

Art behind the bars

Paintings by the inmates of Tihar jail's Prison Five go on exhibition in Delhi today

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Like most prisons, Tihar jail's premises are rather bleak. Its high walls are near insurmountable barriers and within them are the bright peach-painted ramparts with only the odd sentry to break the monotony. The entire complex is divided into nine central prisons. Of them, number five offers some visual relief — a splash of colour here to break the monotone. In the central courtyard of Prison Five, in a blue painted shed, the inmates are busy — they are working to be a part of Tihar's experiment with art.

"Most of the prisoners here are a victim of circumstance," says Anubhav Nath, while observing the inmates busy with pastel colours on canvasses. Nath heads the Ramchandrar Nath Foundation and Ojas Art. They have been conducting art workshops at Prison Five for a year now.

Today the inmates of Prison Five are ready to show the world the products of that experiment. The curtains are set to go up on an exhibition featuring their works titled "Expressions at Tihar" at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for The Arts. The exhibition will also feature works by names from the art world such as Bose Krishnamachari, Chintan Upadhyay, Gigi Scaria, Riyas Komu, GR Iranna and George Martin PJ, who along with many more artists have been instrumental in putting this exhibition together having taken time out to visit the inmates at Prison Five to train them.

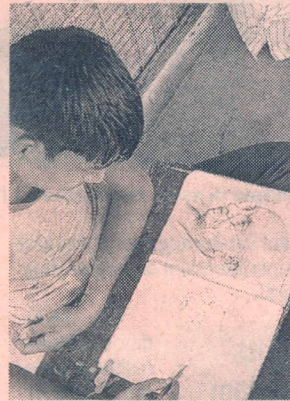
Nath says art is particularly important in the context of Prison Five, because it houses inmates between the age of 18 to 21, who are mostly in prison for their first offence. He says since inmates are in an "impressionable" age, this project can help in their "reformation and rehabilitation".



Prison Five houses inmates between the "impressionable" ages of 18 to 21, who are mostly in prison for their first offence, so this project is intended to help in their reformation and rehabilitation

Talking to a few of the inmates who are busy with their canvasses is enough to understand what Nath is trying to stress. Twenty-year-old Suraj Gautam, wearing an all-white outfit that signifies he is a convict (undertrials wear casuals) is serving a life sentence. But he is excited about the exhibition at which three of his works will be on show. "I was excited when I saw the project started here. I learnt first with figure sketches and then started working with colours. I am also learning tailoring here. My family is happy seeing me work," he says.

According to Tihar's rules, the inmates at Prison Five are



too young to be employed at the various small-scale business initiatives that the jail runs to produce items such as furniture, carpets, oil and soap. Also, a significant percentage of the inmates are anxious undertrials who are waiting for court verdicts. "We waste a lot of time here. Painting helps because, I don't want to think I am in jail. It makes me feel I can achieve something and it will benefit me," says Mukesh Yadav, an undertrial.

The officer in charge of Prison Five, M S Meena said the art workshop is part of continuing initiatives by Tihar Jail on reforming prisoners. The initiatives began

when the prison was headed by Kiran Bedi from 1993 to 1995. Today the scribble board at Meena's office is full with the roster of NGOs conducting programmes at the prison.

The objectives of having prisoners learn the basics of art will come in handy when they eventually have to begin life afresh in society and it will instil a sense of belonging in them. Pawan Kumar Sinha, who is set to be released in five months, echoes those sentiments. "I was a plumber by trade. Maybe I will give art a chance to earn a living. Otherwise I want to only go back to Bihar and farm on our family's land," he says.