Transforming a Hell into Ashram: Kiran Bedi's Contribution in Reforming Tihar Jail

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Abstract

Bedi has really innovative ideas, creativity, courage, determination, fearlessness and firm faith in the cause made the almost impossible possible. Credit goes to constructive hard work of Dr. Bedi which changed Tihar jail, one of the most terrifying and frightening prison, nearly a hell into an Ashram where prisoners were treated not as damned evil doers who ought to be badly treated but as persons who can be transformed and brought into the main stream with little love, understanding, kindness and compassion. It was her firm conviction that constant, unselfish, sympathetic and concerned communication improves even a toughened criminal. It makes possible in softening and rehabilitating many a criminal by the pure strength of genuine and honest intentions. The book 'It's Always Possible' written by Dr. Kiran Bedi, an truthful, sincere, committed, humanitarian and benevolent leader who devoted her life to serve the masses and oppressed, portrays the touching chronicle of the magnetic and captivating leader who absolutely revolutionized an ill institution through her complete and firm determination and will power. This book has all the components of empowering leadership. It is a perfect example of how an ailing institution can be revived and brought to life.

Dr. Bedi was awarded the post of Inspector General of Jail which was not considered as a popular post. She was awarded this post perhaps as a penalty ironically in return of her splendid devoted hard work as a police officer. Credit goes to her that due to her sheer grit and will power she was able to create this as a chance and golden opportunity in improving the wretched and hellish conditions of the Tihar jail. She also received worldwide appreciation in the form of Raman Magsaysay award (known as the Nobel Prize of Asia) in 1994 for her philanthropic, selfless and humane work. Tihar jail is indeed a monument, a living history which is vital to the maintenance of peace and harmony in the society by curbing crime. As the largest prison of the country and located in the centre of the country this jail also plays a trend setting role for other jails. It is occupied by thousands of people behind threatening and frightening high cement walls. It was indeed a big marvel that Dr. Kiran Bedi got succee in completely transforming the conditions of the jail and making it an ashram instead of mere top-security prison in short span of time (May 93 to May 95). In May 95 when she was at the highest point of her reformative fervor, she was transferred to other post.

The book has all the ingredients which present the power of constructive thinking, selfassurance, altruism, devotion, belief and trust in others. It is because of these reasons, it is really a immense evidence of human endeavour and effort that can move the hill if it so wills as it is evident that impossible is really a word to be found in the dictionary of fools. A real

champion and advocate for great cause believes in doing things right whatever difficulties may cross her way.

Tihar Jail before and after Kiran Bedi: Kiran Bedi, the first woman IPS officer had remained in the eyes of storm because of her truthfulness, integrity and boldness. Though much applauded, commended and celebrated figure, she had been a controversial figure and not liked by her officer friends. That is why after a long wait of nine months, she was given the post of IG of Tihar jail perhaps thinking that this is a punishment posting and she would hold a post which is thankless and insignificant but through her grit, vigor and constructive thinking, she proved it otherwise. Her efforts to change the awkward place, in reality a hell on the earth into a properly neat clean and livable place for humanbeings brought recognition and eminence and she won many glorious awards including Magsaysay award rightly considered the Nobel Prize of Asia.

When she entered into the citadel of the jail, she found that there were no modern electronic gadgets or devices. Inmates were confused and panicky and indisposed. There was no amiable and cordial relation between prisoners and prison guards as the guard showed feeling of enmity and hostility towards prisoners and moved their sticks threateningly and warningly at the prisoners. The prison was over-populated and over crowded with prisoners. Prisoners were treated not like human beings but like animals.

Food at Jail: At Tihar, prisoners did not have any breakfast but only lunch and dinner which consisted of five chapattis, lentils and vegetables. Containers used to give out the food were corroded iron containers used multi-purposely for storing water, bathing and even for carrying garbage. This clearly indicates that there was no thought of health and hygiene. These containers were covered with equally unclean towels. Cooks were mostly prisoners who mostly used to wear dirty clothes and had soiled, disheveled hair. There was no quality control to check the food quality. Food material was of substandard quality. Food was cooked without spices and was unsavory and tasteless like medicine. Vegetables and lentils were not washed before cooking. Cooks used to keep delicious food for themselves. Food served was totally unhealthy, unclean and polluted as rotis were thrown on the same floor on which people walked. Even insects were found in food. Milk served in the jail had more water than milk.

