

Naughty Dr

A doctor sentenced to life for Internet crimes has reinvented himself from jail as a prolific writer of pulp fiction.

A little while ago, I was rootling through a pile of books discarded by the literary editor of the magazine where I worked. Amid the dusty necropolis where self-published poetry, obscure *sarkari* almanacs and *desi* chick-lit had come to rest, something caught my eye: a cheap paperback entitled *Maybach Maiden*. Its cover depicted, in deft watercolour strokes, a pink-cheeked sylph wearing a large hat, gold hoop earrings and a pink bustier, her hips frozen mid-way. Looming above her was a hero with an unruly 1970s Amitabh hairdo, and a rifle resting against his chin, while below her, a swarthy lunthead glowered, resting a curled fist atop a seemingly copied and pasted yellow Lamborghini Murciélago. I thumbed through some pages. A few lines leapt out: “He patted her inviting glutei...” “Alicia’s brains were as substantial as her tits.” “He was indeed lucky to have found a buxom and dishy babe like her. Her ran his huge paws

over her delicious curves and said, ‘Well honey! Don’t take too long...’”

I eagerly flipped the book over. Beneath a blurb that described the book as “a riveting adventure drama with a finger chewing climax” was the author’s bio, which read: “Amongst other things, Dr. L. Prakash has been an orthopedic surgeon, a magician, an adventurer, hunter, inventor, scientist, and an industrialist. He is presently serving a life imprisonment in an internet pornography case and scribbles away pages in the Puzhal Prison on the outskirts of Chennai, Tamilnadu, India. He claims to be innocent and [...] expects an honorable acquittal from the higher courts [...]” The author photo at the corner of the book showed a grinning man with a bushy, black moustache, wavy greying hair, a burgundy shirt, and a polka-dotted blue tie, rakishly askew.

I was intrigued. I’d never seen a pulp novel whose author bio surpassed it in salacious immoderation. The whole thing sounded like one “buxom and dishy” matryoshka doll; art imitating life within life imitating art.

The doll’s obverse – a racy reality that veered thrillingly close to racy pulp fiction – electrified reporters and shocked Chennai residents in December 2001, when Prakash was arrested, and jailed. Overnight, locals, who’d only known him as a successful knee and hip replacement expert and a gregarious fixture at swanky hotel bars, found him frequenting front-page headlines in the form of a metonym of rapidly deepening notoriety: “the L Prakash case.” The “horrific and gruesome details” of the L Prakash case, the police announced,

came to light when a young man from Pondicherry filed a complaint in a Chennai police station, stating that he’d been shocked to find that porn videos he’d acted in had surfaced

online. The doctor, their dissipated auteur, had promised they wouldn’t.

Prison seems to have only occasioned a change of medium. In the ten years since his arrest, Prakash has written profusely and perennially, knocking out 111 books (“26 million words,” he likes to point out) in various genres, including detective, crime, and legal thrillers, “sensual erotica,” science fiction, (exceedingly) graphic novels, mythological works, and even self-help books. In 2007, G Asokan, a veteran publisher of Tamil pulp, stumbled on his work, found it promising and “something different,” and went on to translate and publish a few. A number of them, including *Maybach Maiden*, come adorned with deliciously lurid cover art by Tamil pulp legend Shyam. Since then, Prakash has become renowned – both in prison and outside it – for the pulpiest of his crime novels, particularly those that are considered to reflect his lubricious past.



Glimpses into Prakash’s lively past lie on a foundered Tripod site he created in the summer of 2000. Though the site mentions his “lovely wife Latha” and his “little genius (sic) of a 5 year old daughter,” it’s mostly dedicated to chronicling his flashy taste and fast life. He lists the things he loves: “islands, deep sea fishing, jetskiing, speed boating, antiques, cigars, four wheel drives, adventure, photography, computers and lots of reading.” Triple triptychs of yellowing photos show him sporting suspenders and a

lavender shirt in his office; striking a jaunty pose next to a black jeep, and then seated inside it; spotted in a sailboat, and then in a speedboat; beaming next to a dead boar, holding a rifle aloft, and finally, leaning back with a contented grin, with an idyllic island view in the background. In each, he wears an identical expression of wide-eyed, self-enamoured delight.

