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Meditation in Prison: Rehabilitating Prisoners from India to Bangladesh

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***WATER FOOD DIABETES AYURVEDA GENETICS POVERTY YOGA STDS HISTORY SEX
SOCIETY FAMILY PLANNING CASTE GENDER RIOTS RELIGION HEALTH DEMOCRACY
FLOODING WASTE-MANAGEMENT UNANI PSYCHOLOGY FOLK MEDICINE
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION GLOBALISATION BIOCHEMISTRY OLD AGE REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH MALARIA POLICY HIV AIDS WHO MEDICOSCAPES COLONIALISM PHARMACY
RELIGION LEPROSY BOTOX DEHYDRATION NGOs AYUSH...***

Master's Thesis

**MEDITATION IN PRISON:
REHABILITATING PRISONERS
FROM INDIA TO BANGLADESH**

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Summary

Indian and Bangladeshi detention sites are often overcrowded and far from offering adequate health care facilities and rehabilitation programmes to prisoners (Bada Math et al., 2011; Bhutta and Siddique Akbar, 2012; Tamim, 2016). For this reason, governmental and non-governmental authorities and organizations are working on reforming the local correctional system in order to respect inmates' basic needs and rights. Prisoner rehabilitation plays an essential role in such a process. Therefore, legal and skill-development trainings, counselling, and other services are starting to be offered in many South Asian prisons (Jamshed, 2016; Roy, 2003). For instance, meditation practice is being introduced to Bangladeshi jails as a psychospiritual support for the inmates.

By taking into consideration how the role of meditation in Indian jails influenced the Bangladeshi context, this study investigates the reasons and modalities, difficulties and developments regarding the introduction of meditation to Bangladeshi prisons. Through three weeks of fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, my research explores a range of different perceptions of and expectations towards meditation as a rehabilitation method and as a support to other reform measures. I interviewed fifteen informants, mostly NGO members and meditation teachers who currently work or previously worked in prisoner rehabilitation. By combining literature, data analysis, fieldwork experience, and anthropological discussion, this study mainly draws on Alter's theory of the mutual influence of individual health and social health (Alter, 2004), the Foucauldian concept of discipline (Foucault, 1977), and Mosse's ideas of development and agency (Mosse, 2004).

This research reflects on the necessity to carry out new productive collaborations among different organizations in order to realize the inmates' holistic rehabilitation. The NGOs considered in this study promote different reform measures with the aim of developing prisoners' self-awareness, awareness of laws, rights, health issues, and individual and social skills. An increased awareness and a mindset change of people inside and outside the prisons may help develop the process of self-rehabilitation and other-acceptance towards crime reduction. Further, such comprehensive transformation would allow the implementation of new reform measures for both individual and social improvements. Analyzing local evolving perceptions about meditation could also contribute to sensitize the authorities towards innovative policies to reduce crime and recidivism, as well as to improve prisoners' well-being.

1. Introduction

Prisoner living conditions in jails around the world are a crucial issue for the development of civil societies which respect human rights. In South Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh, despite the governmental and non-governmental efforts for improving and reforming the correctional system, prisoners face a large number of iniquities, both as undertrials and convicts. They are confined to overcrowded detention sites, often without adequate health care facilities, rehabilitation and training programmes, as well as legal aid (Bada Math et al., 2011; Bhutta and Siddique Akbar, 2012; Tamim, 2016). Recently, more attention has been devoted to inmates' basic needs, as well as human dignity and psychospiritual well-being. In order to rehabilitate prisoners both as individuals and members of society, educational, vocational, and legal trainings, therapeutic counselling, and other potentially beneficial initiatives are starting to be proposed in many South Asian prisons (Jamshed, 2016; Roy, 2003). One of these programmes is meditation practice, seen as a psychological, behavioural and spiritual support for the inmates.

But what is meditation? Meditation can be defined as “private devotion or mental exercise encompassing various techniques of concentration, contemplation, and abstraction, regarded as conducive to heightened self-awareness, spiritual enlightenment, and physical and mental health” (Merkur, 2019). In addition to lay forms of meditation, Merkur (2019) argues that all the world's religions developed throughout history use peculiar forms of meditation. For instance, *dhyāna* (Sanskrit, ‘concentrated meditation’) is a contemplative practice for the Hindu philosophical school of Yoga, afterwards known as Chan and Zen respectively for the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist schools. Other examples are the practice of verbal or mental repetition of the Hindu and Buddhist mantras, the Islamic *dhikr*,¹ and the Orthodox Jesus Prayer. Another form of meditation consists of focusing attention upon a visual image, like Tibetan Buddhists' *mandala* (Sanskrit, ‘circle’), which is seen as a collection point of universal forces. Other field-based perspectives about meditation are analysed in the following chapters in order to frame its meanings and relevance to the prisoner rehabilitation.

¹ One of my informants, Professor M. Shamsheer Ali, associated meditation with the ritual prayer of *dhikr*, defined as the ‘Remembrance of Allah’. He also mentioned the Sufi practice of meditation, *murāqabah* (Arabic, ‘to watch over’), that looks at developing knowledge of one's spiritual soul.

1.1. Research Questions and Objectives

As detailed in the following chapters, meditation has been widely studied in many different fields and contexts, especially by focusing on its transformative, spiritual, and healing potentials. However, as an experimental reform measure for the rehabilitation of prisoners in Bangladesh, meditation is still an unexplored reality. By considering how meditation in Indian prisons influenced the Bangladeshi context, this study investigates the reasons and modalities, difficulties and developments regarding the ongoing introduction of meditation to Bangladeshi jails. Therefore, it is based on the following principal research question: *Why and how is meditation being introduced to Bangladeshi prisons?*

By asking ‘why’, other significant issues arise in connection to different perceptions of meditation, rehabilitation, prisons and prisoners in the context of Bangladesh, thereby raising a further question: *How is meditation related to prisoners’ rehabilitation and health in Bangladesh?* In this regard, my research considers different aspects of meditation, its role in prison, its potential combination with other reform measures, and different attitudes and expectations towards it. It also addresses the issues of prisoners’ rights and the prison reforms through which meditation is slowly becoming a conceivable, acceptable rehabilitative approach. By comparing and combining literature and data, my intention is to frame meditation in a constellation of different understandings of prisoner rehabilitation. These understandings reflect which aspects of rehabilitation my informants perceive as more urgent in connection with the inmates’ diverse levels of awareness which their organizations aim to develop.

