family and in my town, and with that came expectations. I read constantly, wrote poems, grew introspective and moody.

Throughout, I continued to offer namaz and fasted during Ramzan, as was the practice in my family. It earned me admiration at school. Typically, I would have gone to an IIT and climbed the conventional ladder of success. However, science didn't interest me much, so, quite radically, I dropped physics and aimed for a history degree at St. Stephen's, one of India's best colleges. Before my final exams, I worked extraordinarily hard for a few days and had a nervous breakdown after the exams were over. It was a period of intense depression, lasting through the summer holidays. It lifted without being diagnosed. I was admitted to St. Stephen's College in 1990, in the history honours course.

My father was transferred to Delhi and I once again began to live a divided life. I stayed in Batla House, a grittier neighbourhood now, in a small house down a narrow lane, and took the university-special bus to Stephen's, where most people came from homes far more comfortable than mine. Around this time, my father began editing *Aajkal*, a government-run Urdu literary magazine. The work gave him deep satisfaction and a measure of pan-India recognition.

In my early days at the college, someone pointed to a senior in the library wearing a black blazer and said that he had won the Rhodes Scholarship. The awe with which this was said made me covet the distinction, though until that moment, I had barely heard of the Rhodes. I did well academically and came into my own as a theatre director. I recited poetry and read furiously. I began to smoke. I ruined myself in unrequited love but found emotional anchorage in friendships.

Even as a student, I directed major productions, including the celebrated *Tughlaq*. My ambitions were limitless – I wanted to write a novel, make films, become a philosopher – and I despised myself for not achieving these things quickly enough.

My family wanted me to apply for the civil services. I fought with my parents constantly; they could understand neither my ambition nor unhappiness. I lost my faith in religion and announced the fact. I began to hector my family for their customs, ways, faith and attitudes. I suffered and became insufferable.

I applied for the Rhodes Scholarship. My teachers wrote glowing recommendations. I was brash in the interviews, but an unusual candidate; perhaps they thought they might have discovered a Girish Karnad in the making. I won the scholarship, yet remained so consumed by an inner turbulence that I failed to secure a first-class degree in my final exams. The scholarship was deferred by a year to enable me to repeat my exams and secure the required first.

That empty year was unbearable. I filled diary after diary. For a brief period, I went to Doon to teach and directed Swadesh Deepak's searing play *Court Martial* with the boys there. I returned to Delhi and took my exams. I spent endless days and nights in torment before my results arrived. I had made it.

At Oxford, I spent a spartan first year, confined largely to the library or to my study table. I tried dramatics, but it felt unfamiliar and I was too gauche. I spent eight, nine, sometimes ten hours a day in the library. I read the Urdu greats, Intizar Hussain and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, recorded passages and poems and listened to them repeatedly. I wrote love letters and never posted them.

My tutors praised my work and it steadied me. I made friends, among them was Chris from Cumbria, now a professor at Cambridge. I visited his home near the Lake District and walked for hours. I met Osama and Uzair from Lahore, both eminent Pakistanis now. I played hockey. I had an occasional beer without ever visiting a pub. Spring came, then summer. The

weather was intoxicating. I was filled with inexplicable yearning and euphoria. I was becoming bipolar, oscillating between bouts of exhilaration and despair. I probably had been so since childhood, but I would only be officially diagnosed when I was at Cambridge, in 1999.

I returned to India from Oxford for the summer holidays wearing a khadi kurta and jeans. I flaunted my desi-ness by chewing paan with 120 zarda, a type of perfumed tobacco. My father finally made it into the quota for sarkari (official) accommodation. Implausibly, we moved from Batla House to Pandara Road in the heart of central Delhi, right beside India Gate. I spent a glorious autumn in Delhi in 1995 and began directing *Evam Indrajit* by Badal Sircar, translated into English by Girish Karnad. I spent a large part of my scholarship money registering and setting up a theatre group. Shardul, my closest friend from college, and another, Aamir, acted in the play. It was the only English play I ever directed, and it was a failure. I began drinking beer more frequently.

My second year at Oxford was memorable, and in many ways, one of the most joyful ones I have ever had. I made friends with Yug Mohit Chaudhury and Prashanto Sen, both now well-known lawyers, and we formed a gang with Osama and Uzair. I cooked, underwent corrective eye surgery and frequented an Irish pub that served Kilkenny beer. Yet, I remained unsure of my future. Theatre and cinema pulled me strongly, but confidence lagged behind desire. There was considerable family and social pressure to continue along the academic path. I applied for an MPhil at Trinity College, Cambridge.

When my results came, I had secured a first class, was ranked third overall and had won multiple prizes. I had vindicated my selection, and yet, I stood at a crossroads. I enjoyed directing more than making myself miserable in libraries. I deferred my MPhil.