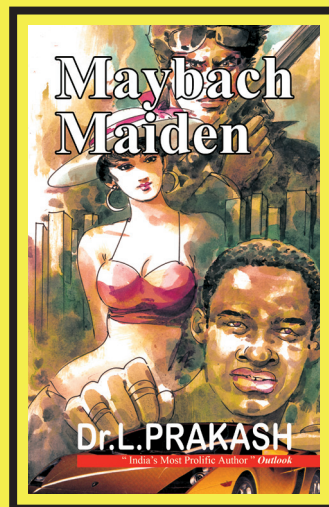
That delight might have looked decidedly sinister to those who read all about the doctor’s exploits, particularly in the vernacular press, where he began to resemble a subcontinental Dr No of less grandiose ambitions. They said that he lured young boys and



girls, including his nurses and the students of an IT education centre he ran, to his beach-house in Kalanchikuppam in the then-undeveloped Ennore peninsula, which, in his website, he refers to as “my private island.” The home-made porn that resulted from these trips was sent in video CDs labelled “surgical procedures” to his brother in the US, who put them on websites – www.tamilsex.com and www.realindianporn.com – both unwisely registered under his brother’s name and home address.

One of Prakash’s lawyers, P D Selvaraj, who’d worked for Prakash for several years, and had thus far dealt with nothing more titillating than tax documents, was taken by surprise when the incident surfaced. He first saw a report about the case, which didn’t mention the name of the accused. “I said to my friend: ‘See what all doctors are also doing!’” he recalls, with a laugh. “The next day Prakash called and said he needed my help. Even after that, the first interview I gave I said he has not gone with girls. Later, when he told me he went to the island and enjoyed with girls, it came as a really big shock to me.”

Just over six years after his arrest, on February 7th, 2008, Prakash was sentenced to life imprisonment and a fine of Rs 1.27 lakh. He was found guilty on five counts: criminal intimidation and kidnapping, “publishing information that is obscene in electronic form” under the Internet Technology Act (relatively new when he was charged under it in 2002), procuring women for prostitution and detaining them, circulating indecent material of women, and being in possession of prohibited firearms.



Internet pornography was an offence of unimaginably exotic depravity when Prakash was arrested – around the time when cyber-café were revealing bewildering new worlds to first-time surfers in India. The attendant scandal and the startling news of his consistent infidelity led to his wife Latha divorcing him during the trial. She also banned him from seeing their adopted daughter Nethra, now in her final year of high school.



Prakash is approaching his eleventh year of incarceration. When I meet him in the interview room of Puzhal Prison on the outskirts of Chennai, one bright morning

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in October, he greets me with an undiminished air of self-gratification. On either side of him, leaning into the grill, convicted murderers answer their aged mothers’ enquiries in weak monosyllables, looking like dejected pupils in their white shorts and shirts. Prakash is similarly clad, in shorts and a shirt whose front pocket bristles with pens. He is tall, with silvered hair, and a neatly groomed brushy moustache. Peering out through thin silver-framed glasses, he somehow exudes a louche cool. He’s oddly irrepressible, swaying back from the bars, laughing uproariously every time he says something he finds amusing. His orderly, a wiry young man from

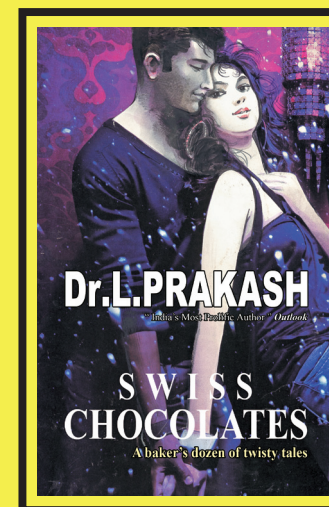
Madhya Pradesh, stands impassively behind him as Prakash chatters on brightly about his rigorous 50-page-a-day writing schedule, his termite-like edacious reading habit (he devours 500 pages daily), the dates-and-fruit diet that helped him drop 20 kilograms in a year, and the unsavoury incident from ten years ago, which got him here.

