



Readers' Forum



Voices of the Future

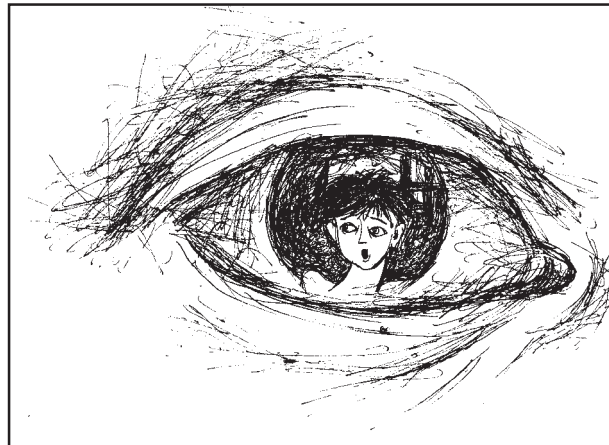
When we talk of children in need of care and protection we must also talk of children who live in 'homes' run by the government. Large amounts of money, time and energy are spent by the government in running observation/children's homes in the country. Amidst people, families, markets and playgrounds, these homes are unfamiliar buildings. People outside are unaware about what happens inside, and are, to a certain extent, uncaring. On the other hand, outsiders are also unwelcome. No one can just walk in and interact or spend time with the children.

The staff at these homes are known to be insensitive, mainly concerned with control, conformity and discipline. Being cruel to children, beating them and ignoring their needs are just a few examples of their misconduct. Yet even they must feel like outcasts from regular society when they work within the four walls of these homes. Surely the atmosphere of seclusion plays havoc on their minds, which is seen vented out through their actions.

To listen to the children of these government homes is a harrowing experience. A boy of a home I had the opportunity to work with said, "I once hurt my leg very badly and I asked Sir for a bandage. He instead hit me with

a shoe. No one cares for anyone's sorrow here." Another child corroborated this: "The office people and the other staff hit the children. They abuse us, so we pick up abusive language. I was once sitting in line and suddenly for no reason one staff member started to hit me and tore my shirt." Clearly, children are made scapegoats and are soft targets for the adults' frustration and anger.

"*Koyi yahan rehne ko tayar nahin hain*" (no child is willing to stay here)," murmurs a seventeen year-old who seemed depressed and dejected



with life. "*Yahan sab apni-apni yaadein lekar bhetein hain* (all of us here keep ourselves going with our memories)," he added. A spirited boy living at the shelter told me, "We were playing cricket and our ball went up onto the terrace. But, because we were not allowed to get the ball, we had to stop our game. If only we were allowed some freedom, then perhaps fewer children would try to run away."

The Juvenile Justice System in India claims to exist for the care, protection, rehabilitation and development of neglected and delinquent children. Children who are without homes must derive good from this system and find a place where they feel safe, protected and cared for. However, in spite of these noble intentions, the children feel anything but benefited. More often than not, they are forcibly brought to these so-called 'homes' and the general feeling among them is that they have been 'caught' and put into 'jails'. They recall being beaten, held by the neck and taken to juvenile welfare courts, without being given any explanation. "When the hearing for children takes place at the children's courts, the magistrate asks us if we have anything to say. But they do all the proceedings in English and then they just take us out of the room. We do not get a chance to speak," claimed a 14-year-old boy living in an observation home.

For the large part, the children who are incarcerated in these homes, have come off the street – they have lived much of their lives on their own and they are more than used to making decisions for themselves. Suddenly, for little reason discernable to them, they find themselves confined and bound by rules measured out to the strokes of a stick. Once in a home, the

misery of the wait for freedom eats into their levels of tolerance. Enduring the passage of the days is anguished. With little joy, meaning or preparation to take a purposeful place in the world outside, crucial years of their lives are wasted.

Do children see these homes as places of care and protection? Do they want to be there? Answers to these are readily available – from the children themselves. Child participation has a special significance within the framework of child rights. It requires that children be viewed as individuals and that they be accorded means by which their views and experiences can shape the process of actualising other rights. Children need to be encouraged to voice their concerns and participate actively in programmes designed to improve their well-being. Governments need to create mechanisms or systems to facilitate the incorporation of children's perspectives into decision-making processes.

Adults need to internalise that children have human rights. The image of a child as weak and dependent needs to be replaced by one that accords respect to a child as competent, resilient and spirited. Sustainable positive change can only be possible if we attach worth to what children convey through their conversations and their silence.

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The Touch of Grace

I have been serving a sentence in the Texas prison system for the last thirteen years. During my incarceration I have had the opportunity to investigate a wide range of political, religious, and philosophical areas. The sole motivation for such inquiries was the wish to locate a path that would enable this social outcaste to make peace with himself and with God, and

to come to terms with the criminal act that put this soul in prison. Without a doubt, the most profound area I have investigated has come from India, and specifically, from within the teachings of Swami Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, and her *siddha yoga* lineage.

In 1978, Swami Muktananda (Gurumayi's guru) initiated a program called the "Prison Project", which began to take his *siddha yoga* discipline behind the walls of America's prisons. The Prison Project has accomplished this in several ways, including by sending *siddha yoga* volunteers into maximum-security prisons to impart Swami Muktananda's teachings. However, the principal mode of delivery was, and still is, via an intense twelve-year correspondence course, given free of cost to any prisoner who wishes to follow it.

After the *maha samadhi* of Swami Muktananda, in 1982, Gurumayi continued her guru's Prison Project. There are now roughly 6,000 prisoners participating in the course. Most prisoners learn of the Prison Project course from other prisoners, as I did. Very few prisoners began any association with Gurumayi either fully knowing who she is, or with even an inkling of the far-reaching magnitude of the course. Like so many other prisoners, who had all but given up on life, I

began my association with Gurumayi out of sheer despair, longing for inner peace, or death, for my soul felt as if it were soon to die itself. Gurumayi was my last chance.

Gurumayi has, via her grace, and divine inner presence, shown prisoners how to begin to let relative existence proceed on its course, and not allow ourselves to get entangled in the webs of the transitory illusions of sorrow, anger, despair, aversion, inhibition, sex and attachments. Many prisoners speak of Gurumayi's subtle presence in their daily lives. Her presence is an inner experience that grows in our hearts, an inner experience of expanding inner peace, despite the chaotic, and often brutal prison environment, and our own individual inner struggles. Now, we are learning to let it all flow...; she has shown us why Lord Buddha had that smile on his face...

As I dive deeper into the ocean of Gurumayi's bliss, and meditate upon her subtle inner presence, I often see my own Self being reflected back. At such times, this reflection is rather unnerving, but this reflection lets me know that what Gurumayi gives, is my own Self, which is already laying within. Gurumayi is the guide I had once cried for, and she is introducing this prisoner to someone has had never before known ... his own Self.

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