Resurgence of Hope through Fashion Education in Prisons of India

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Abstract

This research project was conducted in the women’s jail 6, Tihar Complex, as a planned intervention for a need-based program for skill development. A fashion education program was identified and implemented over a period of six months with certain basic modules in Indian wear. India has 141 central prisons with capacity of 200,000 inmates. Major reasons for committing crime include illiteracy, lack of appropriate skills to earn a livelihood, deprived backgrounds, physical and sexual abuse, and alcohol and drug dependence. Therefore, an initiative was undertaken to establish a Fashion and Textiles Training Centre in women’s central Jail 6 in Tihar, Asia’s biggest prison complex, in February 2017. The program was designed and implemented with several planned outcomes: economic and social empowerment, which would inculcate feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, rehabilitation in society, and reducing the chance of returning to a life of crime post-release.

The present paper focuses on (a) Setting up infrastructure, design of course curriculum and assessment, mentoring and counseling of inmates undergoing training, industry projects, and presentations in the form of fashion shows; (b) Fashion education as a means of correctional behavior, and the challenges and issues faced during training in prisons; (c) Case studies highlighting the impact of training, including increased income, measurable skill enhancement, reduction in stress levels, revival of hope in inmates, a holistic life within and outside prison, and reduction in return cases; (d) Impact of fashion education on other beneficiaries.

Keywords: correctional behavior, empowerment, fashion education, prison as a community, skill development

Introduction

The wheel is the biggest symbol of Industrial Revolution. Mahatma Gandhi, hailed as “Father of the Nation,” revolutionized India’s freedom movement with his spinning whee—the Charkha! The wheel of a sewing machine is now set to bring a social and economic revolution among one part of India, prisoners languishing in its prisons. They can be seen in a different light: prisoners as India’s talented workforce, and prisons as incubators of some of India’s talent. One resource that is abundant in prison is time. Given the right vocation and training, time can be best utilized for positive reform and may provide hope to prisoners for a dignified and independent life post-release.

This reality is also illustrated in a scene from the film The Shawshank Redemption. When entering the prison, Andy Dufresne remarks, “I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really. Get busy living or get busy dying.”

According to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs’ Handbook on Government Schemes and Programs for Prison Officers (2018, p. 1), it is imperative that prison staff understand their roles and responsibilities vis-a-vis the process of restoration and rehabilitation. For this, one must recognize and understand the needs of different groups within prisons. Prisoners are not a
homogenous population; they come from diverse backgrounds with different requirements, vulnerabilities, and skill sets. Heterogeneity among prisoners include the disabled, people with mental illness, those suffering from addictions, women, children, the elderly, as well as those predominantly from the marginalized classes and at the lowest rungs of economical social and political hierarchies. It is therefore imperative to identify their needs and work toward a holistic rehabilitative framework for them. Prison authorities are helping to reform prisoners rather than punish them. Social reform can be initiated when criminals are given opportunities for improvement through custodial care, correctional programs, and post-release support mechanisms.

With the same goal, Delhi Prisons approached Pearl Academy in 2016 to facilitate vocational education for women prisoners of central jail 6, Tihar. The proposal explored all possible aspects, including challenges and opportunities for learning in this complex environment. First, a survey was conducted at the women’s jail to understand the needs, interests, and expectations regarding skill-based education of prisoners and jail staff. It was found that clothing, being a basic need, was of an interest to many. There were just two inmates with basic skills doing alteration work for their fellow prisoners, and sewing was a much-needed skill to be learned in a women’s jail with capacity of 550 prisoners.

Based on the needs of the prisoners and the requirement of skilled labor in the fashion industry, it was decided to establish a fashion laboratory equipped with state-of-art facilities and complete industrial standards for sewing machines, overlock machines, pattern tables, dress forms, and various tools and equipment. The aim of this project was to establish and develop a training program in the field of fashion and textiles for the rehabilitation and empowerment of prisoners in India.

**Objectives**

- To identify need and areas of training for the prisoners in the field of fashion and textiles
- To standardize the lab and equipment in prisons per the needs of fashion industry
- To prepare training modules and select a number of women inmates
- To assess the vocational skills of trained women inmates
- To study the impact of training on the beneficiaries
- To identify challenges and issues of training in the prisons

**Methodology**

Visits were made several times in the women’s, men’s and boys’ prisons to identify the need for fashion education among prisoners. After conducting interview with prison authorities and inmates, the women’s prison was selected to start with and then take forward to boys’ and men’s prisons respectively, primarily due to enthusiasm toward fashion education and less vulnerability among the inmates.

