

Art bar none

A group show draws on experiences of artists with young inmates in Tihar

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After the requisite signatures and checks, entering the bright, large and clean grassy quadrangle of Jail No. 5 at Tihar jail in New Delhi brings unexpected relief. The complex houses male inmates aged 17-21, some of whom are learning to draw and paint as part of a two-year-old programme conducted by the Delhi-based Ramchander Nath Foundation (RNF).

To one side of the quadrangle is a large shed that serves as an

atelier for the art students—there are 15 boys inside in three separate groups: One set is busy embroidering shiny material on a green chiffon-like fabric; two are tailoring clothes on sewing machines; and about nine boys, seated on a *durrie* on the floor, are drawing and painting. With wire meshing for walls and ceiling fans, the shed is surprisingly comfortable even on a hot summer afternoon.

A lady art teacher, making her weekly visit, is seated on a chair, assisting the boys with their artwork. The young artists in the making have received other visitors too. Thirty-five Indian contemporary artists have come over the past year, to encourage them and offer tips. Drawing on these visits, the artists created works that will go on display at an exhibition titled *Expressions at Tihar*,

where works by the young inmates will also be shown.

Anubhav Nath, director of RNF, who initiated the project, sums up its goals succinctly: “The idea is to provide them with art therapy—nothing more, nothing less.” Which basically means, providing them with a creative outlet that keeps them busy and teaches them something new. Nath says the inmates are mostly here for “circumstantial crimes”—those related to poverty and illiteracy—and hardly come across as calculating criminals. The period of incarceration can range from six months to 14 years or more. “They represent the marginalized among the marginalized,” he adds.

Using poster colours and paintbrush, Mukesh, who has been at the prison for six months, is making a painting of a lady

holding an *ektara*, in the fashion of the saint-poet Mirabai. But there is a twist: Her flowing white garment leaves her legs, right up to the thighs, uncovered, lending the work a sensuous touch. Mukesh confirms that his subject is indeed Mira.

Alongside is Dipu, drawing a pencil outline of a lady in a garb with striped edges, such as those worn by the sisters of Missionaries

of Charity. There is a single huge human eye where the face should be. “It’s modern art, sir” he explains. “This is Mother Teresa.”

Suraj, who has been advised by the visiting artists to draw what he sees around him instead of copying images, is making a sketch of an electric switchboard and the rubber *chappals* lying under it.

“They were full of questions,” recalls Delhi-based artist Gigi



For a cause: (far left) Behind the Wall by George Martin PJ; an untitled drawing by Avinash.

Scaria, who has visited Tihar once. “They were mostly about difficulties encountered while trying to paint.”

Besides the fact that it keeps the young men gainfully occupied, Nath points out the initiative’s other benefits—there was a successful exhibition of their artworks in March and one former inmate has been working as a part-time artist’s assistant since his release. “There is no point in just watching TV, eating and wandering about all day,” says Dipu, waving at their living quarters behind the shed. “Now we have a chance to learn something new.”

Expressions at Tihar will show from 12 August to 2 September at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, CV Mess, Janpath, New Delhi.