Basic Facilities: Due to lack of ventilation, there was intolerable heat and prisoners were almost roasted. There was less power supply and also shortage of water. Water is necessary for drinking as well as for toilet. From 6 in night to 6 in morning toilets of the cell were used. Toilets were less and overcrowded Many tapes were defective. Water supply was after the confinement time so water was wasted. Fights for water were common. Sewers were clogged. Though there were hand pumps and tube wells but due to lack of maintenance they were not working properly. Because of that there were outbreaks of cholera and dysentery. Cleaning of the toilets was done by the prisoners themselves. There was monopoly of P.W.D. which provided weak consumer service of water, sanitation, health and hygiene.

Ground Realities: The jail was infected with many problems such as excess numbers of inmates beyond the capacity of the jail, majority of under trials, no provision of breakfast, shortage of water, filthy and unclean cooks, piled up rubbish, congested sewers, poor quality unhealthy and polluted food, foul-smelling toilets, cells infested with mosquitoes, recurrent skirmishes, quarrels and fighting among prisoners.

Shocking Health conditions: Prisoners suffered from failing eyesight, decaying teeth, hypertension, diabetes, heart problems, fever, and cough. Conditions were susceptible to frequent epidemics. Criminals were sent to prison after medical checkup by jail doctor. Prisoners suffering from acute infectious diseases were put together with normal persons. There were few doctors and more prisoners. Doctors were mainly inaccessible, giving less time to patients, apathetic, mercenary. Many suffered with T.B., leprosy and asthma. Doctors used to prescribe medicines indiscriminately. Doctors used to advocate ineffective medicines. Many patients were addicted to tranquillizers. Prisoners were sent outside for medical treatment. Many healthy prisoners were sent for medical check -up outside after paying bribe. The jail had a hospital but it was overcrowded. There were not even enough beds. Prisoners were allotted beds on bribe. X-ray machine was out of order E.C.G. machine and dental chairs were not functioning properly. There were no nurses as vacancies are not filled up. Gangsters used to fake exaggerated ailments. Medical infrastructure was in shambles, medicines were in short supply and instruments were outdated. There was dearth of good doctors and specialists. There was lack of commitment among doctors. There was prevalence of chronic diseases and treatment of patients was not proper. Prisoners were often seeking court intervention for medical treatment. There were 46 children along with their mothers but there was no child specialist doctor. There was no immunization scheme for children. There was no crèche for the proper look after of tiny tots. This was mainly happening as doctors were not under control of prison authorities. Mentally challenged prisoners were not provided essential clothing, slippers, towels, toiletries; chapattis were thrown in their cells from outside

Internal Conditions: System was heavily dependent on prisoners as the jail was under -staff. Toilet cleaning was mostly done by inmates. There was much discrimination among prisoners based on their power and pelf. Life-term convict were mostly deployed for night watch duties. They used to bully others and fulfill their carnal desires with men. Condition of the cells was unhygienic and cells were cramped and over-crowded. Kitchens were dirty and shabby; cooks wore dirty clothes and had unkempt hair and uncut nails. Even the pots used to serve food were rusty, dirty multi-purpose pots which were used even as dustbin.

Administration heavily dependent on prisoners: To evade duties prisoners often greased the palm of officials. Visitors were often instrumental in making the corruption more prevalent as they greased palms of the concerned authorities surreptitiously for entry of food items from outside. Permission for extra relative to meet, allowing longer meeting time. The authorities exercised their power and authority by withholding the visitation when due. Favours were done at the residence of jailors by the gangsters.

Lack of Provisions for Security: The security of the prison was affected by unsatisfactory supervision, dilapidated conditions of the watch towers, over- tired staff, strained due to long hours they have to keep, employment of convicts on clerical posts., leakage of information unsatisfactory supervision as nocturnal activities remained mostly undetected,., weak insecure conditions which led to riots in 1990, overcrowding was also one of the reasons of insecurity, professional management was not supportive callous attitude at the death of the prisoner.

Conditions of Women Prisoners: Women were kept apart and their problems differ from male prisoners. There was serious overcrowding so the cells were cramped. They were often misbehaved by officials and they were threatened against making any complaints. They were sexually exploited by law enforcement agencies. Their living condition was very pathetic and pitiable. They were mostly impoverished, and poorly literate. There was no fruitful occupation or work so they used to quarrel among themselves.

