Delhi's Phenomenal Warden Frees Prisoners Her Way
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Like the weather, everyone complains about crime, but no one does much about it. The state of California has decided the only solution is to lock up career criminals-permanently. The state will soon spend more money on prisons than on education. Perhaps California should see what has been done at Delhi's Tihar Jail, home to 8,000 inmates. In just one year-since July, 1993, when Mrs. Kiran Bedi became Inspector-General-the prison has been completely changed from a place of gangs, drugs, extortion, violence and disease to one of constructive education, religious observance and humane treatment of the inmates. Released prisoners are finding useful places in society and not returning. America, which has the world's highest incarceration rate-426 per 100,000 population-has largely given up on the idea of reform.

Not Mrs. Bedi. Relying upon the inherent compassion of Hindu culture, and the belief that every person is ultimately good, she has set a goal to pull the prisoners out of their sense of hopelessness, and steer them into a decent and honest life. She is attempting this feat by cramming their days with early morning and evening prayer meetings, literacy classes, arts and crafts sessions, music and religious discourses. A central part of her reforms has been to introduce and encourage religion. Bedi, who calls herself a humanist, explained to Hinduism Today, "Religion is taught as moralism, how to be good. How to be a good Hindu, a good Sikh, a good Muslim or a good Christian. How to be good towards fellow human beings. We invite priests to assist Christian prisoners for Sunday prayers. We call priests of the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu faith and celebrate all major festivals."

"I do not preach religion," Bedi continued, "I only preach how to be a good human being. I cannot ask them to believe in a deity or not to believe. But I can say, 'Whoever you believe in, see the good quality of the guru or deity, the Prophet, and practice those good deeds.'"

Central to her reform programs (and her own personal spiritual life) is the Vipasana meditation program, as taught by Sri S.N. Goenka. The ancient technique, associated with Lord Buddha, is taught in ten-day residential courses, in which one remains in near continuous silent meditation, communicating with no one at all the entire time. Amazingly, Bedi has conducted just such a session within the jail precincts, joined by a hundred prisoners and staff. "We were looking for a change of behavior. These people are very extraordinarily difficult people, so we thought that they needed a spiritual touch."

Mr. Meher, a prisoner from Palestine who manages the prison library, said that as a result of the Vipasana, "Tension is decreasing day by day. Vipasana is a confidence and tolerance-building mechanism." A Nigerian inmate, S. Abraham, said the meditation camp helped create a peaceful atmosphere in the prison. Ms. Glory, also from Nigeria, testified, "I participated in Vipasana with 50 other women. We felt the presence of God. I got peace like never before. No more fights take place in our ward."

Before taking over Tihar, Bedi was a police officer in Delhi for 22 years. In 1982 she attracted national attention as chief of the traffic police, cracking down so firmly on illegal parking that she even had the Prime Minister's limousine towed. In her youth she was a national tennis champion.

Asked about her religious beliefs, she said, "I pray to the Hindu deities. I go to gurudwara. I have been to church, but have not been to a mosque. I believe in Hinduism. I have Hindu Gods and Goddesses at home. I have pictures of great saints and teachers. I pray for inspiration from them. I practice service to mankind. That is my religion."

Tihar Jail holds 8,500 inmates, and is controlled by a massive guard staff of 2,500. In the mid-eighties the situation there was so bad that V.R. Krishna Iyer, a former Supreme Court judge, disclosed, "Were there even a modicum of truth in the disclosures made of vice and violence, overt and covert, going on in Tihar, such outrage should make our constitutional culture blush."

Her reform programs have resulted in improved cleanliness of both prison and prisoners, a healthier vegetarian diet, and the institution of a closely-supervised

self-management system of elders within each ward. Bedi explained, "One needs a holistic approach to prison administration. You cannot think in isolation. For example, in order to stop the smoking habit of the prisoners, you have to take away the smoking habit of the staff."

The Deputy Inspector General, Jayadev Sarangi, summarized the change. "Before we used to emphasize custodial administration. Now, besides it, we lay emphasis on rehabilitation, recreation and reform. If prisoners do not learn anything while being in jail, on their return to society, they have nothing. But, now a full-scale education is being implemented. In a year's time, we have seen some of the prisoners go back and start a meaningful life."

Joginder Kaur, Head Martin of the Women's Cell, added, "We feel very happy about the changes. She treats all of us like a mother. We wake up the inmates in the morning. They offer prayer and then take breakfast. Up to 11:00am they study. We have convinced them that learning is good."

Phool Singh, a head constable, observed, "Since 1970 I am working here. I know all these criminals. We never thought these programs could really take place in a jail. They used to consume all sorts of drugs. But now they do not even smoke a bidi. All the prisoners are busy from morning until late evening in various programs. Earlier they used to fight. Now nothing of that sort happens."

Bedi has a basic bottom line: "We want to change man's mind through moral education, and the experiment continues. We have stopped being lazy."

Address: Tihar Central Jail, New Delhi, 110064, India.

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Personal Quotes

Inmates:

Madam (Mrs. Bedi) has done Vipasana meditation in Jaipur. When she told us about this, we thought if our Inspector General can do this, why can't we do it? We joined Vipasana. I got peace of mind and now I participate in religious activities. I used to take drugs, smack. Nowadays, I don't even smoke.- Syed Waris Ali

When I came here 13 years ago, I picked up the bad habit of intoxication. Recently, Madam has come as a Kiran [Ray of Light] in our life, which was full of darkness. I got a new lease in life. - Deep Chand

I was born in England, brought up in Australia and live in Hong Kong. I think it is all good-no smoking is good and the yoga program is excellent. Some people say the jail is better now, some do not. We are getting more privileges than before. With a little bit of time and persistence, things will further improve. - Mr. David

I do not participate in yoga or Vipasana, but I learn Urdu and regularly offer 'Namaz.'

- Mohd. Maqdul

Freedom was available outside, but now it is available here. Nowadays the prisoners who leave the jail usually do not return again. There is a sharp drop in crime in here. Our quality of food has improved. Religious discourses have been organized. Acharya Sushil Muniji of the Jain religion used to visit us. - Surendra Singh, a senior inmate

Inmates' Relatives:

My brother and Bhabi both are inside the jail. It used to be very difficult to meet them. But now it is much easier. My Bhabi is happy. She is learning to read and write. I am equally happy that on her return she can manage herself properly. - Saroj

My husband is in this jail for 10 years. Now I can bring food from home. My husband was a short-tempered man. Now he is learning yoga. He is much more polite. - Amrit Kaur