As mentioned earlier, my family wanted me to join the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). My father even suggested that I could resign after clearing the exam. My teachers felt that my leaving academia would be a loss to history. That year, my younger brother, Masood, graduated as an engineer from Jamia Millia Islamia and found a job in Bombay. He was sharing a small flat in Kurla, a dense suburb. I moved there.

I spent six months in Bombay looking for work as an assistant director in films, while my brother and Shardul supported me. I met many celebrated arthouse directors, but the movement had already faded. I worked as the seventh assistant director on a Bollywood film, and often the ₹150 I received as a daily allowance was the only money I had. I fell into acute depression and decided to go to Trinity.

In Cambridge, I could not settle, and eventually, I circled back to India. Television news was just beginning to expand and I thought it might serve as a stepping stone to cinema. In Delhi, I became known as a dashing reporter, though an unreliable employee of the TV news network I had joined. I was the carping, subversive type. I had little respect for the work I was doing.

But it was there that I met Anusha, another St. Stephen's history graduate, a few years junior to me. She kindly agreed to become my first girlfriend. She was the opposite of me – outgoing and cheerful, and brought a much-needed wholeness to my life. When I quit the TV channel and went to Bombay to try my luck in cinema again, Anusha and I conducted a long-distance courtship, while I lived with my friend Aamir. Only when she would come down to Bombay would I feel fully alive. She supported my choices and often sent me money. I began writing a column for *The Sunday Observer* and later for *Mid-Day*.

I did some plays. I wrote a film script and pitched it to several actors, including Naseeruddin Shah, but nothing came of it.

We got married, and I moved back to Delhi. Anusha's family was a delight. The atmosphere in her home was liberal and playful, and I looked up to her father, a scholar who had founded the Hindi department at Jamia. But I felt consumed by my failure to achieve what I wanted, and soon after our return, I went into a full-blown manic episode. It was catastrophic. I lost friendships, my sense of self, my stature. It was then, in 2002, that I began regularly taking psychiatric drugs to stabilize my condition. Anusha rescued me, with some help from my brothers. It took me six months to regain some equilibrium. I began working with the historian William Dalrymple, researching and translating from Urdu for his next book. Anusha made a few documentaries. We eked out a living. We rebuilt slowly. We adopted some stray cats. I began writing more frequently.

Around this time, I read my uncle Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's book on Dastangoi. I was astounded to learn of this marvellous tradition of storytelling in Urdu. The storytellers were both performers and writers and this purely oral tradition had also found an afterlife in print. I had directed plays and had read widely in Urdu, and had yet known nothing of a tradition that had left us over 46,000 printed pages of the most mammoth story cycle in the world. Its teeming universe was full of sorcerers, tricksters, warriors, beauties and seduction and wine-drinking that verged on the profane. I was amazed and began looking for funding to make a documentary on the form. I applied for a fellowship at Sarai – the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi. I began to read the first volume of the cycle and was blown away by its richness, dialogues, plot turns and humour.

At Sarai, I found a receptive audience and began to thrive again as a writer and commentator. I was offered a lecture-demonstration slot at the India International Centre (IIC) and began to conceive a Dastangoi performance around it. I chose two episodes from the first volume, under my uncle's guidance. The stories were crying to be read aloud. But nobody seemed to have read them. No theatre person seemed aware of their explosive potential. On May 5, 2005, I did the first modern Dastangoi performance, eighty years after the passing of the last great dastango, Mir Baqar Ali of Delhi. It was immediately hailed as a breakthrough. Invitations followed to perform elsewhere. I had made some innovations to the form by bringing in two performers instead of one, and Anusha had helped with the design of the set, which we kept simple – an old-style takht or chowki, with bolsters, a white sheet, a katora (small bowl) for sipping water and candles. My friend Himanshu Tyagi from school became my first fellow performer. Within weeks, we were invited to Indraprastha College in Delhi, to the first IIC festival, to the inaugural Jaipur Literary Festival and to Dehradun. On a simple, almost bare stage, the two of us sat down and recited some of the most colourful tales ever told in the world.

Meanwhile, Anusha had an idea for a film. Aamir Khan was then making *The Rising*, and she wrote to him with the germ of an idea for a film called *The Falling*. He was intrigued but insisted on a full script. She began developing it.

I gave interviews and was profiled in several newspapers. Naseeruddin Shah became curious about Dastangoi and invited us to perform at the Prithvi Theatre in 2006. (Later, he would even perform with me as a dastango.) The reception was heady. Anusha completed the film script and narrated it to Aamir Khan, who gave it a conditional go-ahead. Around this time,

Shardul suffered a cardiac arrest and passed away suddenly. The void he left has never been filled.