**Launch of Fashion Education in Women’s Jail 6**

A fashion lab was established and a fashion program was launched in February 2017 for the first time in central jail 6, Tihar (figure 1). Professor Nandita Abraham, CEO, Pearl Academy, stated during press conference, “Pearl Academy is committed to skill development,
and this is a one-of-a-kind initiative which will help the women inmates of Tihar Jail to build a new life after prison.”

Figure 1. Clips from newspapers on launch of the fashion program by the Director General of Prisons, Mr. Sudhir Yadav; Designer Rina Dhaka; and Prof. Nandita Abraham.

Students of the School of Fashion, Business and inmates jointly performed a fashion show, musical show, and a dance performance during the inauguration ceremony. The attainment of sense of acceptance, community, togetherness, social responsibility, and positivity was the main aim of this cultural evening organized by students and inmates, and is still cherished by both groups.

Figure 2. Music and dance performance by students and inmates at the inauguration ceremony.

Students and faculties also painted the walls outside the fashion lab with impactful visuals and messages about liberation, self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sustainable life through fashion education.
Infrastructural Facilities in Fashion and Textile Labs

Labs equipped with standardized machines, tools, and equipment were set up. They are well lit and ventilated (figures 4 and 5). Training started with 10 each of Juki machines, tables, dress forms, and tool kits. Spurred by the enthusiasm and outcomes of inmates, India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC) opened more pathways to expand the training infrastructure and improve the interiors of the two labs by funding the project. The project has further enabled the installation of following machines:

- 17 single-lock stitch machines
- 2 four-thread overlock machines
- Flat-lock machines
- Chain-stitch machines
- Fusing machines
- Pattern-making tables
- Toolboxes
- Ironing machine boilers
- Dress forms
- Rotary screen-printing machine
- Photographic and foil printing machines

Every inmate undergoing training has a complete tool kit, independent machine, and a locker to store their work. They are also provided with fabric and other raw materials needed for their assignments.
Figure 4. Glimpses of the infrastructural facilities of the fashion labs.

Figure 5. Textile lab inside women’s jail.

Course Curriculum Design

Research was conducted to understand the minimum and maximum period of stay for the women inmates. It was understood that the population is rotates and depends on the decision of their legal hearing. Inmates could stay as short as three months to as long as life imprisonment depending on the crime committed. We hoped to benefit the maximum number of prisoners
through this unique skill development program. Hence, to meet the need of this large and heterogeneous group, a short program of three months was begun in the basics of design elements, illustration, pattern making, and construction of Indian wear. Initially, women enrolling in the program were of Indian origin, so a curriculum focusing on Indian wear was designed. The main aim of the program always has been to make the women skilled and easily employable so that they can earn their livelihood with respect post-release rather than committing a crime and returning to jail.

Over time, we observed a shift in enrollment. Inmates of different nationalities also started enrolling in the course. They expressed a need to learn pattern making and construction of school uniforms, western wear, and knitwear, for which there is a larger market in their respective countries with good earning potential. To fulfill the demands of a larger number of inmates, the course was extended to six months and the women learn all categories of women’s wear. They are also given training in embroidery, tie-dye, hand block printing, foil printing, and screen printing, which add value to fabric surfaces.

There are two full time trainers conducting face to face classes on pattern making, construction and textile techniques. Regular workshops and mentoring on Design, Illustration, Presentation and industry projects are conducted by senior faculties and alumni of Pearl Academy (figure 6).

![Figure 6. Founders of the program: Professor Antonio Maurizio Grioli, Centre Associate Professor Bela Gupta.](image)

During training, inmates were given an industry project to develop a collection for Khadi Gram Udyog, one of the biggest retail stores in India. They were mentored to develop a range of 30 garments using *khadi* fabrics (organic handspun and handwoven) and screen printing by the faculty and students of Pearl Academy. During the process, students understood the need for raw materials and accessories and sourced these from the market for the prison. This enhanced the sense of social responsibility and empathy among students, and self-esteem and confidence among inmates. The collection theme of “freedom” used bird motifs in interesting silhouettes, colors, and layouts, signifying the demand for freedom and justice. Figures 7 through 9 show some of the processes involved while developing the collection.
Figure 7. Design mentoring by Assistant Professor Varun Goel to develop the collection “freedom.”

Figure 8. Associate Professor Bela Gupta giving her insights on measurements and body proportions.