Since this study explores a potentially holistic approach to prisoner rehabilitation, I examine a range of aspects of rehabilitation, though always focusing on meditation. In this regard, it investigates my informants’ positions towards the use of meditation as a prisoners’ rehabilitative practice in combination with other reform measures. My research includes the perspectives of the promoters of meditation as well as of the members of organizations involved in prisoner rehabilitation. It is oriented towards the sensitization of local authorities towards innovative policies of coping with crime reduction and prisoners’ rights. Revealing and analyzing local NGO members’ evolving perceptions about meditation may contribute to the achievement of this goal. Furthermore, this research potentially explores new positive and productive cooperation strategies among organizations working on different aspects of prisoner rehabilitation. In this way, such collaborations would develop both inmates’ self-awareness and their awareness of laws, rights, health issues, and individual and social skills.

1.2. Methodology

My research approach is based on both literature- and field research. I began my literature inquiries in October 2018, and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, from April 9th to 27th, 2019. The literature review focuses on material and online sources about the contexts of Bangladesh and India, but also considers other studies conducted throughout the world, especially in Western settings. The ethnographic fieldwork consisted of qualitative data collection in Dhaka and the nearby village of Narsingdi, based on an inductive approach for data coding and theory-building. Before going to the field, I established contacts with some of my informants, designed the interviews, prepared a research project information sheet, and organized most of the appointments with my respondents. After coming back to Germany, I transcribed my interviews and conversations by combining them with fieldnotes and literature, and proceeding with a discourse analysis.

During my field research, I collected data through fifteen informants, three women and twelve men. I conducted semi-structured interviews of about one hour each in English and, when necessary, in Bengali with the help of an interpreter. I interviewed six members and meditation teachers from two organizations promoting meditation in Bangladesh, Quantum Foundation and Silva Bangladesh. I asked questions about meditation in Bangladesh and the initiatives through which meditation is being introduced to the jails. We also talked about their projects connected to the correctional system, the psychological and spiritual aspects of rehabilitation of inmates both in India and in Bangladesh, and their knowledge of different reform measures for the rehabilitation of prisoners. In addition, I investigated the scope, outcomes, and consequences of such meditation programmes – where, when, how long, and whether offered to all categories of prisoners, to both men and women, and/or to the prison personnel.

I also interviewed seven members of BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities), BLAST (Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust) and DAM (Dhaka Ahsania Mission) involved in the project for prisoners' rights and prison reforms called 'Improvement of the Real Situation of Overcrowding in Prison' (IRSOP). My questions concerned their organizations and their activities connected to the correctional system. They focused on the paralegal advisory model, legal literacy and mediation for BRAC and BLAST, and on capacity building, drug treatment, skill-development training and family and inmates counselling for DAM. Furthermore, I enquired about their knowledge of and expectations towards other reformative measures, including meditation, in the contexts of

India and Bangladesh, and about their positions towards a potential combination of these methods.

In addition to the interviews, I had in person and telephone conversations with many of my informants. Among them, three BRAC and two BLAST lawyers, two Silva and Quantum meditation teachers, and a DAM clinical psychologist currently work or previously worked with prisoners. I also had a long conversation with a physics professor who explained the relationships between meditation, Islam, and science. Importantly, I conducted participant observation of informants' activities, spaces, routines, and events. I attended a concluding conference and meditation session after a four-day event organized by the Quantum Foundation in Dhaka. A member of this organization accompanied me and translated the focal points of the participants' interventions, including the speech of the founder Gurujee Shahid El-Bukhari Mahajataq. I also visited the organizations' centres and offices in Dhaka and in the nearby village of Narsingdi, where I observed BRAC's field activities. They are based on providing free legal training and aid to poor and marginalized people, mediating between parties in dispute, and sensitizing community leaders. In the BRAC office in Narsingdi, I conducted participant observation of the testimonies of seven local women helped by BRAC to solve domestic and marital legal issues.



Figure 1: BRAC office in Narsingdi

Regarding my methodology, it is important to clarify that I recognize my position as a researcher and a lay meditation practitioner, thus combining my personal and academic interests. I am aware of the possible influence my experience might have on my study as both a limitation and an advantage. I perceive my way of practicing silent and guided meditation techniques as an experimental tool for self-development which helps me stimulate critical thinking. Therefore, I am working on the construction of my position as a philosophically defined ‘skeptic’: I am learning to doubt first of all my knowledge, and then the existence of absolute truths.

1.3. Chapters’ Overview

In each chapter, I combine arguments, literature, data analysis, and discussion. Chapter 2 and 3 offer a framework on meditation and on meditation-based prisoner rehabilitation. Chapter 2 introduces meditation as perceived by my informants, and provides an overview of research on meditation from scientific, religious, and ethnographic viewpoints by including some critical perspectives on meditation. Furthermore, it examines some relevant meditation techniques practiced in India and Bangladesh. Chapter 3 discusses meditation as a reform measure for the rehabilitation of prisoners in many parts of the world, especially in India and Bangladesh. It includes Kiran Bedi’s work in India in the early 1990s and delineates the developments, difficulties and current situation of the use of meditation in Bangladeshi prisons. In addition, it briefly traces the history of prison reforms and prisoners’ rights in India and Bangladesh. I further mention the projects of the NGOs I contacted for my research, and how the work on the amendments of the Prisons Act (1894) and the Jail Code (1920) may have a strong impact on the stable introduction of new reform measures for the rehabilitation of prisoners.

Chapter 4 is based on my literature review and theoretical framework in combination with my data analysis and fieldwork experience. By connecting it with my data, the main literature consists of Alter’s theory of the mutual influence of individual health and social health (Alter, 2004), Foucault’s concept of discipline (Foucault, 1977), and Mosse’s notions of development and agency (Mosse, 2004). Further, I maintain the importance of prison ethnography (Bandyopadhyay, Jefferson, and Ugelvik, 2012) as a potential support to the idea of individualized rehabilitation, and I delineate the ideas of positive criminology (Ronel, Frid, and Timor, 2013) and of rehabilitation by means of a collaborative process of forgiveness and repairing of relations among the parties (Lacey and Pickard, 2015).