I continued with Dastangoi. We lived on meagre earnings. My artistic pursuits were possible only because of Anusha's support and her willingness to forgo material security. Over the next two years, Anusha travelled between Delhi and Mumbai while I travelled with Dastangoi. My work with Dalrymple had stimulated my interest in 1857, and I returned to the archives to research my own book on the subject. It was ironic that I was back in the archives, the very thing that I had feared while rejecting academia as a career.

Through many delays, cancellations and reversals, we finally began work on what became *Peepli Live* in 2008, with Anusha as director, me as co-director and Aamir Khan as producer. The film was released in 2010 and became a cult hit. My book was published as *Besieged: Voices from Delhi, 1857*, and was hailed as a significant intervention in 1857 studies. Dastangoi was going places. It felt, at last, as if we had arrived.

Success, however, extracted its own terrible price. As artists, Anusha and I perforce had differences during the making of the film. They became magnified in the aftermath. We differed on where we should live, how we should live, what we should do and, above all, we differed intensely on creative matters. We attempted to make a film based on a celebrated historical novel, but the project proved too ambitious for us. We tried our hand at making a very small film, but that did not work either. We were both headstrong and obstinate. We no longer wished to work together, yet we remained dependent on each other. I smoked and drank immoderately to dull the pain. Catastrophically, Anusha and I even separated for a while, and I looked for solace outside marriage.

Outwardly, I led a fully functional and hectic life of performing, travelling and writing, with a busy social calendar. I wrote new dastans, and they were celebrated. I went to the US, Australia and Sri Lanka to perform. But, within me, I was full of despair. I wanted to make more films, write more books and make more than our pitiful earnings. I wanted more success than I had achieved. I wanted more of everything. I wanted Anusha back; I wanted our love back. We were estranged despite living under the same roof. In despair, I drowned myself in my addictions.

It was around then that I met an American woman, a researcher who came to see me because she was working on Gorakhpur. She was thirty-six years old and had been coming to India for many years. We became friendly and met a few times, often over drinks. She once sent me a two-litre bottle of vodka on a dry day in Delhi and earned my undying admiration.

On June 19, 2015, I was sitting in my study, preparing a new dastan on the Arabian classic, *One Thousand and One Nights*, when the doorbell rang unexpectedly. I opened the door to find two policemen. They asked me to accompany them to the New Friends Colony Police Station. They did not say why.

It was only after several hours of waiting in a secluded part of the police station that I was told that there was a complaint of rape against me. The complainant was the American research scholar. I was stunned. At no point in our acquaintance, which had ended three months before the complaint was lodged, had I raped her.

Under the Indian law, an allegation of rape leads almost automatically to arrest, particularly in Delhi. That is what happened to me. I was taken into custody and sent to Tihar Jail. I did not see the first information report (FIR) before my arrest. It was through my family that I learnt I had been charged with

forcibly performing oral sex, an act that forms part of the legal definition of rape.

By then, my work in reviving Dastangoi, my books and my association with *Peepli Live* had made me reasonably well-known. That the complainant was an American from an Ivy League university also made the arrest newsworthy.

I spent four months in Tihar before being released on interim bail in October 2015. In July 2016, I was convicted by the Sessions Court and sentenced to seven years of rigorous imprisonment, the statutory minimum under the post-2012 rape law. I appealed. In September 2017, the Delhi High Court acquitted me. In January 2018, the Supreme Court of India upheld that acquittal *in limine* (at the outset). It declined to reexamine the case. A few months later, it dismissed another appeal against its judgment.

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I have written here about the Tihar I saw. I cannot claim to speak for the entirety of Tihar. I know that prison can be a much more brutal experience than it was for me. This is often especially so for women and children, for poor inmates belonging to the oppressed castes and minorities. I have only tried to truthfully portray my own experience. Further, thousands of people are released every year from prisons across the country. Few get to narrate their story. I am aware of my immense privilege in having the opportunity and the means to narrate mine.

I have taken ten years to present this book. Some wounds were too raw to be exposed earlier – for myself, my wife, my mother, my brothers and our families. I also wanted to rebuild a life before returning to those days. My father was alive when I

went in. He died soon after I came out on bail. I had feared he would not live to see me out of prison. That he did, even briefly, is enough.

In these ten years, another cycle has completed itself. I have written three more books and many new dastans. I have travelled the world with them. Anusha has made another film, *The Great Shamsuddin Family*, to critical and popular acclaim.

All along, I kept revisiting the book that is now in your hands. I felt impelled to carry on writing this story of finding life amid disgrace, meaning amid ruin and purpose in a place designed to strip one of it.

What follows is what I endured, what I witnessed and what changed in me during that time.

The boy from Gorakhpur had arrived, fallen, arrived again, fallen again and arrived once more. As the Yeats verse goes:

*Many times he died, many times rose again.*