

Puducherry – A Model Prison?

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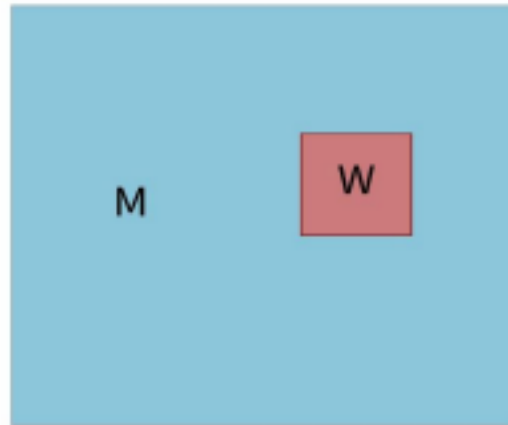
I traveled to Puducherry, India with the sole aim of getting to know more about the Auro Society's work in the various development sectors they are contributing to. While that was achieved, some of the instances left a scarring impression on me. Just so I don't lose my aspiration to help humanity in any way possible, I thought it best to record my experience on paper when the memory is still fresh, so as not to let more mundane experiences take over them.

Puducherry prison seemed very unlike what one might expect to see if they are visiting such a facility for the very first time. Nobody was walking around handcuffed with a police officer following right behind with a laathi. It was 3pm on a cool summer weekday, and nobody was locked indoors. It seemed like a very open, very busy workshop of sorts. The 'inmates' seemed to be walking around the campus with a sense of purpose. The walls were painted reportedly by them – a colourful mélange of silhouettes, yoga poses, sceneries – along the entire enclosure. There were sprawling lawns for the occupants to exercise in, play games, set up performances. There is a surprising sense of camaraderie between the policemen and the inmates, where even a man with a life-long jail sentence is brave enough to walk up to the highest official with greetings and a tray of his special Chai for us commoner guests. Everybody was waiting with anticipation to practice for the annual Gandhi Jayanti celebrations and hoping to put their best foot forward for a one-of-a-kind performance. This, coupled with the fact that things were falling back in place after a year of stringent COVID-19 restrictions, was adding to the buzzing atmosphere. But more on that later. All in all, despite the obvious underlying guilt or regret or whatever the emotions might be when one is, by law, locked up indoors, it seemed like a calm place for one to be able to live a peaceful existence.

I mention inmates, but at the risk of sounding discriminatory, that term unfortunately only refers to the MALES in the prison. The females, they somehow do not fit into any of the above descriptions, even as blink-and-you-miss appearances. It so happens that the one thing that Puducherry jail is stringent about, despite its humane treatment towards proven criminals, is the fact that there should be absolutely no interaction between the men and the women. This includes not just touch, but also sight, probably olfactory too. This has led to the creation of a big divide – very literally – between their two campuses. A better description might be that the women are allowed to inhabit a part of the men's campus, and no more than that. When I visited their living quarters, there were a total of nine female inmates, out of which only one had been convicted, while the other eight were still awaiting trial. They seemed to be in good spirits, but when I heard about the statistics, my first thought was, what if even one of the eight women awaiting trial, is innocent? What if her trial takes place after 2 years? Is it fair that she had to be kept in such conditions while the convicted MEN around her are keeping themselves busy working or even running around in open fields? Will she be able to overcome the mental trauma?

Here's a descriptive picture of the women's quarters. It is small. Very small. Which is fine considering the number of women inmates is grossly disproportionate to the number of male inmates. But the 'gardening' space they have been given to keep themselves busy is enough to grow flowers and

tomatoes, but not enough for them to walk around or have sporting tournaments. This may seem like I'm asking for a lot, but the men do have these facilities. The rooms have no light. When I say that, I mean there are no windows to bring in any natural light or air. When I asked to look around the room, they had to turn on the tube light, which at 3pm, is a waste of electricity.