There was no special provision for the children of convicted women prisoners so they led a miserable life away from the society. Without committing any crime themselves, these children used to live life of prisoners. Unhealthy environment, poor food quality, lack of exposure used to make these children little brats who used very foul and abusive language and talked about crimes.

Foreign Prisoners: Foreign prisoners were mostly convicts caught in drug trafficking case. They stayed in over -crowded cells. There were also ethnic groups formed on the basis of different culture and religions such as Christians and Muslims. They had problems as they had communication gap due to different language, different food habits, cultural differences and lack of visitors.

Adolescent prisoners: They were from diverse background but mostly slum dwellers. They were convicted for the crimes of attempted murder, kidnapping, stabbing, drug-peddling, burglary and street and house-hold thefts as they were interested in making easy money. Female adolescents were mostly caught in immoral trafficking and street theft. They showed signs of remorse for their crimes while their male counterparts were unrepentant. Their youth energy was misdirected and they thought still of making one time money. Most of them indulged in gambling, smoking, abusing, bullying and gossiping.

Gangsters Galore: The members of notorious gangs were imprisoned for the multiple crimes like murder, mayhem, extortion of money, drug supply and caste and gang wars. They got special privilege and had a regular stream of visitors. Notorious, hardened criminals considered jail as the safe abode where they were free from the worry of their enemies. They often took the help of doctors to live an easy life.

Reformative Measures Taken by Kiran Bedi :Thus the jail was infested with these problems and no solution appeared in sight but the visionary, devoted and self-less leader Dr. Kiran Bedi took firm steps to bring the desirable changes through her grit, energy and selfless love even for the hardened prisoners.

Compassion Towards Prisoners: According to Kiran Bedi crime and delinquency is a thought action product. Crime correction has to take the thought-mind-intellect route to reach its goalpost of crime-free living. She was of the firm opinion that her role was not to be judgmental about the crimes of even hardened criminals but to provide them opportunities where they can live a safe, secure, healthy and comfortable life. In the brief regime of Bedi, rigid and distant hierarchies were broken down. The prisoners were protected and stood enveloped from all sides- officers, staff and the useful members of the community. Written directives, leading by example, problem solving, mission statement, strategies declaration, regular and direct access transparent functioning helped to bring the desirable change and reforms. Transparency and accessibility developed through family culture with integrated. family welfare, hierarchical flexibility, by encouraging Interaction, delegation and leadership, by daily morning rounds with spot briefing ,by providing open rewards and deterrant punishment, by officers acting as role models, by adopting Open policy in transfer, postings and promotion. Instead of barbaric punishment, encouraging an institutional system of grievance redressal through mobile petition box , allowing NGOs to enter, allowing under trials to work and earn if they so desired, initiating care and rehabilitation of prisoners, by medical examination of the convict on the same day., by abolishing solitary confinement, by training prison authorities about the responsibilities and rights of prisoners, by regular auditing, by following C models i.e. collective, corrective and community. In past the jail was a breeding ground of corruption and savagery where new criminals were trained, killers recruited and dope addicts created but now human rights respected, better and hygienic food provided, proper medical attendance given, effective rehabilitation programme implemented. Crusading police women transformed the hell hole of women cell.

Regular Rounds: Before her other officials were happy with only checking the files as they took this duty lightly but Dr. Kiran Bedi decided to take interest in jail proceedings. She decided to take rounds herself and note down important suggestions. She met the prisoners when taken to court and interacted about food, water supply and distribution of milk. She met with a perfect representative sample as she met prisoners from various jails. This exercise helped her in knowing and remedying their problems. Staff also became more active, concerned and vigilant, alert and conscious. Taking rounds also minimized need for situational reports, improved punctuality of the staff, ensured on the spot interaction with staff and inmates. It improved both inter and intra communication. Prisoners were motivated to speak of their unsolved problems and also suggest solutions. It also provided opportunity for test checks. It increased increase of mutual respect between inmates and the staff. It reduced complaints to courts against the officials. Prison environment became relaxed and reduced tension, enabled observation, interaction, learning, solving and evolving. Observations were typed and photocopies displayed. The work of officers evaluated constantly. It vanished red tapism. Doctors were advised not to ask personal questions. It restored the confidence of prisoners and they stopped going to court for redressal.