“I am a sensuous man,” he begins, his lupine grin widening to reveal several mottled teeth, souvenirs from a sedulous chain-smoking career. “The fact is, I had a lot of girlfriends, and I’ve taken lots of pictures of them. But it’s all been voluntary...” They were, he says, lapsing into classified adverts nomenclature, “slim, model-like,” “classy five-star hotel receptionists,” and “part-time models.” They would come to his remote island home and drink lots of “costly booze.”

“My social life was very fancy,” Prakash says matter-of-factly. “During the week, I worked non-stop doing hip and knee replacements – only failure cases! I handled as many as 250 cases a month! But in my free time, I was a devout student of the art of sensuality.”

At the time the trouble began, he says, he was “successfully juggling three girlfriends.” One of them happened to have another boyfriend, Ganesh, whose complaint landed him in jail. Prakash, understandably, doesn’t have charitable memories of either of them. Their common girlfriend was “a borderline nymphomaniac,” he says, and Ganesh, “a puny young fellow who turned out to be a school dropout.”

“He was happy to booze and eat as much chicken as he could,” Prakash continues, “and then he and his girl performed admirably for the camera. He tried to blackmail me later, and when I didn’t fall for it, he went to the cops, who found a *bonanza* when they raided my house and went through my computer.” He guffaws, and sways back from the bars. “They threatened me, and demanded Rs five lakh. I was not intelligent. I was arrogant and aggressive. I acted tough. Said: ‘Go to hell!’” That’s when he claims they foisted additional



charges on him. He insists that there was “no victim as such,” and even suggests in his prison diary, *Behind the Bars*, that the porn films were initially the “uninhibited nymphet” girlfriend’s idea, after he’d shown her “videos of Afro-American men and Swedish blondes doing impossible things.”

The social “morality issue” at the time of his trial, he believes, made matters worse. “Prostitution is seen as a vocation, and photography as exhibitionism!” says Prakash, with a laugh. “I was punished so harshly when I committed no offence except admiring female beauty and exploring human sexuality.”

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These continue to be the doctor’s abiding passions, consigned for the moment to print in the 111 books he’s written in jail, first in Chennai Central Jail, and since the past six years, in Puzhal. He emphasises, more than once, that his 9ft-by-12ft enclosure is smaller than the toilet of the master bedroom in his bungalow in west Chennai, but the enforced solitude, strict routine, and lack of distraction has made it serve as a writer’s cabin retreat, helping him read and write at a prodigious pace. “Besides,” he adds, “each of the thousand prisoners I’ve interacted with has given me a story. I consider them the greatest source of plots, sub-plots and characters for my

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He certainly wouldn't have been able to write his prison diary, *Behind the Bars*, which sold a blockbusting 40 000 copies in Tamil. With its ecstatically bubbly narrative voice, it manages to turn the grim actuality of incarceration into a lively setting for adventures, populated by monkey-faced cats, enormous rats, and characters like Laptop Padmanabhan, Mouse Mahadevan, Wrist-watch Williams, and Herculiyah the bicycle thief, all named after the items they were caught purloining. He's also occasionally a droll observer. Here he is on prison food: "Parboiled rice cakes, Sambhar to the consistency of Bay of Bengal saline, and chapattis slightly thicker than the morning newspaper is hardly an appetizing combination, but a hungry lion has to survive on green grass if that is all that is available."

"Many of the inmates here are fans of my work," Prakash says proudly. He turns to call out to a lean black man who gives him a handshake as he passes by. "Sammy! Come here a moment!" He lopes up to the grill.

"Tell her what you think of my books," Prakash says to him.

He peers at me and asks in a fluty, undulating voice, "Are you one of the characters of *Prisoners of Time*?"

Prakash roars with laughter and sways back from the grill. "I met her for the first time today, Sammy," he says.

Sammy looks at me with some disappointment. "I really want to meet them," he says, and then excuses himself to meet his sister, who has come from Nigeria to visit him.

"*Prisoners of Time* is my latest book," explains Prakash. "It's 3 000 pages, and Sammy has read it twice already! I know it's destined to create history. It's an adventure-romance, and probably India's biggest novel." It is also, he says, an autobiography. Judging from the excerpt on his website, which refers to

writhing, "glistening bodies" engaged in an "acrobatic display" on a remote island beach, it likely dwells on his wanton weekends.

