

Jhappis in jail: This NGO unites inmates with their children

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Raman Pandit was around five when his father was whisked away to jail. He would probably have never met him had it not been for the persistent visits of some NGO workers to Raman's boarding school on behalf of a pining Pandit. They finally arranged a meeting when the elder Pandit came out on parole eight years later. To the young boy, this emaciated stranger — who embarrassed him with a hug and kept calling him 'babu' — didn't exactly fit the bill of a man who had set his mother ablaze in a fit of rage, and whom Raman grew up hating. Soon, a series of letters, money orders and warm meetings in Morshi open jail ensued. Today, a year after Pandit's release, father and son live together in a cement shanty built from Raman's savings. After deftly rolling chapatis, the gaunt ex-lifer now entertains guests with jail stories involving contraband beedis while Raman — a wheatish third-year arts student — chuckles at Pandit's habit of pulling the TV's main wire to switch it off. "I consider him a friend more than a father," says Raman.

This bittersweet reunion is one of many small victories for VARHAD (Voluntary Action For Rehabilitation and Development) based in Amravati, which has been organising meetings between jail inmates and their children for more than 15 years. Besides a website, the NGO — partnered by Tata Trusts — also boasts soft-spoken staffers who haven't been paid for four months for lack of funds. It was founded by a moustachioed man named Ravindra Vaidya who had spent two months in jail as a teenager after "an elderly woman with a rivalry against my family immolated herself and blamed me in her dying declaration." After his release on bail from Amravati Central Jail, Vaidya studied social work and started helping poor prisoners in Vidarbha with free legal aid and counselling.

"Most prisoners in Maharashtra who are lifers are not hardcore criminals or habitual offenders," says Vaidya. According to him, several innocent inmates from the backward regions of Vidarbha land in jail because they can't afford good quality lawyers. "Family members then paint the inmate as a villain, and keep kids away," he says.

Amravati Central Jail, for instance, has many convicts whose families stay far away and can't afford to meet them often. When they do, it's for 20 minutes from beyond a three-tier partition — glass, mesh and a grill. "But people want to touch and feel close to their family members," says Vaidya, adding that Gala Bhet — a two-year-old initiative by Maharashtra prisons department which facilitates poignant meetings between families and inmates without the noisy barrier of a mesh



BITTERSWEET: Raman Pandit (right) grew up hating his father, Rakesh (left) because he set his mother ablaze in a fit of rage. He is keen to let go of the past and now lives with his father

When 20-year-old Rakesh Kamble (name changed) met his father in Amravati Jail for the first time, he sat on his lap and cried. His family had told him that his dad killed his grandmother and then died soon after

grill — gets its cue from meetings organised by VARHAD.

Often, workers have to deal with incensed families and unshakeable mindsets. But tearful reunions make it all worthwhile. "I sat on his lap and cried," says 20-year-old Rakesh Kamble (name changed), recounting his first meeting in Amravati Central Jail with the father he had never seen. The youngest of six children, Rakesh had been told that his father had killed his maternal grandmother and died soon after, which is why there were no photos of him in the house. "But every time we would go to a wedding, relatives would ask with a smile,

"So, when is your father getting out?" says Rakesh, who started pestering his mother for the truth which came out finally when he was barely a teenager.

VARHAD project coordinator Dhananand Nagdive says that what families go through outside is often worse than what the prisoners go through inside. Rakesh recalls his father sending a money order once. "My mother sent it back," Rakesh says, adding that accepting it would have invited taunts from neighbours. After release, his father did work

as a security guard in Pune and sent money home but succumbed to a brain tumour in May. "If only there was someone to guide me, I'd be more confident today," says Rakesh, an IAS aspirant, whose home still doesn't have a picture of his father.

While stigma escapes families of prisoners in busy metros, they often pay other invisible prices. "It's like driving a car without one wheel," says Thane's 19-year-old Sonal Kokate, about the five painful years that followed the arrest of her father on June 21, 2012, the day she saw her mother wailing and banging her forehead against the wall. Three hurried glass-partition meetings had

followed. Then, it was during a Children's Day Gala Bhet in 2015 — for which VARHAD sponsored her travel tickets — that Sonal and her younger brother met their father for an hour at Amravati Central Jail.

Sonal says her civil contractor dad became sad on learning that his wife was working as a domestic help to pay the rent and fund the kids' education. "I learnt to curb my desires," says Sonal, who penned a 46-page handwritten letter to the PM via his radio show Mann Ki Baat, urging him to consider her father's case for bail. Her problems have given the MBA aspirant a long-term goal. "I will adopt a child or at least fund a child's education when I start earning," says Sonal, who has now left her CAT classes midway for lack of funds.

Meanwhile, Rakesh says he will share his name with the world when he "becomes a success". Raman — who wants to believe his father who pinches his own Adam's apple to say that his mother burnt herself after a big fight — is keen on letting go of the past and starting his own business. He also seems to be warming up to his dusky 'baba'. "He looks more like me now," says Raman.