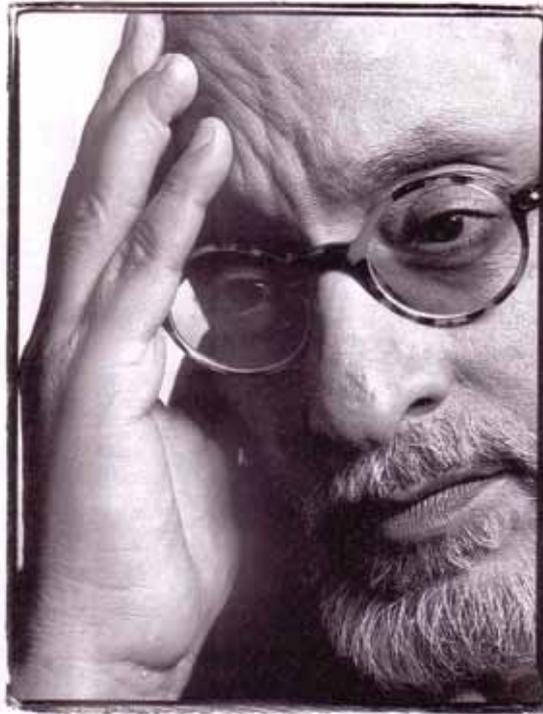


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## Best of Times, Worst of Times

Interview by Caroline Scott



Photograph by Gino Sprio

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In the early 1970s, the Punjabi poet and essayist **Amarjit Chandan**, 58, spent two years in solitary confinement in Amritsar as a result of his Maoist activism. He says that experience still dominates his life

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In my heart I don't feel I could kill. But when I was young, I think I could have. Idealistic and naive, I came from a long line of radical militants and I wanted a cause to believe in. The Maoist Naxalite movement started in West Bengal and was suppressed ruthlessly by the Marxist government. Charu Majumdar, the Maoist

leader, believed the Indian revolution was around the corner and set the date: 1975. He was a psychopath, but we didn't see it — such optimistic years.

I didn't commit any act of violence, but my comrades did, and hundreds, both Naxalites and police, were killed. Words were my weapons. I edited the movement's official organ, *Lokyudh* [People's War] and was declared an offender for publishing an illegal journal. In August 1971, I was grabbed off the street while taking proofs to a publisher.

There was romance in being arrested, though I knew I could have been killed.

I had this notion I would write poetry in prison like Ho Chi Minh and Nazim Hikmet, but the police tortured and killed the Naxalites they had in custody. I still don't know why my life was spared.

For two months I endured sleep deprivation and torture. I was woken throughout the night and beaten with sticks. "Who do you know? What are your plans?" They'd hang me upside down and beat my feet. Then when I told them nothing, I had a so-called trial where false witnesses were produced and I was sentenced to three years, later reduced to two, for trumped-up charges of bank robbery and carrying bombs. My cell in Amritsar jail measured five of my steps by 10; it had six iron bars and a hole in the corner for a toilet, and was open to the elements. Punjab is a land of extremes, and so nature punished me as well. Rain came in during the winter, and in summer there was no shelter from the sun. I slept on the floor, feet fettered, with four coarse blankets over and under me. From there I could see the moon. Sounds from the outside came as sounds of freedom: traffic, mill hooters, leaves rustling, children playing.

Tea and soup were served through the bars, with two *chapatis*, twice a day. I never saw the other inmates' faces. They sang, wept, said their *ardas* — prayers from the Sikh scriptures. I couldn't let my emotions go. I held it all in, and still I hold — I don't share my feelings even with my wife. My only visitors were my mother, sister and a writer friend. Others were too scared to be identified with me. It was hard to pass the moment, the hour, the day. Yet years passed. Time irritates like chalk screeching on a blackboard. You count your breaths, lose count and start again. Thinking fills the emptiness, but too much kills you from the inside — the emptiness is infinite.

I'm a poet, yet there are no words to explain these feelings, this loss of spirit. Wittgenstein said in this situation, silence is the only answer. But silence doesn't help, because everything turns inwards. My destiny is that I must live with it.

I saw myself as a fellow traveller of Ho Chi Minh, and that helped me survive. But the experience made me doubt everything. When I was young I believed violence was the midwife of change — I don't believe that any more. Violence and class hatred as a creed is not human. There is no absolute sociopolitical truth.

I'd like to make my cell disappear and all the cells of all the jails where prisoners of conscience are held. Some years ago, I visited Gorky's cell in St Petersburg. I have a photo of myself taken inside it. I look dazed and lost. I shouldn't have gone. It made me feel bad, as if I had violated Gorky's space.



I remember vividly the day I was released. The gate was opened and I was out. I felt weightless, as if walking on the moon. The noise and the smells of the city were both shattering and joyful. The panic came later. Having found no words to explain my experiences, I became introverted. I still suffer from melancholia and panic attacks.

I know the reason behind my misery but I can't stop it, and I do desperately want it to stop. There is no escape from memories. I still see myself walking endlessly in my cell, every inch of it imprinted on my mind. Even when I'm walking outside, I sense its boundaries: my mind roams aimlessly, my head bangs against the walls and bars and I scream the names of my dear ones.

I watch the grainy monochrome film of those years all the time. The soundtrack is erased, the suffering silent.

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Courtesy: The Sunday Times