Chapter 5 includes my findings and results, with further discussion. It addresses different levels of knowledge and expectations towards meditation as a prisoners' rehabilitative measure. In this chapter, I reflect on the connections between spirituality, religion, meditation and science. I also discuss the issue of considering meditation as a measure for improving discipline or health of prisoners, and the interconnections of these views. An important point is the need to change mindset of and towards prisoners in order to take the path of self-rehabilitation and other-acceptance. Another potential effect of such mindset change towards an increase in awareness is the implementation of new reform measures for both individual and social improvements. Finally, I conclude my thesis with a brief recap of my data, arguments and findings, the limitations of my study, and suggestions for future research.

2. Defining and Contextualizing Meditation

After providing a general definition of meditation as in the introduction, it is relevant to describe my informants' perspectives about it. During my fieldwork in Bangladesh, they defined meditation by referring to religious, spiritual, scientific and psychological aspects of using human mind and brain beyond ego. Even without providing a precise definition of the ambiguous concept of ego, many of the participants in my study mentioned it and generally considered it as something that an individual understands as his or her 'self'. From a religious viewpoint, the BLAST lawyer Rashedul Islam associated meditation with prayer. In addition, M. Shamsheer Ali, a Muslim professor, physicist and meditation practitioner, described it as leading to the condition of being away from sins, bad thoughts, impurity, and ego to become as close as possible to God. Differently, Md Borkot Ali, another member of BLAST, expressed his idea of meditation as a form of motivation to overcome personal ego problems.

Another way to understand meditation is through the lens of science. Pranjit Lal Shil, a Quantum meditation teacher, defined it as a 'science of living', an exercise for human mind, and "a process to cool down our brain and to clean our mind". Abul Kalam, the director of Silva Bangladesh, described it as the way in which human beings can use their minds, brains, and their thought process. The latter two organizations promote different meditation techniques in Bangladesh by intertwining spiritual and scientific explanations of such practice. It is significant to highlight that, apart from the ancient spiritual traditions and the most recent scientific findings, the evidence of the practical usefulness of meditation in present-day Bangladesh is understood to be a key factor for facilitating its diffusion. In this regard, during the conference I attended, the founder of the Quantum Foundation Gurujee Shahid El-Bukhari Mahajataq maintained that the numerous positive testimonies of the Quantum Method practitioners were the proof that meditation is the key to open any portal to success. I perceived such a statement as a confident advertisement of Quantum meditation, and through it I reflected on the supposed necessity to show its reliability.

Other definitions are related to the psychological and healing potentials of meditation. For instance, BRAC lawyers Md Ekramul Haque and Sandhu Kumar Nandi stated that meditation is practical knowledge to build confidence, or a way out of trauma for a traumatized mind. Amir Hussain, a clinical psychologist and member of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, understands meditation as mindfulness and as a method for psychological change. Finally, two cancer patients attending the conference on the Quantum Method testified about

their improved conditions with the support of meditation to relieve pain as psychological healing.² These different perspectives can be useful to understand my informants' interest in and expectations towards meditation itself, as well as meditation as a rehabilitative activity for prisoners.

2.1. Studying Meditation

According to Walsh (1979: 161), meditation has been studied since the early 1960s, but with a high level of initial skepticism. From 1970 onwards, “the popular interest in non-Western cultures and disciplines led in turn to greater scientific interest”, resulting in an evolution of the empirical research on meditation (Walsh, 1979: 161-162). Research on meditation focuses on psychological, physiological, and chemical responses. Generally, both phenomenological and objective studies on meditation report metabolic and neural responses and an enhancement of perceptual sensitivity, also demonstrating its therapeutic potential for psychological and psychosomatic disorders. The possible effects of meditation are mainly associated with psychological mechanisms, such as “relaxation, desensitization to formerly stressful stimuli, heightened awareness, habituation, attention, expectation, deautomatization, cognitive factors, counterconditioning, insight, disidentification from mental content, regression in the service of the ego, and behavioral self-control skills” (Walsh, 1979: 168). Investigated in scientific as well as anthropological studies, and partly mentioned by my informants in the field, such meditation-related psychological mechanisms might have a significant impact for the criminal rehabilitation strategies which are being introduced to many prisons in South Asia and throughout the world.

In connection with the field of rehabilitation, one of the key concepts that emerged during my fieldwork was ‘awareness’. On the one hand, by accessing different forms of awareness – such as self-awareness, awareness of laws and rights, awareness of drug use and health issues, awareness of individual and social skills – the prisoners may change their mindset and hopefully reduce the risk of recidivism. On the other hand, through a raise of awareness and a psychological change, the rest of the society would, in theory, create a healthy environment that does not stigmatize and instigate crime, and that allows new initiatives in the field of rehabilitation. Among other relevant reform measures provided to the prisoners, meditation practice may significantly enhance particular forms of awareness and, to some extent, shape the brain’s gray and white matter. In this regard, Fox et al. (2014:

² The Quantum member Nishat Tasnim Khan was my interpreter in that occasion.

68) conducted a study based on results from functional neuroimaging, behavioural and clinical research, and phenomenological reports of long- and short-term meditative experiences. They found out that the brain regions hypothesized to be involved in meditation are

regions key to meta-awareness and introspection (RLPFC/BA 10), exteroceptive and interoceptive body awareness (sensory cortices and insular cortex, respectively), memory consolidation and reconsolidation (hippocampus), self and emotion regulation (anterior and mid-cingulate, and orbitofrontal cortex), and finally intra- and interhemispheric communication (superior longitudinal fasciculus and corpus callosum, respectively).

Meditation and its healing potentials are widely explored in both religious and scientific literature, and therefore it is difficult to write about it in this context without seeming to conflate religion and science. For instance, Kabat-Zinn and Davidson (2011) describe an increasing confluence of religious, meditative and scientific perceptions of the mind and brain that is coming to light by studying and experimenting with the clinical applications of meditation. Their work is collected in an edited transcript of a conference organized in 2005 in Washington DC by the Mind and Life Institute. It brought together leading thinkers from the medical and contemplative traditions, including His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Interestingly, my informants from the meditation-oriented organizations Silva Bangladesh and Quantum Foundation insistently pointed out that their ideas of meditation were scientifically proven and consistent with all religions. Such interconnections between the fields can be considered fascinating and potentially constructive, while at the same time a smart way to widen the audience, the spread and the appeal of a meditation technique.