"My books don't sell because they are racy," Prakash is quick to say. "They sell because they are readable and entertaining." For all their smuttiness, they're also – and this is an odd thing to say about a 54-year-old convicted criminal – filled with childlike glee. Prakash's language is as excitable as that of your average Myspace-dwelling teen, and it is just as littered with exclamation points. "The sea was too vast to swim!" "He looked dangerous despite his appearance. Like a smiling mamba!" "The



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giant chap was patting a packet of smack or cocaine and not a pistol or a grenade!"



G Asokan, his publisher, who has been in the Tamil pulp novel business since the 1980s, says that he knew Prakash's books were potential best sellers despite his own "sumaar" (average) English. "I was initially a little doubtful when I met him first in 2007," Asokan recalls, "though my friend, a lawyer, had recommended his work. Within a week, though, I read four or five of his books, and I realised that he wrote well." Asokan has since published six English books under the Banana Books

imprint, and translated five of them into Tamil. The English ones have met with little success, but two of the Tamil books have been bestsellers – his prison diary, and *Tangled Web*, the noir tale of a police officer's ill-starred date, which left him with a blinding hangover and a hideously disfigured corpse. Priced at a pocket-friendly Rs 20, like most Tamil pulp, it sold about 32 000 copies.

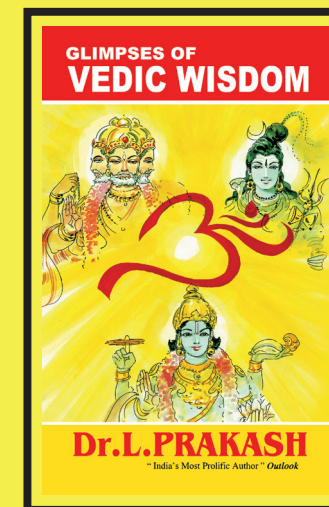
"He might have a particular kind of image," observes Asokan, "but if a book is good, people will read it." And then, sounding like a hard-boiled mystery cover line, he says, "He is intelligent and talented, but his *dhairya*, his boldness, took him down the wrong path."

According to Asokan, many of Prakash's fans are women, mostly from Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Chennai. "Two or three ladies call regularly to find out when the next one is due," he says. "One of them, who lives in Anna Nagar, even invited us to her daughter's wedding!"

One woman, in particular, is the self-professed biggest fan of the doctor's work – Pramila Ramaswamy, his sister, a gynaecologist in Palakkad, Kerala. "All his books are fast and breezy," she says, "His *Mahabharata* is better than a James Hadley Chase, I must say. I've passed it on to some doctor friends, and everyone who has read it has been crazy about it." Ramaswamy has been an admirer of her brother's work ever since she was a child, and fondly recalls a science fiction story he read to her when she was eight. "It was just like *Endhiran*, the recent Rajinikanth hit," she says. "This girl's father is a scientist, he makes a robot, who she falls in love with. They elope to another planet, where there's a fire. The robot, he's made of a waxy material, you see, he melts. I cried a lot after reading it."

His work continues to affect her. "Every time he finishes a book," she says, "every page I read, something happens in my stomach. Why did this happen? When murderers and criminals come out after the trial, why is my brother behind bars?"

Vijayan, Prakash's driver, from Idukki district in Kerala, agrees – despite complaining bitterly about how his seven-year-long incarceration ruined his marriage prospects. "My boss is a good person, a talented person," he says, "and it's a waste for society to lock him away." Vijayan has been managing the doctor's affairs since his release in 2008. He visits him twice a week, maintains his bungalow, disburses salaries, gets the doctor's manuscripts typed up and proofed, and brings him fruit, reading material, and art supplies for his most recent hobby – making papier-mâché masks of chimerical creatures. Like his boss, Vijayan thinks his own



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sentence was unjust and harsh. "Sex *panniyachu* (I had), one-two times," Vijayan says, grinning widely. "If that is wrong, then all ladies and gents should be in jail!" He adds, warming to his theme, "Everybody who works and eats is doing it. That's all they do on Sundays."

Every Sunday, Dr Prakash, for his part, writes, draws and dreams of the life that waits for him outside. "I'll spend time with my dogs and fish," he says eagerly, "and I have to find myself a good international agent – two offers have come already for movie scripts. How I long for my release!"

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