

Postcard to Bhopal Central Jail: 'Thank You for Teaching Me'

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*What began with a group of volunteers reading aloud to students has become a lifeline for students in the hinterland and a source of relief for the prison inmates helping them. **SHEFALI TRIPATHI MEHTA** writes on a unique and noble experiment going on behind prison walls in Bhopal.*

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LOO, the hot summer breeze that sweeps through the plains of Central India relentlessly throughout summer, was raising mini red-soil whirlpools on the roads on that unbearably hot day of May as we waited in a shed-like structure outside the Central Jail, Bhopal, to be let in.

Apart from us, there were a few police personnel and people in twos and threes sitting on their haunches, presumably there to meet someone lodged inside. They appeared poor, careworn, and obsequious in the manner of the “mango class” in the presence of police and politicians. We were called in first (of course) and taken to the Jail Superintendent’s large office, where we were introduced and offered cold water to drink.

The Jail Superintendent spoke to us intermittently while clearing his table of files and meeting other waiting people. While still signing and pushing papers away, he asked one of his deputies to take us inside. We were asked to deposit our mobile phones at the gate, and then, much like in films, a small door set within two towering doors was opened to let us in. Like kittens, we climbed over and were inside the actual precincts where the inmates live and work. It was as neat as a child’s drawing.

We were there to meet the men who recorded lessons for students who are blind and see the recording studio they had set up. In a large hall, we were seated on the front sofas and served tea and biscuits. The inmates had formed a music band and sang a few patriotic and spiritual songs away from us on a stage. The singing was so soul-stirring that not a single eye remained dry. The tea in my hand grew tepid. I have never been so embarrassed as then for having tea and biscuits sitting before those men whose voices dripped with honesty. But to refuse would have been rude to our kind hosts.

There are no tape recorders, no cassette players. What is the relevance of this work, I ask? Volunteers from Arushi tell me these devices are only available in big cities. In the hinterlands, 90% of students do not have digital access to study material. Without the recordings done by prisoners, thousands of students would never study.

The jail inmates were dressed in clean, white khadi kurta-pyjama and had Gandhi topis on—much like the disciplined *dabbawallas* of Mumbai, I thought. The lead singer was a gentle-faced young man, not a day older than thirty-five. He, like some others, wore a black kurta instead of white. In hushed tones, we were told that those in black are in for life.

The recording studio next to the stage was like a shopfront; a glass façade, a digital recorder, and microphones. Stacked next to the recorder was a pile of school and college textbooks. A few lay open on their faces. The work was on. One of them showed us how they are recorded by reading out a passage from a textbook.

Education without literacy

In the early 1990s desktop computers with tower-like external CPUs were installed inside air-conditioned rooms, where, before you entered, you had to take off your footwear and wear black rubber slides of the same large size so that you did not take “dust” inside. In effect, computers were not easily accessible.

In earlier pre-screen-reader or digital audiobook times, students with blindness got “educated” without ever becoming literate. All their learning was auditory. They listened to the teachers in class, and if they could afford a portable cassette recorder, they recorded important parts and listened to these to prepare for exams.

Those who could afford them would have scribes reading out to them. These scribes were also enlisted to write their exams. So, without learning to read and write, students with blindness received their school and college degrees.

What about Braille, you ask? Braille is a significant invention for people with blindness and low vision, but this six-dot tactile writing system is a complete no-go option for writing since it is slow and tedious for day-to-day work. A text gets multiplied three to four times in Braille.

Need for scribes

Scribes were hard to find. It was mostly due to a lack of awareness among non-disabled people who believed, and still do, that people with blindness do not go to school; that they are those who sing at high, unpleasant pitches on trains and weave plastic cane chairs.

A college student who cannot see, who had regular scribes, asked one of them if some more of his friends were willing to read to the boys at the Blind School. Quickly, a group formed, and volunteers began to read out to students who could not see, most of whom were preparing for their Class X board exam. Then, to circumvent the constraints of time and presence in face-to-face reading, the volunteers began to record lessons in their free time on used audio cassettes that they collected as donations.

The work was catching on. The group began enlisting more volunteers. Anyone ready to lend their voice could come, take a textbook and audio cassette home, record and bring it back. Initially, they were all students, but gradually, many retired people and stay-at-home mothers joined the initiative. But the effort always seemed in short supply compared with the need, and this group realised they had discovered the proverbial tip of an iceberg. As word got around, an increasing number of blind students from other parts of the country began writing to request an audio recording of specific study material.