Mobile petition box: She also introduced the system of mobile petition box. It was introduced to counter gossip network which was marked predominantly by secrecy, callousness and indifference. In this locked box was circulated among the prisoners. They wrote about their problems like water scarcity, unsatisfactory cleanliness, ineffective supervision, absence of doctors and non-availability of medicines. Through these mobile petition boxes, suggestions were given for improvement, valuable information provided, creativity encouraged by sharing, feeling of gratefulness expressed, also grievances against police, court and lawyers expressed. Sometimes family problems were also expressed. She also took steps to provide clean water, nourishing, and healthy food to prisoners. Security of the jail was also improved. Meeting of jail staff and prisoners were organized as Sampark Sabha.

Providing for Basic Requirement: For improving the conditions of prisoners National Open School Classes are to be organized at the jail. IGNOU syllabus was provided so that their minds may be used in positive direction, Satsangs organized for adolescents and cassettes for Vipasasna a form of meditation were distributed. Basic requirements like soap and oil provided. Flit sprayed to check the menace of mosquitoes, redistribution of blankets and utensils was done. Goals, objectives and mission were decided.

Staff development: For staff development, gatherings of family members on religious functions were organized. In some meetings, plan for welfare of family and children's education were discussed. Head warders were asked to organize prayer, yoga, physical training exercise, gardening and educational classes. This was done to enhance their selfesteem. She had tea sessions with staff members in which problems like how to strengthen female ward, construction of visitors' room, shortage of sweepers and construction of sports complex were discussed. These sessions eliminated lurking suspicions, nagging doubts and latent bitterness. It enabled the internal management to deal with issues like education, yoga, prayer management, roll calls, P.W.D. maintenance, library, horticulture, games, health, hygiene, essential services, clerical support, vocational training, mess management, job work management, procurement and distribution of canteen items and satsang. To supplement the income of staff members, a filter manufacturing unit was opened. A healthy competition among 4 prisons developed. The purpose was to develop collective effort with total cooperation. Both staff members and inmates were encouraged to enroll themselves in National Open School and Indira Gandhi Open University. Problems like payment of arrears, seniority issues and issue of uniforms were cleared. Insurance cover was provided for the staff and various welfare funds established. Kiran used motivation and persistence with selective and deterrent punishment.

Innovations Used by Kiran Bedi

Spiritual Practice: As a truly spiritual being, Kiran Bedi did not consider prisoners as the persons without any dignity as she somehow perceived that all human beings have inherent goodness but that need to be encouraged whereas devilish part which would have provoked the criminals to do crime at the spur of moment, passions and emotions. She firmly believed that spiritual well-being, good hobby, provision for better pastime, deviation from destructive thoughts and activities, indulgence in creative and fruitful work can make them better human beings. For mobilizing the human resource creatively she introduced Prabhatpheris by prisoners with devotional songs in place of age old harsh wake up calls., encouraged prisoners to pray and play together, invited Brahma Kumaris, Ramkrishna mission, yoga teachers Sardari Lal and Tripta Bhanot to train the inmates in Yoga, invited Sheetal Sehgal who was running counseling and legal aid centres and schools for deprived children to do the same for prisoners. Thus Yoga, spiritual discourse, occupational training and counseling for women started. First ever crèche in jail was also established so that children of women prisoners can have better opportunity to progress and develop.

Self-governance: For self-governance following committees were constituted so that work can be divided and satisfactorily completed. Panchayats like Ward Panchayat and Mess Panchayat were constituted to look after food management, Education Panchayat to look after educational activities, Sports Panchayat to look after sports facilities and proper utilization of these facilities, Medical Panchayat to look after medical and health provisons, Cultural Panchayat to look after cultural activities, Legal Panchayat to look after legal issues