More generally, numerous forms of meditation have been practiced and studied in different geographical and social contexts. For example, two ethnographic studies conducted by Pagis (2009; 2014) in Israel and the United States show particular features and effects of Vipassanā meditation – detailed in the next section – which may be considered as helpful factors to change mental and behavioural attitudes within the path of criminal rehabilitation. The first study follows the interaction between discursive and embodied modes of reflexivity and provides a framework for embodied self-reflexivity. According to Pagis (2009: 268), the self is placed in the reflexive capacity of bodily sensations, used as indexes which arise in conjunction with psychological states, emotions, and past experiences. The constant awareness of embodied responses is used as a tool for self-monitoring. In her second study, Pagis (2014) analyses meditation-based equanimity not only as a psychological state, but

also as a social attitude constructed through a silent interaction. During the meditation retreats, participants gradually learn “how to be with others while not directly attending to them”, allowing for “the emergence of silent social attunement that leads to a shared emotional state” and that facilitates equanimity (Pagis, 2014: 16).

Despite the positive images of different meditation techniques that emerge in many studies, other research reports critical perspectives about some aspects of meditation. Van Dam et al. (2017) express some important criticisms toward mindfulness meditation, a Western term which gave birth to the mindfulness movement. They review the present state of mindfulness research, focusing on assessment and measurement, mindfulness training, possible adverse effects,³ challenges to (clinical) intervention methodology, intersection with brain imaging, and questionable interpretations of data from contemplative neuroscience concerning the brain mechanisms and mental processes underlying mindfulness (Van Dam et al., 2017: 7). Their study discusses the misinformation and poor methodology associated with past studies of mindfulness, the difficulties of defining mindfulness itself,⁴ and the crucial methodological issues for interpreting results from its investigations.

A different critical analysis by Zeng, Oei, and Liu (2013) explores the problematic concepts and measurement of awareness and equanimity in Goenka’s Vipassanā meditation (GVM), similar to the abilities cultivated in mindfulness-based psychotherapies (MBTs). However, they claim that none of the previously created mindfulness scales can adequately capture the way in which those ideas and abilities are applied in Vipassanā. For example, “[a]wareness in GVM, which refers to sensitivity toward bodily sensations and associated emotions, is significantly different from the present moment attention in the Western concept of mindfulness” (Zeng, Oei, and Liu, 2013: 13). In order to improve the measurements of awareness and equanimity in relation to GVM, Zeng, Oei and Liu (2013: 13) offer two potential solutions:

The first choice is to create a new scale according to the ideas of GVM. [...] [However,] complicated ideas in Buddhism may not be suitable for people without Buddhist background. Therefore, when the major concerns of studies are the basic abilities of awareness and equanimity, adjusting the current

³ Examples of possible meditation-related adverse effects are: “psychosis, mania, depersonalization, anxiety, panic, traumatic memory reexperiencing, and other forms of clinical deterioration”, according to many case studies, case series, or observational studies, but mostly without a control group (Van Dam et al., 2017: 12).

⁴ One of the most common definitions of mindfulness is elaborated by Kabat-Zinn: “moment-to-moment awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, in the present moment, as nonreactively, nonjudgmentally, and openheartedly as possible”, considered as a convenient, more comprehensible definition for Western audiences (Van Dam et al., 2017: 3).

scales such that they are no longer confusable in the context of GVM or Buddhism could also be an acceptable second choice.

2.2. Practicing Meditation from India to Bangladesh

Considering the large number of different meditation techniques, it is necessary to focus on a few particular ones in order to not generalize the diverse potential effects and methodologies of each practice. One of the techniques here examined is called *vipassanā*,⁵ a Pāli term translated as ‘insight’ and defined as “the intuitive light flashing forth and exposing the truth of the impermanency, the suffering and the impersonal and unsubstantial nature of all corporeal and mental phenomena of existence” (Mahathera, 2005). By referencing to the Pāli Canon and to the Buddhaghosa’s massive manual of meditational theory and practice *Visudhimagga* (‘The Path of Purification’, ca. 500 A.D.), King (2007: 16) writes about Theravāda Buddhism, Vipassanā meditation and its relationship to yogic elements,

Vipassanā is the methodological embodiment of the Buddhist (Theravāda) world view. It contains the hearth of the Four Noble Truths of the intrinsic painfulness or unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned existence, the denial of any substantial self, the denial of any Absolute such as Brahman with whom unity is to be realized, and a resolute determination to refuse any less-than-ultimate release found in subtle self-bolstering meditative states, however peaceful their abidings.⁶

From a historical perspective, it is important to highlight that Vipassanā meditation underwent several transformations until the present-day which adapted its practice to a broader and lay public. According to King (2007: 120-126), in nineteenth century Burma, the Theravāda Buddhist monk Ledi Sayadaw was one of the initiators of a gradual relaxation of the monkish ‘ban’ on lay meditation. He moved towards a simplified method which did not necessarily require yogic-dhyānic skills, and that emphasized the mind-body centred concentration on breath and body-feeling. Such new contemporary Burmese meditation methods also led to the increasing establishment of different meditation centres and associations. Their lay adherents described the meditation masters and techniques as ‘deeper’ and ‘faster’. A disciple of a disciple of Ledi Sayadaw, Thray Sithu U Ba Khin

⁵ I decided to include Vipassanā meditation in this study because, as explained in the following chapter in more detail, it was successfully introduced to Tihar Jail, New Delhi by the Indian Inspector General of Prisons Kiran Bedi. Another reason is that her work inspired Bangladeshi prison officials (Rahman, 2010; Ethirajan, 2010).

⁶ The focus, objectives and quality of Vipassanā meditation are explained in detail by Buddhaghosa in his *Visudhimagga*, where he discusses ‘understanding’ (*paññā*), used as an equivalent of Vipassanā insight (King, 2007: 16, 90). More generally, King (2007: 22) describes the ultimate purpose of meditation as the escape from the saṃsāric cycle of death and rebirth to attain the Nibbānic enlightenment (absence of greed, hatred, and delusion).

(1898-1971) adapted his method and continued to encourage meditation among people of all classes and kinds. He was a devout Buddhist layman and “was fully persuaded that vipassanā was the quintessence of the Buddha’s teaching” and “the final cure for all human ills” (King, 2007: 125). For this reason, he founded a centre in 1952 and opened it to people of all religions, as well as atheists and foreigners. Afterwards, S. N. Goenka continued his work by calling it ‘Vipassanā in the U Ba Khin tradition’ and by spreading it abroad.