Figure 9. Toiles checked for fit by Associate Professor Mr. Bhaskar, Pearl Academy.

For the first time in Indian prison history, inmates walked the runway in a public place to showcase their “freedom” collection (figure 10). The trust of prison authorities, and the sense of
responsibility and resurgence of hope regarding the inmates’ own freedom made impossible become possible.

Another industry project was given to the next batch of inmates who had to develop a collection for handicapped children of Tamana School. Measurements and photographs of these children were provided to inmates in prison to understand body types and make designs accordingly (figure 11). Fabrics and other raw material was sourced and brought to the prison by students.

Figure 10. Collection showcased on the runway by inmates.

![Figure 10](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/citys-latest-fashion-show-with-designs-from-tihar-4836447/)

Figure 11. Left: handicapped children in garments made by inmates. Right: Inmates walking the runway after the show.

Another industry project involved giving trained inmates an opportunity to design and construct costumes for a Bollywood movie, *Mark Sheet*, under the mentorship of designer Rinki Singh.

Another strategy that motivated and was appreciated by the inmates was the sale of garments produced by inmates during training. Inmates felt happy and confident when they saw jail staff and other inmates buying and wearing garments made by them. It further motivates
them to begin working in the production unit within the prison and earn daily wages, and inculcates a sense of empowerment and resurgence of hope. The sales process makes the program sustainable as well as reduces of the need to keeping the stock.

**Current Mechanisms**

This education project is derived from major schemes as given in Section IV of the *Handbook on Government Schemes and Programs for Prison Officers* (2018, pp. 16 & 35) which clearly states that large numbers of Indian youth/women should take up industry-relevant skill training that will make them employed/entrepreneurs. The scheme is intended to benefit youth/women above the age of 16 across the country. In order to implement the scheme, Pearl Academy signed a five-year agreement with women’s central jail 6 in February 2017. The model for the ongoing training is shown in figure 12.

Inmates receive six months certified training to acquire fashion-related skills and critical life skills through regular counseling and team projects. They are also undergo a two-level assessment:

- Proficiency assessment to build professional credentials
- Character assessment and certificate issued by prison authorities for better acceptance in industry

![Figure 12. Model of the ongoing fashion education in the women’s prison](image)

Employment opportunities are built up within the prison as an extension of the training program. A production lab next to the training lab is set up, where trained inmates start to work soon after completing the course; they are given jobs by jail staff, other inmates, and designers. The average earnings that a graduate of this program may draw is INR 2,500 – 8,000 per month, with rates per the prison wage scheme.

**Results and Discussion**

**Learning Outcomes of the Program**
Through the fashion program, the inmates are able to:

- Develop a basic understanding of elements of design
- Develop basic drawing skills for fashion presentations
- Become familiar with various fashion terminologies and trends
- Demonstrate appropriate skills of pattern making, construction, and finishes utilized in Indian wear, western wear, and knitwear
- Demonstrate appropriate understanding of techniques to enhance surfaces such as embroidery, tie-dye, hand block printing, screen and foil printing
- Work cooperatively and collaboratively in a team and display work ethic and values associated with a garment-making professional
- Demonstrate skills for professional presentations, reflection, and use of appropriate format
- Display an understanding of unconventional approaches to cut proportion and silhouette through explorations and industry-led projects.

Interpersonal Outcomes

By kick-starting the production work, the trained inmates are able to earn their livelihood and gain confidence needed to increase their production output. This helps many inmates to sustain their families outside the prison by sending them monetary aid.

Inmates are interviewed twice during the course to evaluate the impact of skills-based fashion education. More than 93% of inmates say that fashion education has helped them to release stress and depression, as they continue in the creative process involving mind and hands. They want to spend all their time exploring new ideas in the fashion lab.

Some outcomes of the textile training are shown in figure 13. Inmates are given full freedom to express themselves while embroidering, printing, and tie-dyeing. It was observed that inmates prefer to use more colors to bring excitement and happiness to their work. It is a way to express themselves through creative and artistic work.

![Figure 13](image)

Inmates are awarded a Certificate of Completion of the six-month course in “basics of design, pattern making and garment construction” by Pearl Academy. The course is mapped to six months of the certificate program in Fashion Design by Indira Gandhi Open University. By the end of program, inmates are awarded the Certificate of Completion during the convocation ceremony held in the prison, and there is much pride in attaining it.
The data in table 1 shows that 164 female inmates have been trained in fashion education in women’s jail 6, Tihar in last three years. Of these, 57 have gained employment post-release or inside the jail. Many released prisoners do not keep in touch or are not willing to inform the prison of their involvement due to personal reasons.

