

## All in All, It's Just Another Hole in the Wall...

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*The inner wall of the detention centre is the outer wall of the city.*

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Our story begins on the afternoon of 29 January 2007, when 46 juveniles detained at the Observation Home in Bangalore broke out of its guarded boundary.<sup>1</sup> The juveniles had escaped from a discreet hole created by patiently scraping through the grille-encased ceiling above the bathroom, and dislodging three bricks from the wall. Climbing one on top of another and pulling one another out on the other side, they squeezed their way onto the branch of a nearby tree which functioned as a bridge to the parapet of the Home's wall. They then leapt down and dispersed into the bustling suburb of Madiwala. The work of carefully digging the hole was done over many days, and the material removed was hidden inside their clothes.

According to Satish, the oldest juvenile escapee, he and four other boys hatched the plan almost three months in advance of the actual escape. It was decided that the best time to flee the Home would be between 5 and 6 pm, during officially allotted 'play time'. As the mastermind, Satish summoned a meeting to discuss the *modus operandi*. Before inviting all boys to join him in the escape, he threatened each of them with dire consequences if they informed the authorities of his intention. He also arranged for friends to meet him outside with clothes and money after his escape. In keeping with this plan, it took the boys ten days to slowly grate through the chosen segment of the formidable wall that separated the inner wall of the detention centre from the outer wall of the city. With precision and planning, the boys made their great escape by passing through the inconspicuous yet significant hole in the wall.

The Observation Home is located between the IT Park on one side and jumbo shopping malls on the other. It is carefully tucked away in the middle of a colourful and bustling wholesale *sabzi mandi* (vegetable market) that runs along the entire length of the road, more or less obscuring the entrance of the Home, which is indicated by an indistinct bleached board. As a result, though situated at the heart of the city, it remains an urban 'non-space', disconnected from the everyday of the modern metropolis.

While the regular rhythm of the city beats around the lack of infrastructure, the invitation for bigger investment in the BPO sector and the escalating stories of crime, the sudden appearance of the hole in the wall protecting the city from the Home caused an acute disruption in the usual pattern of stories that the city narrates about itself. Accounts of the "great escape"<sup>2</sup> by the juveniles captured the headlines of every newspaper and news channel in the city. The Observation Home becomes the focal point of scrutiny and curiosity. The attention of the city's inhabitants is forcefully drawn to this sudden act of defiance; those for whom the home previously did not exist, are now rudely awoken from their undisturbed sleep, and so notice the presence of an uninvited guest – the *denizen* – amongst them.

For three days following the escape, the media bombarded the public with photographs and commentary on the catastrophe, making sure that the inhabitants of the city were well aware of its illegal citizens suddenly on the loose. Before this story slowly receded into oblivion, the absconding juveniles were described as "murderers, dacoits, Naxalites, Maoists, undertrials and convicts"<sup>3</sup>. The language adopted to narrate the incident blurs the supposedly neat lines between the adult offender and the young denizen, not to mention violating the privacy of the juveniles. In fact, it was almost as if the danger posed by the escapees was so grave that "five teams of police officers" needed to be constituted to "nab the kids"<sup>4</sup>. The newspapers proceeded to further suggest, "... Since most of them had been arrested in connection with crimes such as murder, dacoity and rape, they were unable to get bail"<sup>5</sup>. At the Home, the immediate emphasis fell on the lack of adequate security, along with the inefficiency of the administration, completely undermining the *raison d'être* of the escape. A diagnosis offered was the fact that the walls of the Home were not high enough, and there was an urgent need to increase their height.

Ironically, the media that cries itself hoarse over the importance of freedom of speech, and the IT industry that pushes the idea of free trade, seemed to entirely miss the fact that the escape was eventually an act of *freedom*. A freedom whose ultimate price would be measured by additional layers of bricks to further fortify the now not-so-formidable wall. The language of the law has always had a curious obsession with the metaphor of walls and fences – an obsession that naturalises distinctions of the legal from the illegal; the inside from the outside; the citizen from the denizen; and the inner wall of the detention centre from the outer wall of the city. Some walls are torn apart by acts of brutal force, others decay slowly over periods of time, while others appear to stand tall and strong, and yet do not remain the same as they carefully mask their powerlessness only till an act of rebellion exposes the fragile bravado that sustained them in the first place. Just as the rest of the wall is rendered hypervisible by the appearance of a hole, the parameters of the rule of law become obvious when they are breached.