An Indian organization that contributes to the scientific research into the sources and applications of Vipassanā meditation is the Vipassanā Research Institute (VRI) (2010), a non-profit association established in 1985. According to the VRI, Vipassanā is a non-sectarian technique that was reintroduced to India in 1969 by S. N. Goenka, one of the main lay teachers of this technique. The Vipassanā training includes three steps: the moral abstaining from any action which causes harm (*sīla*); Anapana meditation, focusing attention on the breath and bodily sensations, and developing concentration and mental awareness (*samādhi*); and Vipassanā meditation, penetrating one’s entire physical and mental structure with the clarity of wisdom (*paññā*). Nowadays, Vipassanā meditation is widely known and practiced in India. Numerous courses are organized in meditation centres and, as detailed in the next chapter, even in some Indian prisons as rehabilitative activities for prisoners.

Two other forms of contemporary meditation, which can be found in Bangladesh, are the Quantum and the Silva methods. Both these techniques define themselves as scientific meditations and are promoted as such through their respective websites.⁷ The Quantum Method was invented, taught and spread throughout the country for more than two decades by Gurujee Shahid El-Bukhari Mahajataq (Quantum Method, n.d.). The Dhaka-based Quantum Foundation, in addition to some humanitarian missions, organizes events and programmes of meditation in schools, police stations, working offices, and even in prisons. The Quantum Method is conceived as a combination of Eastern spiritual practices and modern scientific techniques⁸ which are expected to help the brain work most effectively. This method proposes several procedures and guided meditation exercises in relation to healthy breathing, sleeping, relaxation, detoxifying the mind from negative emotions and attitudes, concentration, wisdom, enhanced memory and creativity, emotional control, overcoming addiction, and self-healing. It is interesting to note that meditation is defined as

⁷ No other useful sources on Quantum Method are currently available in English (only in Bengali). Apparently, the Silva Method has been studied more than the Quantum Method. Unfortunately, reliable academic sources about it – and about Quantum meditation as well – are very difficult to find.

⁸ I realize the flaws of the Eastern/Western binary, but I am using it here for brevity and to report the Quantum Foundation’s understanding of meditation.

scientifically efficacious and not as a supernatural or miraculous thing, though it is put forth as a potential solution to almost all worldly and human problems. Moreover, the Quantum Method is advertised as open to everyone and as not in conflict with any religion, rather helping practice it with more sincerity and devotion.

The other modern meditation technique in Bangladesh is the Silva Method, defined as “a series of lectures and mind-training exercises that blend the most effective concepts with the latest scientifically proven techniques in personal and spiritual growth” (Silva Bangladesh, 2019). The Silva Method was founded by José Silva in 1966 in the USA, and it is based on his mind empowerment research. This meditation method arrived in Bangladesh in 1990. Muhammad Abdul Hameed Quazi, described as “the pioneer of Mind Science in Bangladesh”, practised it in England and brought it to his own country, founding the organization Silva Bangladesh. The Silva Method is seen as a tool for using the brain more effectively, by mastering stress, improving memory and sleep, managing and transforming pain, and enhancing creativity and learning capacity, along with other allegedly beneficial effects. As previously mentioned, I interviewed and observed some members and meditation teachers of both Quantum Foundation and Silva Bangladesh, especially about their ideas and projects regarding the prisoners’ rehabilitation through meditation.

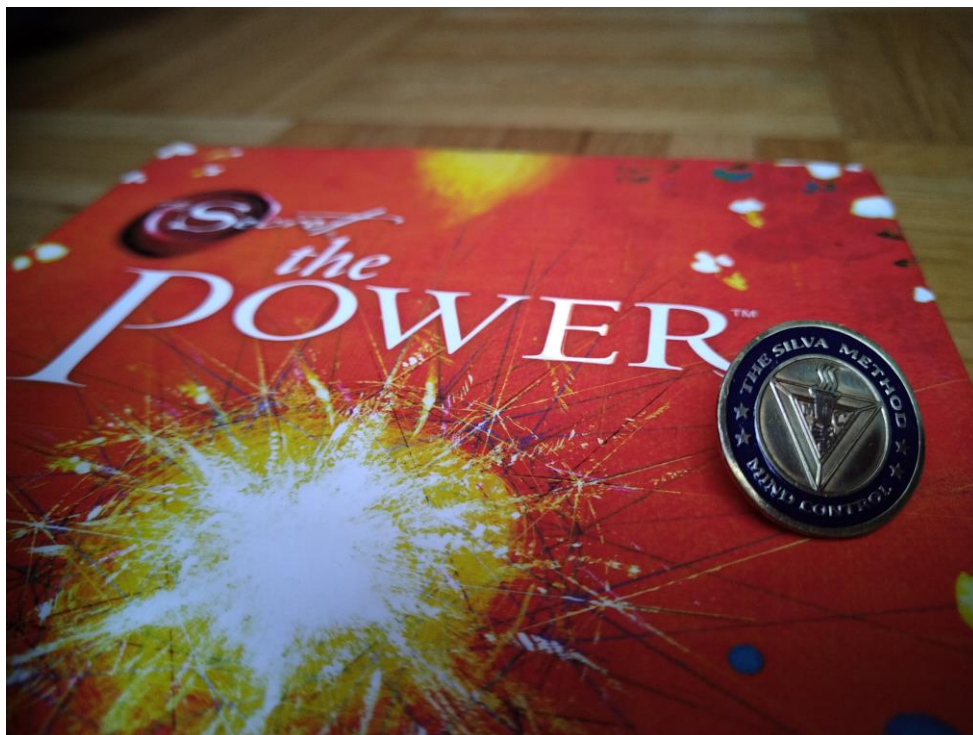


Figure 2: Book and pin donated by Silva Bangladesh director Abul Kalam

3. Meditation and the Rehabilitation of Prisoners

Moving on to the potentially transformative and reformatory nature of meditation, several studies investigate meditation as a prisoners' rehabilitative activity in different settings and circumstances. For example, Yoon, Slade, and Fazel (2017) provide a systematic review of psychological therapies with mental health outcomes in prisoners and qualitatively summarize difficulties in conducting randomized clinical trials (RCTs). Meditation is included in the paper as a psychological therapy to meet the mental health needs of prisoners in different contexts, mostly in America because of the larger number of US-based studies. The results showed that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based therapies were modestly effective in treating depression and anxiety symptoms of prisoners. In this regard, it is relevant to reflect on the use of meditation with people suffering from serious mental illnesses, regardless their legal position. Since meditation means working with one's own mind, it is also necessary to be able to consciously decide to undergo such a mental process. For this reason, meditation should be used taking into account the heterogeneity of human minds' understandings and misunderstandings about meditation itself. Such clarification is connected to the concept of awareness and self-awareness, which influenced my informants' ideas and expectations towards meditation as a form of criminal rehabilitation, and not necessarily as psychological healing.

