

The inmate and the entrepreneur

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It would have been reasonable for a CSR engagement to extend from the backyard of an industrial premises to a correction home (what we used to call jail once upon a time), but an industrial facility extending to the correction home itself?

This is precisely what makes the industrial initiative between Spark Minda, Ashok Minda Group, Maruti Suzuki and Tihar Jail one of the most exciting within the ambit of correctional

space reforms within India.

This was perhaps an idea whose time had come anyway; for years, the various projects being run successfully within Tihar Jail comprised shoe making, chemical unit, bakery, paper processing, furniture and carpentry, so perhaps the time had come to extend these learnings to the next big play - industrial manufacture. This project at Asia's largest correctional home has been implemented by Minda Furukawa Electric Pvt. Ltd. (joint venture between Spark Minda, Ashok Minda Group of India and Furukawa of Japan), a company that manufactures wiring harnesses and components (couplers, terminals, relay box, junction box, and steering roll connectors).

There are a number of reasons why this CSR experiment could prove to be a game-changer in our legacy perception of inmates and correctional homes.

One, those inside correctional homes were for long seen as lost to mainstream society; it is initiatives like these that reconcile the sidestream with mainstream.

Two, those who spend years inside correctional homes seldom collect monetisable skills. Besides, even when they do, there is no organized discipline that focuses on quality, productivity or market linkages. This project has commissioned a full-fledged business delivery model that brings into play the full range of international best practices that will make it possible for inmates to build replicable skills that can be deployed across NCR's vast automotive industry.

Three, the Furukawa Group has not ventured blind; it has implemented such initiatives in different countries; the Spark Minda Group launched such a venture in Dresden Jail since 2005, so the launching of this initiative in India represents an extension of a rich customized experience.

Four, most such well-intending initiatives fail because they are set up by credible NGOs without market linkages. This Tihar Jail initiative is effectively a backward integration, with the wire harness production (estimated 250 a day) pre-sold to Maruti Suzuki India Limited, liberating the project from challenges of viability and sustainability. Five, the programme is being run by inmates under MFE supervision, which effectively graduates them from being mere hired low-cost hands to potential business managers with competencies in business building, material management, equipment efficiency and financial forecasting coupled with insights into safety measures, time management, quality awareness and packaging competence.

Six, the programme is scalable and sustainable; as Tihar Jail allots a large area, more inmates could be trained, widening the impact from an initial batch of 30 to an estimated 250; inmates with more than five years of imprisonment were preferred - they further underwent a screening procedure based on their eyesight and literacy.

Seven, what this programme opens up is a new set of economics and dynamics. It has been conventionally perceived that when someone is sentenced to spend years in a correctional home, it could lead to income loss for the family, affecting their social, health care and educational interests. This project promises to reverse the reality to a point where individuals could potentially generate a larger income from within a correctional home than they probably earned outside in the first place. Eight, there could be fascinating downstream spinoffs. A part of the earnings of inmates could be allocated for a welfare fund that benefits all inmates (including those not covered by the programme); more remarkably, the earnings could address victim families as well, bringing into a play a new dimension in social justice.

The big questions: can this programme be nationally dispersed? Can it escape the usual accusation that this is nothing but a labour exploitation model crafted by canny industrialists? Can it beat the cynicism of the various commissioners of correctional homes so that the idea of what has succeeded in Tihar doesn't lie stillborn in other states? Can a one-window policy be created so that prospective corporates do not have to keep tendering arzi after arzi until they lose interest? Can customers be excited enough so that they can convince their vendors to start outsourcing from correctional homes, which ties in the interest of customer, vendor, labour and correctional home?

This idea is now more relevant than ever - and for good reasons: Corporate India complains of worker attrition; in this case there is a 'worker' lock-in (bad pun). Corporate India is finding it increasingly difficult to access land; in this case, you get the land (however small) for free. If the big push for this idea could come from the Big Man himself in New Delhi, then nothing like it.