Table 1: Number of Enrolled and Released Prisoners Along with Their Employment Data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Batch</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrolled</th>
<th>Released</th>
<th>Return cases to prison</th>
<th>Present In prison</th>
<th>Working in production lab in prison</th>
<th>Released cases working outside</th>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2018</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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**Fashion Education: A Means of Correctional Behavior in Prisons**

The former Director General of Delhi Prisons, Mr. Sudhir Yadav, says, “A criminal is brought to prison for three reasons after he commits a crime, first to seek punishment, second to isolate him from society as people around him may get scared of him, and third to correct. We consider prisons as correction centers.” Fashion education has brought positive change in the behavior of inmates in their rehabilitation. The use of hands, mind, and creativity works as a correctional tool and has a therapeutic effect. Inmates worked on industry projects in a team, which resulted not only in a positive change in thinking, but also healthy relationships among each other. The inmates started to appreciate each other. In addition, the positive feedback from outsiders is invaluable and boosts inmates’ self-esteem and confidence.

Scholarly educational programs in prisons have helped inmates increase their knowledge, but case studies suggest that vocational training programs like the fashion project are more helpful, allowing inmates to earn a living inside prison as well as post-release, and to rebuild a meaningful life.

Rina, a mother of four children, was convicted for murdering her husband. Growing up, she always saw her mother sewing clothes to support her family. Rina enrolled in the very first group and learned with keen interest (figure 14). Soon she involved herself in the industry projects and stitched well finished garments for various fashion shows, as well as for the Bollywood movie *Mark Sheet*. She was convicted for a minimum of 10 years and had been in prison for the last four years, always worried about her children, who were at the mercy of relatives. Based on her attitude, behavior, and dedication to work, an assurance was given to the Delhi High Court that Rina could earn enough for herself and her children. She was released after a few hearings on these grounds and today owns a Juki industrial machine. She undertakes freelance work from designers and is earning enough to take care of her children. There are many similar success stories of empowerment of women inmates who have earned their freedom and livelihood via this venture, both inside and outside Tihar.
During the feedback meeting with the Fashion School Dean, Professor Antonio Maurizio Grioli, and Associate Professor Bela Gupta, expressed their desire to increase training time as they want to learn much more. They feel at ease during training, and arguments, fights, and other unacceptable behavior has been reduced as their involvement in the creative work in lab has progressed (figures 15 and 16). The inmates tend to spend much less time in wards where fights generally took place, said one inmate. They are regularly counselled during classes to help and care for their peer in the learning process so that once they are out of prison they are more sensitive to people around them.

<figures 14, 15, and 16 here>
Fashion Education as a Way to Build Holistic Life Experiences for Prisoners

Responding to inmates, Professor Antonio Maurizio Grioli explained that they are not in prison for their whole lives (figure 17). Rather, it is just a phase that would pass and they need to prepare themselves for a better life outside prison. They should take it as an opportunity to develop skills.

Two inmates have responded: “We wanted to be fashion designers but fashion education was very expensive in our country and we couldn’t afford it. It is an opportunity for us to do it now.” The women are regularly counseled to lead their lives with a positive attitude and cut the cords of their past.

Fashion education has also enhanced the awareness of inmates toward social and ethical practices, which motivates them to become responsible citizens and in fact shape their futures. On the skills front, fashion faculty have been offering special workshops to teach artwork and products out of waste fabrics (figure 18). They are exposed to the concept of sustainability through these workshops. Superintendent Anju Mangla explained that “such training involving ethical practices have actually changed their perspective toward life and reduced the return cases to prison to less than half.” Inmates rethinking about a new life and not even a day back in prison.
Tina, a homemaker, was imprisoned in July 2019. She suffered from severe depression. Tina underwent counseling and joined the fashion program in August 2019. This led to personal changes for her. She shared her happiness and enthusiasm about learning new techniques on a daily basis during fashion training and is no longer depressed. Today a confident and ambitious Tina hopes to move out of the prison soon and start her own boutique someday. Life has begun on a new note for her.

Rita, an inmate whose daughter studies in Pearl Academy in a regular four-year undergraduate program, shared her concern of not being able to pay school fees, as both husband and wife are in prison and their daughter is dependent on her uncle. Under special circumstances, the student was given a scholarship and counseled to maintain her confidence, enthusiasm, and
motivation to learn. The mother, at ease now, joined the fashion program in prison and is happy to start a clothing label post-release.