Sumter, Monk-Turner, and Turner (2009) conducted further research that explores the potential benefits of meditation practice in the correctional setting. By comparing an experimental group and a control group of female prisoners at a regional detention centre in Virginia, they examined the relationship between participation in meditation sessions and a decreased frequency of medical symptoms and negative emotions and behaviours. The meditation program was based on different practices, like counting breaths, repeating a self-selected mantra, walking meditation, and some simple yoga postures. They found out that detainees who participated in the structured meditation "experienced a reduction in sleeping difficulties, wanting to throw things or hit people, and nail and cuticle biting, and showed improvement in feelings of hopelessness about the future" (Sumter, Monk-Turner, and Turner 2009: 55). Therefore, they assume that meditation helped the prisoners manage anger, feelings of frustration, stress and anxiety. The researchers recognize some limitations of their study: the data collected were self-reported, therefore potentially inaccurate according to the informants' memory recall; their findings cannot be generalized since the sample size was

small and limited to female detainees under a probation sentence to serve approximately 20 weeks in a secure community correctional setting.

Among other meditation practices, Vipassanā has also been studied as a rehabilitation activity for prisoners. For instance, Simpson et al. (2007) investigated this meditation technique in Seattle among North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) residents in relation to drug use and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their research revealed that participation in the Vipassanā course was associated with significantly greater reductions in substance use than treatment as usual, regardless of PTSD symptom severity levels. Another study examines Vipassanā meditation in a maximum-security prison in Alabama as a non-Western approach to reduce stress, conflict, and rule infractions (Perelman et al., 2012). By investigating its psychological and behavioural effects on prisoners, the researchers reported enhanced levels of mindfulness and emotional intelligence and decreased mood disturbance relative to a comparison group. Interestingly, both groups' rates of behavioural infractions were reduced at one-year follow-up.

3.1. Meditation in Indian and Bangladeshi Prisons

Meditation, in the form of yogic techniques, Vipassanā, or the Quantum and Silva Methods, was introduced to Indian and Bangladeshi jails as well. According to the Vipassanā Research Institute (2010), in India, Vipassanā was used for the first time as a reform measure for the rehabilitation of prisoners in 1975 at Jaipur Central Jail. Subsequent courses were conducted in other Indian prisons, extending participation to life-term convicts, senior police officers, and correction officials. The aims were the transformation of inmates' mental and behavioural attitudes and the improvement of relationships inside and outside the correctional institutions. Supported by the Government of India, Vipassanā as a reforming method for prisoners is currently used in several Indian jails, such as the Nashik Road Central Jail in Maharashtra and the Vadodara Central Jail in Gujarat. The Vipassanā Research Institute (2010) emphasizes the increasing popularity of Vipassanā meditation throughout the world over the last twenty-five years, which brought its teaching to prisons in Canada, Israel, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Vipassanā meditation is also investigated in the Indian prison of Tihar Central Jail, New Delhi. For instance, Khurana and Dhar (2000) examine the impact of meditation on subjective well-being and criminal propensity among 262 Tihar inmates. By using before-and-after and control group experimental designs, they reported a significant enhancement

in subjective well-being and a decrease in criminal propensity. Furthermore, the Israeli documentary film project *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana* shows how Tihar Jail prisoners in the early 1990s underwent profound changes in their self-awareness and positive transformation through Vipassanā meditation. This film even suggests that the inmates' perception of incarceration shifted from that of an irrecoverable end to that of a fresh start toward improved and more positive lives (Ariel and Menahemi, 1997). Such self-reform practice was made possible in Tihar Jail thanks to India's first female Inspector General of Prisons, Kiran Bedi. As an engaged social activist, she also founded the Delhi-based non-profit voluntary NGO India Vision Foundation (IVF). This organization works on reformation, rehabilitation and correction with prison administration and helps male and female prisoners – as well as their children – by training and counselling them (India Vision Foundation, 2008). Their reform activities in prisons are based on the '3 S Model' of *Sanskar* (value education), *Shiksha* (education) and Skill (training and development). Yoga and meditation are used as a part of moral or value education.

At India's Tihar Jail, Bedi (2006: 159-169) strongly encouraged the cooperation of the entire population of prisoners by promoting a system based on self-governance, self-policing and responsibility. It was sustained by external donations and by internal activities such as turning garbage into manure, a source of revenue. She also isolated the gang leaders and suspended the corrupt prison officers, thus leading to a decline in drug use. Although Bedi (2006: 166) states to have “no ready-made magic formula for instant reform”, she describes the reforms she introduced to Tihar Jail as having a spectacular impact:

The daily rounds, reinforced by the parallel avalanche of petitions from the mobile petition box, along with the entry of the community, led to a pronounced change in the prisoners' attitudes. [...] Within a short time, we initiated adult education programs, yoga activities, daily morning prayers, sports, and festivities. Remarkably, this was accomplished with the existing staff, which was only waiting to be properly motivated and organized. We next developed a model for reform called the Prisoners' Panchayat (Cooperative) System. The main objective was to encourage the prisoners to voluntarily take part in organizing educational, cultural, and sports activities and in maintaining discipline.

Meditation was recently introduced to Bangladeshi prisons as well. Ethirajan (2010) and Rahman (2010) write that, in Bangladesh, a meditation programme for inmates was set up for the first time in 2010 in Dhaka Central Jail. The Quantum Foundation, as a non-profit organization and meditation school in Bangladesh, designed a 10-day course for both male and female inmates in order to lower their stress levels and to give them an opportunity to reform before and after their reintroduction into society. Rahman (2010) reports the intention

of the founder chief of the Quantum Foundation, in offering the service for the jail inmates, to “hate the sin, not the sinners”. In addition, Ethirajan (2010) quotes Suraiya Rahman, one of the main meditation trainers also mentioned by my Quantum Foundation’s informants Aatur Rahman and Pranjit Lal Shil. According to Ethirajan (2010), she pointed out the excellent response from the prisoners, willing to continue with the programme.

