

# Slice of freedom

**OFFBEAT** They may be inmates of the Puzhal jail but their spirit of freedom is evident as they bake bread under the guidance of chefs from a leading city bakery, says SHONALI MUTHALALY

The road to jail is long and winding. And, I don't mean in a metaphorical sense. Puzhal jail is in Red Hills, a good 45 minutes from the heart of the city.

From outside, it looks appropriately forbidding, with high gates, armed guards and soaring sentry towers. Inside, there are pink flowers, cheerful 'Welcome' signs and prisoners, in white shorts, shirts and sneakers, nodding hello.

Sprawling Puzhal jail, holds about 500 'lifers', who are prisoners condemned to life imprisonment (14 years), besides about 250 long- and short-term prisoners.

## Chef support

Under Chennai restaurateur M. Mahadevan and DGP (Prisons) R. Natraj, seven of them are being taught how to bake, by five chefs from Hot Breads, overseen by the chain's Corporate Chef Sundar K. The bread – about 500 loaves and 2,000 buns – is distributed at places such as The Banyan, Spastics Society of Tamil Nadu, Little Drops and Arunodayam.

With me is successful Californian Chef Craig Ponsford, here – on Mahadevan's request – to study the bread making, and then explore ways to enrich the loaves (see box).

Friendly jailors A. Anser Basha and K. Sounderaj walk us to the bakery, wrapped in the wonderful aroma of crusty, fresh bread. Inside, the lifers and Chefs are sociably gathered around a big table, rapidly separating and shaping dough. The bakery is calm, spacious and flooded with natural sunlight.

As they begin to stack loaf tins into the gargantuan oven, shim-



**SKILLS FOR LIFE** (From left) Inmates of the Puzhal prison with Californian Chef Craig Ponsford, Sundar K., Corporate Chef, Hot Breads and some of the Hot Breads staff

mering with heat, Craig explains why this project titled 'Freedom' is so important. "It's mental freedom," he states, adding: "Now, when they get out of jail they have a chance to work, to support themselves and stay free." He adds: "They also know they're feeding children, and that releases immense positive energy."

Sunder talks of how reluctant his 'boys' were to teach the lifers, many of whom are in for murder. "They were scared. But by the end of the first day, they

said they didn't want to work anywhere else. Now they all even live on the jail premises."

The baking lifers are shyly friendly, quietly enthusiastic and slightly bemused at all the attention. They line up excitedly for the photograph, when the jailors tell them – with what seems like fatherly pride – that their families will now see their pictures in *The Hindu*.

Basha proudly introduces us to a young former heroin smuggler, who now uses his MCA in

the prison. Then there's the plumber convicted of murder, who just attempted, but failed, his Class VIII exam. "But I'm going to try again," he says, adding that he studies "after lock-up", which is at 6 p.m.

They tell us how many years they've been in Puzhal, a number that ranges from five to 10, and how many more years each of them has to complete. Pushparaj, who aims to finish Class X before he leaves says he's got three more years. "He's expecting to be released early for good

conduct," whispers Sounderaj, "But cannot be sure."

While a number of the lifers initially applied for the bakery training just so they could have something to do, simultaneously earning money (prison wages range from Rs. 13 to Rs. 18 a day depending on skill and labour), they eventually realised that these are skills they can put to use once they're out too.

Unfortunately, although Puzhal Prison has the space, they don't yet have the facilities to engage all the prisoners in activ-

## FLOUR POWER

The flour and milk in the U.S. are fortified with all sorts of things such as multi-vitamins and iron, says Craig, discussing ways to enrich bread. "My guess is that the kids here need calcium. Also vitamins A and B. They're getting a decent diet, but I'm sure it's not complete."

In Los Angeles, there's an annual conference on Functional Food, where an entire section is dedicated to manufacturers, trying to find ways of making food more powerful by adding things such as Omega 3, vitamins or antioxidants. A lot of what they work with is natural – such as ginseng, spirulina, taurine (what goes into Red Bull!) Craig's new project is to find manufacturers who can enrich Freedom Bread, making this powerful symbol a complete food.

ities such as this.

Travelling through the baking campus, profuse with vociferously bright flowers, in an ambience open at the back so we get a good view, we pass a series of huge blocks: School, High Security, Condemned Prisoners Cell. Ironically the threatening 'Gallows' are followed by a 'Meditation Hall / Rehabilitation Centre' complete with an area for yoga. Inside, we bump into Selvaraj, a prisoner who teaches sculpture. His classroom is crawling with startlingly plump imitations of the Oscar statuette. "All over the world, getting an Oscar is very difficult," chuckles Sounderaj. "In jail we'll give you one for free." Though I'm gifted a cement Buddha instead. "A prison-made Buddha. So you'll never forget us." It seems appropriate.