When the demand increased in summer with school and college exams approaching, the number of volunteers dwindled as most of them had exams to study for, homemakers had to attend to children at home. Summer vacation followed, and volunteers had other things to do. The core group had to find people who could work dedicatedly, not constrained by time.

The group requested the Jail Superintendent to let the inmates record study material. The answer at first was a stern no. Very few people in high offices want to take a chance. Those without a vision want the status quo—no questions asked, nothing risked. Besides, this kind of project was unheard-of.

Nobody in the group can pinpoint how they hit on this idea, zeroed in on this literally captive set of people. They requested the Jail Superintendent to let the inmates record study material. The answer at first was a stern *no*. Very few people in high offices want to take a chance. Those without a vision want the status quo—no questions asked, nothing risked. Besides, this kind of project was unheard-of. The inmates had physical work to do and prayer and introspection to occupy themselves. No interaction with the world outside could be allowed. Yet, the team did not give up; experience has taught them that government machinery could take years of persistence but mostly paid off.

They approached the Jail Superintendent again when there was a change of guard. The new in-charge was willing to try. So, in 1999, a tape-recorder with a public address system and some textbooks were brought into the jail and the process of recording lessons was demonstrated.

A link established

As a fixed format, at the end of each lesson, when the narrator completes the voice recording, they record their name and location. When the jail inmates signed off, they took their names and added, “from Central Jail, Bhopal”. Within a few months, the jail started receiving postcards addressed to these men from students across the country, thanking them for their invaluable help in their studies. Some students would write to tell them more—what they were studying and how much they had scored.

The prisoner-volunteers had begun to elicit a repose from the world outside their stark limewashed walls.

Some of them, incarcerated for life, seemed to have found a purpose in their lives. One day, an inmate handing the recorded cassettes requested a volunteer who had come to collect it, “Could you share it with my daughter so she knows I am doing this work?”

Several devoted themselves to the task and kept asking for more work. Sometimes, when they were taken for medical visits to government hospitals or out for other purposes, they requested to visit Arushi, the name under which the group had by then been formally registered, as a not-for-profit. Although the volunteers say they feel embarrassed by how these men were brought in, held by policemen, and sometimes, with hands tied behind them. Still, the human connection was cherished on both sides.

Still relevant

The sky was cooling off to a dirt blue as we came out of the auditorium. Scores of birds were noisily settling into the tall mango and neem trees. Some men in the white kurta-pyjamas stopped what they were doing to look at us.

It is the 2020s. There are no tape-recorders, no cassette players. What is the relevance of this work, I ask? Volunteers from Arushi laugh and tell me that these changes are only in the big cities. In the hinterlands, ninety percent of students do not have digital access to study material, and these audio lessons are their only means to study.

Most prisoners are not hardened criminals even though they have committed heinous crimes. Many repent their crimes. When they come in, most are depressed at the thought of the years ahead in prison. Jail Superintendent Dave counselled them two decades ago, “Use this opportunity, be part of a noble cause, use your education for the benefit of others.”

Although they have moved from audio-cassettes to compact disks and, more recently, to pen drives on cell phones, thousands of students would be left to the constraints of their circumstances without their recordings.

Prisoners in for sentences longer than two years get lodged in Central Jails. Most are not hardened criminals even though they have committed heinous crimes such as murder. Many admit they are repentant for the crimes they committed, often in the heat of the moment. When they come in first, most of them are depressed at the thought of the long

years ahead in prison. It is they whom Jail Superintendent Dave had counselled two decades ago, “Use this opportunity, be part of a noble cause, use your education for the benefit of others.”

There is deliverance in this thought. There is self-worth in reading out a textbook and sending it off to a student who will listen to one’s voice and learn, receive an education and gain the freedom to live, learn and become independent.

Being socially useful reduces recidivism. Working in the kitchens, gardening, spinning, tailoring, furniture-making, there are several avenues available inside the jails for these men and women to keep themselves occupied.

There are several educational opportunities to facilitate the transition of these individuals back into their communities. But if there is one job the literate inmates of the Bhopal Jail consider noble; that they say is next to prayer, it is the recording of lessons; being the eyes for those who cannot see. That they have only the same patch of blue to look at is a less confining thought.

(Shefali Tripathi Mehta is an author and editor. She works with Azim Premji University. Her most recent book is the novel, People on Our Roof. (Niyogi Books) The views expressed are personal.)