Meditation seems to be one of the latest government’s effort to improve the quality of life inside the Bangladeshi prisons. In 2010, Dhaka hosted an international jail conference joined by Kiran Bedi, who gave a presentation entitled *Penal Reform in Developing Countries*. My BLAST informant Rashedul Islam participated in that conference and provided me with Kiran Bedi’s presentation. During the congress, she promoted the collective, corrective, and community-based model she applied in India’s Tihar Jail. As a long-lived, cost-effective and replicable project, it aimed at enhancing physical, mental, environmental, social and spiritual well-being within and outside the prison. Inspired by her pioneering work at Tihar Jail, Bangladeshi prison officials launched meditation as a service to rehabilitate prisoners in their own country (Rahman, 2010). Rahman (2010) reports the opinion and expectations of the Inspector General of Prisons Brigadier General Mohammad Ashraful Islam Khan, also an army doctor with expertise in preventive medicine: he argued that prisoners need spiritual and mental purification, and expected that meditation would help to rectify them and prevent recidivism.⁹

Kiran Bedi was also mentioned by some of my informants, such as Abul Kalam, the director of Silva Bangladesh, who stated that she “turned the prison into an *ashram*” and that “she put discipline into the prisoners’ lives”. Arpita Saha, a Silva meditation teacher who worked with a group of female prisoners in 2001 in Narsingdi Central Jail, specified that Kiran Bedi had the opportunity to change the prison system from within. In contrast, she had the chance to experiment with meditation in prison only for a short time because of the lack of jail authorities’ and government attention, permission, and support. In this regard, it is important to trace the developments, difficulties and current situation of meditation in Bangladeshi prisons, as well as the modalities, methods and regulations regarding such initiatives.

⁹ As subsequently reported, my Quantum Foundation’s informants Aatur Rahman and Pranjit Lal Shil stated that the 2010’s Inspector General of Prisons was more interested in spiritual rehabilitation of prisoners than the present-day one. They understand this leader change as a possible reason for the subsequent interruption of the meditation programme in Dhaka Central Jail.

In addition to the lack of government support and interest, my informants identified other obstacles to the use of meditation in prison. Pranjit Lal Shil, a Quantum meditation instructor who worked with prisoners in 2010 in Dhaka Central Jail, mentioned the lack of opportunities, spaces, and management. The *karagar*'s motto (Bengali, 'prison') is *Rakhibo nirapod, dekhabo alo poth*, that is 'We'll keep you in safe and we'll show you the path of light'. However, he observed that it is very difficult to actually realize its second part, the rehabilitation as a path of light. Another problem regarding the use of meditation in prison seems to be the common perception that prisoners are still spiritually immature for meditation due to the lack of education. For instance, Mohetosh Sarkar, a lawyer and member of BRAC working in Narsingdi, asserted that many prisoners do not even know they have committed crimes, so they must be educated before they can receive spiritual support.

The developments, modalities and the current situation of meditation-based rehabilitation in Bangladesh emerged as other relevant topics. The first initiative seems to be the short experiment with the Silva Method in 2001 for female prisoners in Narsingdi Central Jail, based on morning meditation and yoga. Subsequently, as previously mentioned through literature, the Home Ministry inaugurated a Quantum meditation programme in 2010 for both male and female inmates in Dhaka Central Jail. It included self-development speeches and half an hour meditation on a daily basis, and was directed by Suraiya Rahman, the Director and Coordinator of Quantum Foundation and a meditation teacher herself. According to my informants Pranjit Lal Shil and Aatur Rahman, after a year and a half the programme was interrupted since the prison headquarters were moved and the Inspector General of Prisons changed. Nowadays, only one meditation programme is currently offered in Bangladesh, a weekly session of an hour and a half in Pabna Central Jail organized by the Quantum Foundation. In order to implement new activities for rehabilitation, including meditation, and to rename the prisons as correctional centres, my three informants from BLAST and Dhaka Ahsania Mission expressed the necessity to continue to work on the amendment of the Jail Code of 1920 and of the Prisons Act of 1894 in Bangladesh, already amended in India in 2000.

3.2. Prison Reforms and Prisoners' Rights in India and Bangladesh

In order to understand the reasons for and modalities of the introduction of meditation to Bangladeshi jails, it is essential to review relevant literature on the history and developments of prison reforms both in India and Bangladesh. Bhutta and Siddique Akbar

(2012: 172) argue that in India, starting in the 18th century, prison was conceived as a place of punishment after conviction. Both countries inherited their prison systems from the British as a colonial legacy. However, from the 19th century onwards, some reformatory movements started moving the attention from retribution to reformation and rehabilitation, as well as changing the objectives and functions of prisons. Jails gradually transformed into institutions of learning and correction, and detention became an opportunity for self-improvement. Similarly, Jamshed (2016: 56) explains that while Indian detainment facilities have heretofore been simple confinement houses for depraved beings, they are now shifting into restorative organizations aiming at changing the detainees and at expelling the criminal component from their socially maladapted identity through non-punitive techniques.

According to Jamshed (2016: 57-58), the XII International Penal and Penitentiary Conference (1950) brought to the development of relevant themes for new policies in terms of adequate prison labour and programs as well as educational and vocational training. Subsequently, the All India Committee on Jail Reforms (1980-83) was appointed in order to recognize the prisoners' rights to human dignity, basic minimum needs, access the law, and meaningful and gainful employment. In 2000, after the 1999's annual report of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the Government of India amended the 1894's Indian Prisons Act. According to Roy (2003: 37), this amendment provided, among other points: equal inmates' treatment; improved living conditions in regard to accommodation, food, and medical care; an enhanced possibility of reduced sentence for good behaviour; the obligations of magisterial inquest in case of custodial deaths, and of undertrials' release whose detention exceeded the minimum period of incarceration specified for the offense. Furthermore, increased attention started to be given towards inmates' well-being and rehabilitative services for their reintegration into society, such as educational and vocational training, therapeutic counselling, drug rehabilitation centres, upgraded health care, recreational facilities, and legal aid.