Educational Process: Prisoners were encouraged to manage time. Literacy programme started from 9 to11a.m. Blackboards were made by the carpenters. Even school children donated note books, pens and pencils. There used to be daily attendance and weekly tests. Teenagers scored more. Foreign and Indian languages taught. Many correspondence courses started. Deepalya(NGO), VidyaJyoti College of Theology, Urdu and Punjab academy helped. Tihar education programme was supervised by Panchayat staff and senior officers including I.G. Educational material was gifted from outside as well as provided by the jail. Teaching staff constituted of prison community teachers and outside community teachers. It meant that educated persons of the prison community taught others while individuals like Tani Bhargava, Shanti Singh, Neeraj Khosla, Manoj Goel, Sheetal Sehgal ,Saroj Vashisht took part in this. National Open School, Punjabi and Urdu Academy, Meera Model School, Lady Fatima School were happy to cooperate in this great cause. Institutions like IGNOU, Shakshi, Arya Publishing House, Penguin Books Ltd. Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. And Ajanta Books International were willing volunteers.

Vocational Training: She firmly believed in the dictum that an empty mind is a devil's workshop. To keep the prisoners busy as well as equip them with necessary skills to earn livelihood in future she also introduced opportunities for vocational training. Institutions like Shramik Vidyapith, State Resource Centre and Jamia Milia University willingly provided their services to train the inmates for different vocations. They were taught skills like book binding, file cover making, aggarbatti stick rolling, tailoring, chalk making and repairing of T.V. and radio sets. Many industrial houses were also willing to cooperate but had difficulty as the stay period of prisoners remained uncertain due to legal proceedings.

Disciplined Life: The prisoners were encouraged to lead a disciplined life to develop positive values and discourage negative and destructive thoughts. In the morning literary activities were followed by vocational training. Evening was reserved for games and sports. Lectures and motivational talks by eminent persons like Nassuruddin, Manoj Prabhakar, Rajmohan Gandhi, Salman Khurshid, Hindu Pandits, Christian and Muslim priests, Representatives from ISCON, Osho, Brahmakumaris, Ramkrishan Mission addressed evening congregations. Sometimes there were even talks by the inmates themselves about their spiritual journey. Festivals were celebrated to develop the feeling of brotherhood and humaneness. Prisoners took part in value based plays, participated in seminars and learnt music. All this was to develop feelings of oneness, love, affection instead of hate and jealousy.

De-addiction Drive: Many inmates took drugs when they were not provided they used to make macabre. When not provided drugs, they used to make macabre sounds. Drug peddlers used to supply drugs. To solve this the drug abusers were clustered apart, comprehensive plan was put in place to control supply and demand of drugs inside the prison., treatment centres were opened inside the prison, alternative medicine was integrated with health care. Homeopathic medicines were given to provide rest. practised therapeutic community model, medical diet of addicts enhanced. N.G.O.s strengthened the education and treatment programmes, Homeopathic medicines were given to provide rest, addicted employees were also separated. Medical treatment was given. Silver foil from cigarette removed so that it could not be used for drug taking, N.G.O. Asara helped in de-addiction drive efforts were made to shape their pro-social behavior. It resulted in their enhanced self-esteem, increased discipline, decrease in quarrels, better coping with anger, less smuggling of drugs, Navjyoti Institution helped in de-addicition drive through counseling and audio visual programme, Yoga was used for de addiction., Brahmakumaris, Asshiana and All India Institute of Medical sciences, New Delhi helped in de-addiction drive. Anti-social and asocial behavior was changed into pro-social behavior through counseling. Longitudinal study of negative behavior was also done. Detoxification drive enhanced self-esteem, increased discipline, decreased quarrels, helped in better coping with anger, reduced smuggling of drugs, inmates began to take interest in community work. Prison complex was declared a no smoking zone.

Medical Service: To improve the dilapidated condition of medical facilities, she introduced a system of mobile dispensary and made the doctors take rounds. Alternative therapies like homeopathic medicines were used. To counter the problem of shortage of doctors, non official doctors were requested to attend the patients. They proved to be more prompt than regular doctors. Daily work journal was sent to prison. The record of individual doctors was maintained. In case of emergency, even hiring taxis to get medical aid was permitted. Doctors from outside were also contacted in case of medical emergency. Comprehensive medical register of all convicts maintained. Ultramodern detoxification centre established. Terminally ill inmates could be visited by their relatives even outside visiting hours. Use of addictive medicines banned. First aid course in medicine was offered to inmates. Bharat Vikas parishad donated wheel chairs and artificial limbs. Dr. Bhutani a famous eye specialist helped the prisoners by checking their eyes and providing spectacles. Instead of only allopathic, Ayurvedic, homeopathic, Unani medicines were also used to provide succor and relief to the doomed lot of this humanity. Out of order, old dilapidated medical instruments were replaced. Many more doctors from outside were willing to lend support. Community also provided generous and comprehensive support in health care. Government order to direct the transfer of management and control of Tihar Medical Services to the Directorate of Health Services (DHS), made the work difficult but due to the selfless reformative zeal of Kiran, reforms continued.