Fashion education in women’s prisons would continue to open many new horizons to build holistic life experience for prisoners.

**Impact of Fashion Education on Beneficiaries**

Fashion education in prison has been transforming lives. It has not only empowered and boosted the morale, confidence, and positivity of the inmates, but has also impacted other organizations and people connected with inmates. A few are described below:

**Prisons:** Tihar has always been in the news for not being an ordinary prison but a reformation center focusing on the rehabilitation and acceptance of inmates by imparting skills for a dignified life outside prison. Fashion education is being looked at as a successful model for replication in other prisons. A similar program is moving toward a start in a boys’ prison (ages 18-21 years) in 2020. The boys would be trained for menswear, and same model of training and production would be followed. Haryana and Uttrakhand prison authorities have also expressed the need for skill-based training and is likely to begin in 2020 (figure 19).

**Woman Inmates and Their Families:** “Educate a girl, empower a nation.” This initiative has not only proved to be an incubator of the inmates’ talent, equipping them with a new skill to get a new livelihood, but has also helped stop the vicious cycle of these inmates falling into the rut of criminal activities after release. It is acting as the perfect navigator in finding the right means of livelihood in society, and their families can express pride in the women. The earnings of trained prisoners have increased from 2500-8000 INR as shown in figure 20.

<figures 19 and 20 here>
**Nation Building:** The “Skill India Mission” is an important Indian government program under which focused initiatives work to convert India’s workforce into a skilled workforce. While the government is running various schemes to provide skills to India’s poor and underprivileged, the Tihar Fashion Laboratory has gone a step further by making this mission more “inclusive.” Inmates who might not have a place on any government agenda in the context of skill-building have found a place here (figure 21).

**Education with a Humane Aspect:** The benefits of the program are not limited to prisoners, but has extended to the students and faculty of Pearl Academy, who closely collaborate with the inmates for cultural performances and various fashion shows without any inhibitions. This goes a long way in inculcating acceptance and appreciation for these inmates in the hearts and minds of youth and of society in general. Students selflessly come forward for this initiative and are always keen to partner with inmates. This partnership explains that fashion education can be used to bring hope to many, and that fashion designers can have careers in which they can rebuild society as well.

**Challenges and Issues**
Inmates are allowed to meet their relatives twice a week and, depending on how their meeting with family members goes, can affect class attendance. Court visits have also limited class attendance several times. Regular counseling and communication with inmates is a must to run the course successfully.

Sometimes inmates are released in the middle of the program, and there has been no provision for completing their training. There have been instances in the past, though, when only the final assessment was left for released inmates, who then received special permission from jail staff to complete the final assessment. This proves that inmates value their learning and completion certificate.

Per prison rules, there is a limited exposure to print and online media, which limits the teaching of the design process and latest trends.

Over the last three years, 35% of trained inmates are recorded to be employed. They are enthusiastic and 100% wish to work in the fashion industry, while they are training, but for various reasons released inmates do not join production units or are not willing to keep in touch.

**Conclusion**

Fashion education has played a very powerful and distinctive role in helping this class of women build a new belief in self, and to recreate a future free of crime.

To quote inmate Rachna, “The program helped in every aspect of my life. I have visited jail three times in last five years because of prostitution and use of drugs. I hope this is the last time as I never got fashion education before in prison. It is a rebirth for me. I hope to get a job in an export house and work day and night to lead a glamorous life full of respect, happiness, and honesty. I want to go up on the runway again one day and not be called as inmate but a designer walking a runway after the show.”

“I am happy that I am getting to learn stitching and embroidery. I plan to make clothes for my grandchildren and prove to them that their grandma is not a bad woman,” says 58-year-old inmate Raminder Kaur.

“I plan to open a small boutique or a shop where I will make semi-stitched clothes for fat women since it is difficult for them to get the right sizes. I will also make matching accessories,” says a beaming Puja.

In its own unique way, the team at Pearl Academy established the Fashion Laboratory at Tihar, and fashion education has become a source of hope for many. More than anything, the initiative has contributed to bridging the gap between skill, a dignified life, and a talent pool identified only as criminals!

While consoling Red, his fellow inmate in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne says, “Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

**Acknowledgements**

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*Note:* All the names in the case studies are fictional to protect privacy.

**References**