I dwell so strongly on the female ward because of the stark differences that I saw in the treatment of the females and the males, and how in turn that was reflected in their treatment of the facilities. I had the privilege to be escorted by some kind officials through both the living quarters. The men, their rooms seemed to be clearly demarcated with different coloured doorways. Inside, their belongings were placed with care, again clearly creating divisions between respective personal spaces. There were boxes with things neatly arranged inside them. They felt free enough to change with the room doors wide open. You could imagine them sitting up late at night to play charades, but that's just my extremely dramatized imagination. The gardens were well maintained. They had a courtyard too. So even though they need to go back inside to get locked up at 6pm everyday, they seem to have made their peace with the space, and accepted the reality of the bed they have created for themselves to lay in.

The female ward, however, seemed very much like a temporary accommodation. Things were strewn around. All the females were sitting inside the room even though technically they could have been picking flowers from their garden outside. There was no sense of belonging echoed in any of the spaces, even though many of these women might have been doomed to live here for years. The air you get when you enter their quarters is more on the lines of 'just have to pass the time till sweet death'. You don't feel the sense of hope that you long for. Again, based purely on my memory, I do remember asking about what kind of co-curricular activities or vocational practices they are provided – and I hope I am wrong about this – but there were none.

The men in the jail have a few options to choose from as their primary vocation. They weave cotton mats which are then sold at a subsidized price in the common markets. Some of them are cooks in the mess – and very good ones, might I add, since I had the pleasure of eating some of their savouries and sweets. There is a canteen coming up right next to one of these workshops, with more chefs to volunteer. There is another room coming up to set up another small cottage industry, TBD. These activities seem to take up a majority of the day, and it does not hurt to get a minimum wage income for the future. I was told that the females do not have access to any of these rooms. Why then, can we not provide them with vocational experiences too, perhaps within their quarters?

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE CONDITIONS

Adding just two large windows across from each other can make such a significant difference in the room. Not only will there be enough daylight that makes the rooms far less gloomy, but there is also some fresh air entering the room, and on cool afternoons like the one when I visited, you might not even need a fan. One of the concerns that was brought up when I suggested this was that on the first floor there is no privacy with a window present. Now, since I couldn't document any of these conditions on site, my memory could be quite wrong, but here is my interpretation of the existing conditions.



Figure 1: Existing Conditions - Women's hostel

The fence walls are high enough and the building is far enough from the fence to add a solid visual barrier for any passersby, from both floors. In addition to that, there seems to be a corridor right outside the rooms which adds another layer to said barrier. So even if one were to just add a window in the same existing settings, one might not have to worry so much about the privacy of the females. Even then, if my memory does not serve me correctly, there are ways to maneuver this with very little interference in the structural integrity of the building. A large window can be placed slightly higher than the usual $\sim 1.2\text{m}$ above floor level, say around 3.5m - 4m above floor level. This way the only part of the females that risks any kind of privacy loss, if at all, is the neck and face, that too only if they are trying really hard to peer outside. The handles to these operable windows can be placed at the bottom so that they can easily operate them.