Education on Disease Prevention: For this hygiene and cleanliness improved. Clean water and soap was provided. Cutting nails, daily bathing, wearing clean clothes was made compulsory.

Improving Conditions of Women Prisoners: To empower women's conditions, they were firmly made literate by inmates as well as outside teachers. Mathematics, Science, Literature, Grammar and Social Sciences were taught. Examination was also conducted. Supply of clean water was ensured and they were encouraged to be clean through daily bathing and wearing clean clothes. New diversions stopped their quarrels and bickering and made them positive and creative. She worked hard to improve their condition. Mahila Pratiraksha Mandal dealt with relatives of these women and contacted lawyers to fight their cases. N.G.O. Sakshi provided lawyers to women prisoners. Marg an organization organized a legal literacy workshop to provide knowledge about legal petitioning, visiting rights for relatives and trial procedure. The Family, an organization helped through its philanthropic efforts of teaching music and theatre programme. Pramila Kapur put forward proposals for rehabilitation of her target group i.e. prostitutes. Justice Fatima Biwi directed to speed up trials of women. Sister Max used her creative energy, marketing acumen and unwavering determination to launch self-financing programme that enabled women inmates to be self-reliant. These women were trained to handpaint clothes, making greeting cards, printing gift wrapping papers, knitting so that they can become self-reliant when their prison term is over. These measures were highly effective as women inmates learnt to value time. They surged ahead of their male counterparts in creativity and time management. They became a homogenous group which facilitated programmes. They received an intensive package of services like education, vocational training, legal aid, banking, art and culture. Their creative instincts found an outlet. They developed a positive vision for future.

Caring about Innocent Children: A great tragedy with these women was that their children born in their prison time were had to also remain in prison amid all those dire circumstances. Confined in the four walls of the magnanimous Tihar jail, they were deprived of their innocence, purity, childhood joys and sorrows and education. They were malnourished and socially deprived and learnt the foul language and violence improve their conditions, Mahila Pratiraksha Mandal was established. Nursery school was established to teach 60 children who were deprived of their basic human right without any fault of their own. They were provided toys to play and enjoy the bliss of their childhood even amid the ghastly prison conditions.

The Results: Result of the well-meditated efforts of Kiran Bedi ensued following results. The material and essential instruments for prisoners were bought through welfare fund. Open air auditorium was constructed by prisoners. Garbage was turned into manure. Market having multiple items came into existence. One pond was constructed. Prisoners were encouraged to participate in festivals. This has resulted in restoration of self-esteem and feeling of security, recording of rounds showed prisoners' involvement in the activities, handicraft work introduced in women's cell made them learn some life sustaining skills. A Japanese was provided guitar. He became comparatively happy and played guitar. It reduced tensions among prisoners. In her tenure there were only minor scuffles. It also brought the policy change as it was realized that keeping the inmates busy in productive and recreational activities reduce stress and strain.

Learning values: Thus this book is a saga of the heroic efforts of a brave woman and crusader. This is really a very inspiring book from which an expert swimmer of the sea of knowledge can gather the pearls of wisdom like believe in the inherent goodness of all. Many crimes are done at the sudden impulse which makes a man forget right and wrong. Even criminals are human beings having inherent human qualities. Their basic qualities can be developed through unselfish love, care and faith. Gandhi ji's precept 'Hate the sin not the sinner' need to be followed and tireless, ceaseless devoted efforts can change even the hardened criminals as positive thinking can bring the positive change. A true leader should lead by examples as shown by Kiran Bedi who changed the rotting system by actually involving herself in the prison activities. Having faith in ourselves can win many friends to help one in noble cause as shown in the book. Many communities came to assist in noble cause.

Reference

Kiran Bedi, (2002) It is Always Possible, Sterling Publishing Private Limited, New Delhi