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## ‘Freedom’ from hunger launched in prison

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Photo: S. Thanthoni



**Director General of Prisons R. Nataraj handing over the ‘Freedom’ logo to actor Revati and Chief Secretary K.S. Sripathi (centre), at the Central prison, Puzhal, in Chennai on Monday. —**

CHENNAI: On Monday, the first loaf of ‘Freedom’ was produced in the Puzhal Central prison.

That’s the name that entrepreneur Mahadevan and the State prison boss, R.Natraj, the brains behind transforming prison into industry, chose for the bread made at the facility. “This is one job that will give you a lot of satisfaction even as you serve your sentence,” remarked Chief Secretary K.S.Sripathi, who travelled to Puzhal early on Monday to inaugurate the facility, despite arriving in the city late on Sunday. “This is not merely a job,” he said.

As many as 25 life convicts will work in shifts at the baking unit installed in a section that was meant to handle prisoners who came in for bounced cheque offence.

Speakers at the simple function on Monday stressed the fact that what the prisoners were doing was much more than a job. The bread goes to feed residents of The Banyan, Spastics Society of Tamil Nadu and Little Drops one day of the week. It will also be distributed to the poor students who land up for tuition at one of the many centres operated by in the city by Give Life, an NGO that supports deserving poor children.

Mr.Natraj handed over the first box of bread to Vandana Gopikumar and Vaishnavi Jayakumar of The Banyan.

“This is an attempt to defeat hunger. Hunger, we know, is a major reason for many of us ending up doing wrong things,” said Actor Revati, who was visiting the prison after more than 20 years.

“I had been to the prison when it was near Central [station],” she said. A life convict reminded her of her earlier visit. “Please come often,” he told her.

Tamil Maiyam founder Jegath Gasper Raj, who is also part of Give Life, told the prisoners who gathered there that they were bread-makers, a job that was pure and sacred and which had to be done with a great deal of dedication.

“You are participating in the process of giving life to many, including 14,600 children. You are not workers, you are stake holders.”

‘Hot Breads’ Mahadevan, also a Give Life trustee, who installed the Rs.20-lakh unit, said that 1,000 bread pieces and 10,000 buns can be baked in a shift. Most NGOs struggled to make ends meet because of the downturn and the consequent drying up of donations. “The primary aim is skill development so that you can be gainfully employed when you go out,” he said.

But DGP (prisons) R.Natraj, never the one to rest on his laurels, has set his sights higher.

He put the onus on running the unit well on the prisoners and told them that if the facility does well, then, he would expand the unit for commercial production.

“We can sell it to the people, we can even make organic bread, which has such a huge market. We can also make pastries,” he said, looking at Mahadevan and counting on his support.

Mahadevan nodded in agreement.

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