

JV IN A JAIL

M&M & Minda group have forged a unique joint venture in Yerwada jail to employ convicts to work on the Bolero pickup. Lijee Philip tells the story from inside the jail



PHOTOS: BHARAT CHANDA

Rohan Hajare and his team work about eight hours daily to complete 90 wiring harnesses for automaker Mahindra & Mahindra's best-seller Bolero pickup. Hajare though, is not an engineer; he is a convict. He doesn't work in one of Pune's many auto factories; he works out of Yerwada Jail.

He and 30 inmates are part of a unique, life-changing socio-commercial project put together by M&M in collaboration with the Minda Group, one of its key suppliers.

It all began a couple of years back when Ashok Minda, chairman of the auto component major, was taking a round at his plant in Dresden in Germany. He realised that sub-assemblies were being transformed into full assembly units by the inmates of a particular jail. Some months later, at a dinner with Hemant Sikka, chief purchase officer, M&M, a similar idea was mooted. This is today slowly transforming the lives of some 30-odd inmates of Yerwada Jail.

"There is a sense of purpose to their lives now", says UT Pawar, jail superintendent of Yerwada Jail. "These convicts feel inspired doing something different."

Yerwada is one of the first prisons in Maharashtra to adopt such kind of labour intensive jobs, says Pawar. Spread over 512 acres, this high-security prison in Pune is the largest jail in Maharashtra and also one of the largest in South Asia, housing over 3,000 prisoners. Setup in 1871 it has held freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Netaji Subhas Bose and Bal Gangadhar Tilak.



Logistically, Yerwada is close to M&M's automotive plant at Chakan. M&M and Minda jointly approached jail authorities in July 2014. A set of 30 inmates were chosen and trained in this particular job. The DG Prisons at that point of time took responsibility of the project to ensure that it did not meet any bureaucratic hurdles.

Intense Training

"This initiative is part of our alternative thinking," says Sikka of M&M. "This project makes the inmates employable, once they serve their sentence."

The inmates who were chosen for harness project were those serving a longer sentence, besides having a 12th standard qualification. They were put through intense training over three months and began work in a 5,000 square feet facility.

"Making a wiring harness is a completely manual process which requires an eye for detail," says Sikka. "More than 156 wires in 100 different colours need to be taped and assembled. There are 300 to 400 parts in a wiring harness which requires absolute concentration". The inmates sort and assemble the connectors according to the colour codes which is then taped and covered by protective tubes.

A wiring harness uses a lot of electronics unlike routine jobs like carpentry and stone breaking which are common at jails. Still, it can get monotonous. So a music system was set up to keep the workers entertained as they worked.

This writer visited the jail and spoke to convicts after taking permission from jail authorities. Hajare is happy he is getting a higher remuneration of ₹55 per day on this

job compared with ₹40 a day in a regular carpentry job. Amit Chitole, another inmate, says this work experience will enhance his future career options once he is out of the jail.

Since starting this March, the Yerwada project has increased daily output of wiring harnesses from 70 units to 90. "We may request the jail authorities to scale up the production to 100 units per day if the demand arises," says Sikka.

Mahindra personnel keeps a strict vigil on quality parameters. It uses PPAP - Production Part Approval Process - which ensures that only 100% fit wiring harnesses are used. On the job learning is important and inmates are regularly kept updated on critical matters such as safety, quality circle and Kaizen.

This initiative has also caught the attention of other inmates. Many have evinced interest to learn and work on the wiring harness project. The current shift of 30 inmates on a single shift can go up to 100 inmates.

M&M and Minda are upbeat about this project and are looking to take it to the next level both in commercial and social impact. "In the next phase, we may look at Nagpur Jail for such a project and will soon commence talk with the jail authorities," chairman Minda. "We see it as part of our responsibility to help the inmates to lead a normal employable life once they finish their sentence," says Sikka.