Figure 2: Windows for more daylight, while still maintaining the women's privacy

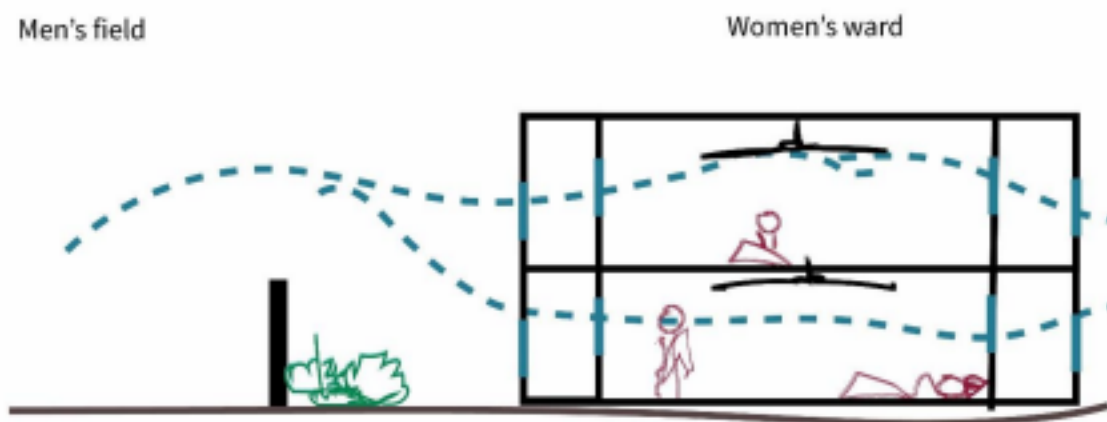


Figure 3: Windows for better ventilation

I know that suicide prevention can be a cause for concern in prisons but considering the first floor corridor is already existing and open, I doubt these windows will have a major impact on the protocol. Furthermore, it could even have a relatively positive impact on the psyche of the female inmate. The right kind of placement for these windows could even make the room a lot cooler – a staggered plan for their placement will encourage stronger air movement.

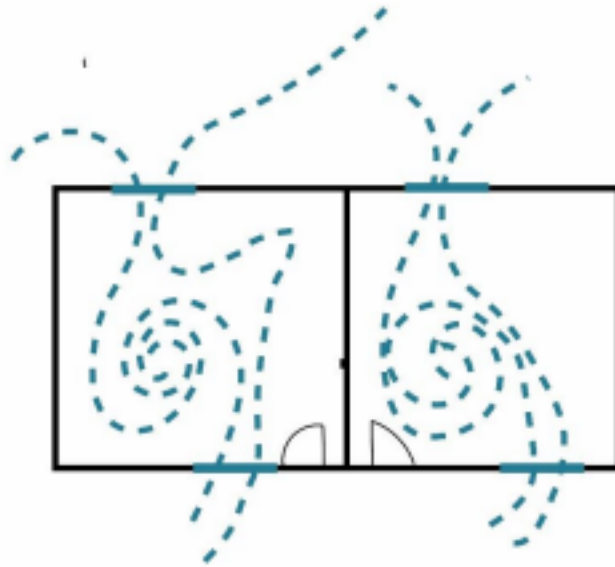


Figure 4: Staggered arrangement of windows in plan for better air circulation

Another addition I would suggest is a system of time slots. The fields within the campus are vast and clean, and if the men are allowed to walk on them, the females should not be confined within their four walls. If the idea of the female campus being allowed to expand is too drastic a change, maybe the inmates should be allotted time slots for the sprawling lawns, based on gender. The females get to enjoy the open spaces twice a day during which time no male inmates are to be allowed to set foot in or around the area, and vice versa. It is, after all, a detention facility. Rules are to be expected to an extent. The same system can be applied to the workshops and the kitchens. If creating completely new and different spaces for the women is an extreme request, maybe they can be allowed in these facilities for a few hours during the day and complete their tasks on a daily basis. A sewing machine within the female quarters or in the workshops will not take up a lot of space and might still be able to produce beautiful pieces for sale. The same kind of handicrafts that the men are allowed to make, the females can too, in a separate room. I'm sure a bit of work or some cooking or some reading might do them a world of good.

I had the opportunity to visit the jail when the male inmates were in particularly high spirits. They were all waiting in anticipation for a dance instructor to come teach them steps for an important upcoming annual programme for Gandhi Jayanti. This was a very different kind of occasion. The performers were to include the inmates in collaboration with the officers, and each of them was to bring along a family member to also perform. The inmates were voluntarily coming up to the coordinators to suggest their roles in the programme, to showcase their artistic skills to be used on the boards, to volunteer their young kids to be part of the performance. The men were truly energetic, mingling with each other, chatting about their experiences. The women from the jail could not join in the festivities.

The day ended with a rather touching poem written by one of the jail inmates. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for having killed his wife 19 years ago. I wish I could take a copy of it with me, but some of his words are still resounding in my brain.

My mind may not know how many months or how many years have passed since I came here, but my pillow knows the sorrow. My pillow, that has been drenched in my tears over the many many years, knows the pain I suffer everyday, knowing that in that one moment of anger I committed a sin that even God will not forgive, and for which I am paying the price on earth.

At the risk of sounding biased, everybody in jail, male or female, has a lot of time to just give to their thoughts. One feels the wrath of the justice system, the remorse for their crimes, the anger for their sins, the regret for their lack of control over themselves, and frustration over the lack of control over the system. Is it too much to ask, then, that they be placed in the same external environment, and be treated with an equal amount of dignity and respect?