In the ordinary language of material physics, a hole would be just a hollow space in a solid body or surface. But a hole in *this* wall represents a different space altogether: a void which nonetheless challenges the larger, critical distinctions of inside/outside, and allows for a brief respite from the well-rehearsed separations between the city and its detention centres. While it appears that a city can only make sense of itself through processes of legitimised segregation, the narrative enacted behind the walls reveals the uneven story of the rule of law, citizenship and identity. The powerful irony is that but for the hole in the wall, the city would not have been alerted to the walls that exist within it, as well as the walls surrounding it.

Operational within the spatial logic of such walls are the codes embedded within the state's formation of what constitutes the good citizen, or the *adarsh balak* (ideal child) – those who didn't quite make it past the walls of schools.

Although the art and science of designing and constructing buildings follows the purpose it intends to serve, the architecture of the juvenile home falls outside the spatial logic of this intention. Bearing a close resemblance to the austere entrance of a prison, the barred porch of the Observation Home in Bangalore is heavily guarded by the members of the duty staff. A tight lock-and-key system welcomes only known entrants to the inside of the observation Home, while restricting the contact the juvenile has with family and friends, marking the distinct boundaries of the 'outside' and 'inside' worlds.

According to sociologist Erving Goffman, the "all-encompassing or total character is symbolised by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests or moors"<sup>6</sup>. The Observation Home acts as the 'total' institution that creates an exceptional world of the 'inside' – governed by rules and procedures that dictate every aspect of the subject's movement, and curtail body autonomy.

Within the apparatus of correction, the juvenile is confined to the pale inner walls of his 'new home', considered to be a 'safe abode' for reflection, introspection and reparation.

These inner walls symbolically offer didactic uplifting quotes, along with pictures of various deities, tendering the quintessence of Virtue that will somehow, subliminally, infiltrate the consciousness of the alleged 'criminal'. At the Home in Bangalore, the most prominent of these reads: "Training of a child is like painting of a masterpiece". This is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's observation that "[...] The entire para-penal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell, on the walls of which are written in black letters: 'God sees you'"<sup>7</sup>. Such a lack of temptation within this spiritually caged environment is meant to therapeutically cure the inmate of the Home of all the evil that has entered his body. Willingly or unwillingly he submits himself to the pedagogic fantasies of the state acting as *parens patriae* – a notion that allows the state to treat the child in 'a manner' supposedly in his/her best interest.

The inner wall of the detention centre acts as a site for multiple contestations – not just representing the denial of physical interaction with the outside, but also raising questions about the limited understanding behind the prescribed type of reformation process for children, and the obscure language of the pedagogic fantasies of the law.

Not satisfied with just the spatial confinement of the juvenile, these warped projections take on a temporal aspect as well, through controlling each waking moment of the juvenile. The manual of the Observation Home, for instance, dictates the following schedule (this list draws upon information provided by dozens of children interviewed):

5:30 – 6:00 am: The juvenile delinquent must rise.

6:00 – 6:30 am: He must wash up before the day begins.

6:30 – 7:30 am: A mandatory session of prayers and yoga.

7:30 – 8:30 am: Cleaning duties – sweeping and swabbing of the community and dormitory areas.

8:30 – 9:00 am: Must bathe and get dressed.

9:00 – 10:00 am: Breakfast. Three boys help with the cooking on a rotational basis.

10:00 am – 1:00 pm: School. Juveniles receive non-formal instruction that includes training in painting, drawing, moral education and alpha-numeral literacy.

1:00 – 2:00 pm: Afternoon meal.

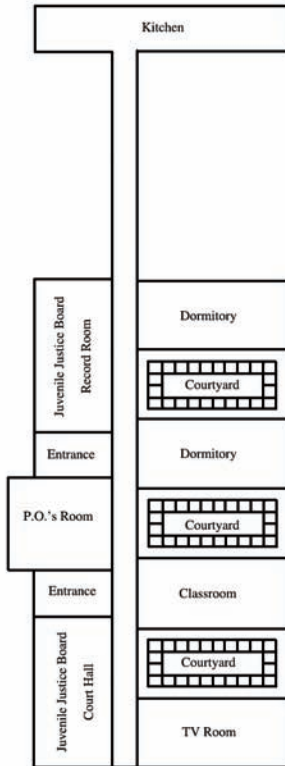
2:00 – 5:00 pm: Recreation. Vocational training in drama, tailoring, electronics repair as and when resource persons are available. Prayer.

5:00 – 6:00 pm: Play. Games such as carrom and chess are played within a fenced courtyard.

6:00 – 6:30 pm: Tea and a fruit.

6:30 – 7:30 pm: Evening prayers. The hymns are led by the juveniles themselves.

