

A promising ray of hope in prison

Rashmi (*name changed*), a prison inmate serving life sentence, has expertise in pappad rolling which fetches her a handsome income of Rs. 3000 per month. Going by her own account, Rashmi was falsely implicated in a case related to the death of her mother-in-law. Rashmi, a mother of five children and a resident of Damoh District, comes from a poor farming family with scant income sources. Often Rashmi found herself bitter and frustrated since her landing in the jail had adversely affected both social and economic condition of her family. Rashmi realised with certainty that she could hardly do anything for repairing the social image of her family while still in prison. But she knew that she could definitely contribute to the income of her family.

Rashmi knew about the economic opportunity from Sr. Pavana of Manav Vikas who used visited her and other women prisoners of central jail Sagar for offering counselling support. She narrated the sorry tale of misfortune to Sr. Pavana and told her how her in-laws conspired to drag her name into the accidental death of her mother-in-law. Manav Vikas, with the experience of offering counselling and life-skill support to women prisoners suggested to Ms. Alka Soankar, the jail superintendent, to start some economic activity that will help women prisoners engage themselves in productive activity. The jail superintendent and Fr. Shaju Devassy, director of Manav Vikas, held several discussions for starting economically productive activity for women prisoners. There were several women prisoners in the jail who shared the poor social and economic background as Rashmi and the new alliance of central jail and Manav Vikas have the potential to brighten the lives of dozens of women living a wretched life in prison.

Ms. Alka and Fr. Shaju discussed several options and finally zeroed in on *pappad* and *bari* (lentil meal) because most women knew how to make them and hence needed no additional training. The proposal was taken to Mr. Ayush Sheopuri, district development manager of NABARD, who promptly agreed to mobilising support. After long deliberations and preparations, the programme was launched and equipment were installed in central jail premises with an initial investment of Rs. 10 lakh grant from NABARD. With the installation of machinery and supply of raw materials, Rashmi and other women prisoners started rolling out *pappad* and *bari* in huge quantity. While women worked hard in prison turning the raw materials into sellable products, Manav Vikas took the responsibility of marketing the *pappad* and *bari* in the city.

On an average Rashmi rolls 2 kg pappad and 3 kg bari every day which helps her earn Rs. 3000 every month. She says that there were months when she earned even more. The economically profitable activity is an enjoyable group work as well for the 37 women prisoners who are employed in the industrial unit installed inside the jail premises. While it helped them reduce the monotony and frustration, the economic activity helped them to contribute to family income and thus regain the sense of belongingness to their family.