**Rough Layout of the Observation Home Building**



7:30 – 8:30 pm: Dinner.

8:30 – 9:30 pm: Juveniles are allowed supervised viewing of television.

9:30 pm: Lights-out, as order and silence is ensured.

While children enter schools as future citizens, the juvenile enters the Observation Home as a denizen. Unlike other sites of cultivation such as the school or camp that hide behind their walls, there is a collapse of temporal understanding in the Observation Home. The inmates are prevented from freely crossing its boundary for an indefinite period of time; and within the walls they are subjected to a disciplined routine, in the same place, amongst the same set of people, day after day. It is assumed that this set of activities is 'best suited' for his development. The law believes in correcting the behaviour of a young errant to match the perfectly calibrated settings of a 'worthy citizen'.

The language of the law often masks the concept of subjugation and unfreedom in its extensively maintained

argument of protection. Although the juvenile is not subjected to the force of the iron hand, he nonetheless is reduced to a state of bare existence, in order to rewrite the coveted notion of ideal citizen on his body. As Foucault declares:

In our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain 'political economy' of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use 'lenient' methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. Punishment, if I may put it, should strike the soul rather than the body.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, today behind the inner walls of the guarded Observation Home in Bangalore, the juvenile mechanically performs the chores of a general code which closely resembles the House rules 'of the young prisoners in Paris' of 1837.<sup>9</sup> Like a prisoner, the

juvenile is stripped of his identity. He surrenders all personal belongings before he poses as a 'criminal' for his 'rowdy-sheet' photograph. Along with the formal identity of 'Qaidi No. XXX', he is also assigned a new name by his dormitory mates, while he slowly learns the nuances of the Home rules and regulations.

Further, to effectively render the denizen as an 'ethical citizen-subject', a host of duties are mapped against this objective – a project of cultivation behind the closed doors of the Home. Through this disciplined drill he is forced to inculcate the pragmatic virtues of cleanliness, punctuality, morality, helpfulness and unselfishness, amongst others – an important step in the making of the good citizen, and which purportedly help in forging and regulating the identity of the *adarsh balak*, the subject who is otherwise moulded within the walls of the school.

It is worth recalling a moment in popular culture where a wall emerges as the deeply symbolic space between public memory and private struggle. In Yash Chopra's blockbuster Hindi film, *Deewar* (Wall, 1975), after the heroine and her two children are forced into the city, they find shelter under a bridge. One morning the mother wakes to find her younger son Ravi missing, and she goes out to look for him with her older son Vijay. They find Ravi outside the walls of a school, standing by the gate and looking longingly into the compound, while the patriotic tune of *Saare Jahaan se Accha* plays as the poignant accompaniment to his yearning for self-improvement. Vijay offers to work so that his brother may study; their paths diverge, and they meet many years later – below the same proverbial bridge, where the only witness to the split between the figure of the contractual law-abiding citizen and its subterranean 'other' is the *deewar*/wall between them.<sup>10</sup>

Acts of resistance are often articulated via metaphorical and dramatic excess and the use of words such as 'revolutionary', 'explosive', etc., to describe efforts of emancipation. The "great escape" of Bangalore reminds us that it is sometimes useful to pay attention to the ways in which fiercely motivated people 'scrape' or 'dig' their ways out of confinement; how a space of anonymity, oblivion and neglect can be converted into a zone of significance; how a hole can suddenly and dramatically reveal the citizen's shadow on the other side of the wall, inhabited now by the denizen – who finds himself in a temporary state of aporia where he is simultaneously present and absent, is legible and illegible, and is inscribed and erased.

## Notes

1. Section 8 (1), The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000: "Any State Government may establish and maintain either by itself or under an agreement with voluntary organisations, observation homes in every district or group of districts, as may be required for the temporary reception of any juvenile in conflict with law during the pendency of any inquiry regarding them under this Act".
2. Times News Network. "Wanted: Judicial Probe into 'Great Escape'". In *The Times of India*, 31 January 2007 (Bangalore edition).

3. "Nobody's Children". Editorial, *Deccan Herald*, 30 January 2007 (Bangalore edition).
4. Times News Network, op. cit.
5. ————. "46 Undertrials Flee Bangalore Remand Home". In *The Times of India*, 29 January 2007 (Bangalore edition).
6. Erving Goffman. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Anchor Books, 1961, New York), p. 4.
7. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995, New York), p. 294.
8. ————, op. cit., p. 16
9. ————, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
10. Lawrence Liang. "Cinematic Citizenship and the Illegal Citizen". In *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, p. 376 (2005).

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