Despite recent developments in the field of prison reforms, the overall picture of the Indian correctional system remains problematic because of the significant gap between policy decisions and implementation level in terms of administrative, legislative and reformatory measures to address the major problems facing the prisoners and prisons in many countries of South Asia (Bhutta and Siddique Akbar, 2012: 171). "Overcrowding, prolonged detention of under-trial prisoners, unsatisfactory living conditions, lack of treatment programmes and allegations of indifferent and even inhuman approach of prison staff" are some of these substantial problems, in addition to corruption, inadequate legal aid, shortage

of correctional and medical personnel and poor training (Bada Math et al., 2011: 38). For this reason, the State Governments and the Government of India established numerous committees and commissions to design suggestions and recommendations for improving the prison conditions and administration, by increasingly leading them to the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners. Bada Math et al. (2011: 36) state that

the Supreme Court of India has laid down three broad principles regarding imprisonment and custody. Firstly, a person in prison does not become a non-person; secondly, a person in prison is entitled to all human rights within the limitations of imprisonment; and, lastly there is no justification for aggravating the suffering already inherent in the process of incarceration.

By describing the prison reforms and the rights of prisoners in Bangladesh, Tamim (2016) mostly refers to the Prisons Act (1894), the Prisoners Act (1900), and the Jail Code (1920). He advocates for radical changes in many provisions of these laws which directly contravene with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the Standard Minimum Rules. The national laws ensure some prisoners' rights – in relation to religious observance, labour, diet, water necessities – which are frequently not respected and implemented in reality. Many Bangladeshi statutes do not even conform with the international requirements for the fair treatment of prisoners and the management of prisons, as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Among the numerous suggestions for improving the correctional system and prisoners' life, Tamim (2016) mentions the introduction of different facilities: counselling, skill training and advisory services for the inmates' psychological treatment; work of intellectual quality to make the prisons self-dependent; personalized vocational, academic, and religious training for the reform and re-socialization of prisoners.

Recently, the Government of Bangladesh is starting and sustaining new reform measures aimed at improving prisons and prisoners' conditions. For instance, Jani (2018) explains that the Department of Prisons has launched an innovative initiative for the rehabilitation of convicts in Bangladesh by providing them with a mobile phone to keep in touch with their dear ones. The government project, named 'Prison Link', is being tested in Tangail District Jail. This calling facility, offered only to regular convicts and not to top militants and terrorists, is based on making limited-duration calls to two provided numbers twice a month. The restriction of incoming and outgoing calls works by means of a specific software.

In India and Bangladesh, many organizations work in the field of prisoners' rights and potentially effective reform measures. One of them is the previously mentioned India Vision Foundation. Similarly, Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC, 2019) is an international non-governmental development organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. According to their agenda, the Human Rights and Legal aid Services programme (HRLS) is “dedicated to protecting and promoting human rights of the poor and marginalised through legal empowerment”. As an implementation partner, HRLS piloted a project authorised by the Ministry of Home Affairs on the criminal justice system and prison reform called ‘Improvement of the Real Situation of Overcrowding in Prisons’ (IRSOP). Applied to the Dhaka Central Jail and Kashimpur Central Jails through a paralegal advisory model, this project is financially and technically sustained by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.¹⁰

Other non-governmental development organizations based in Dhaka which advocates for the recognition and realization of prisoners' rights are Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM). BLAST provides legal aid, advice and representation to groups of people belonging to civil, criminal, family, labour and land law areas. This organization has been involved in the IRSOP project “to provide legal assistance to indigent prisoners under trial” (BLAST, 2010). The impact of the project is described as noteworthy since, between January 2009 and September 2014, a total of 4,549 prisoners had been released



Figure 3: BLAST Centre (sign top left)

with the intervention of the paralegals. My BLAST informant Rashedul Islam clarified that the IRSOP project is not enough to solve the problem of prisons' overcrowding in Bangladesh because there are still more arrested people than released ones. Nevertheless, he

¹⁰ GIZ, the German Society for International Cooperation, collaborates with the Government and the Prison Directorate of Bangladesh. Although I contacted some of its members involved in the IRSOP project, and I met one of them in person, we did not manage to organize an interview, both for problems of permission and time schedule.

stated that BLAST is working to positively increase such significant results which can also improve the living conditions of prisoners who still remain within the jails.

DAM works in several sectors with “the aims of social and spiritual development of entire human community” (Dhaka Ahsania Mission, n.d.). Within the Health Sector, it participates in the IRSOP project by offering drug treatment and skill-development training for inmates inside and outside prison, peer training, prison staff capacity development training, orientation workshop, consultation meeting, and family and inmates counselling. BRAC, BLAST and DAM already offer relevant services for inmates’ rehabilitation that may be more easily carried out through a wider range of different reform measures; hopefully, these measures will continue to be explored in the future with the goal of combining them in a confluence of social development and self-development programmes.

4. Across Literature and Fieldwork

Before moving on to the theoretical framework and data analysis, I would like to provide a brief introduction to the context in which I conducted my fieldwork. This research focused on Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, and included the neighbouring town of Narsingdi. I travelled with my husband, who is Bangladeshi-Italian, and some of his relatives welcomed and hosted us in their home. We mainly stayed in the diplomatic area, a very peaceful zone if compared with the rest of the city. Almost all the places I came across to reach the field sites were very crowded and chaotic, but rich with vegetation and brightened by colours on the walls, roads, painted rickshaws and trucks. Since I had already been to Bangladesh six years previously, traffic jams and uncommon driving rules were not so shocking for me. However, I noticed the increasing number of cars, traffic lights and paved roads, as well as higher buildings – many of them under construction. Thankfully, hospitality and delicious local food have not changed at all.



Figure 4: Painted road for Pohela Boishakh, the Bengali New Year

I conducted my fieldwork in twenty days, with fifteen informants. I took fieldnotes during and after the interactions with my respondents, and I recorded them whenever feasible. I visited the BRAC Centre in Dhaka,¹¹ the BRAC bureau and regional office in Narsingdi, the BLAST Centre, the Health Sector of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, a Silva

¹¹ I mainly visited the areas assigned to the Human Rights and Legal aid Services programme (HRLS).

Bangladesh centre, and the Registered Head Office of the Quantum Foundation; I also attended a Quantum Meditation event. My husband and I reached the field sites by car, mostly by using Uber. He assisted me by working as an interpreter and by translating from Bengali whenever it was necessary. I further perceived that his presence facilitated trust and rapport building with my informants.



Figure 5: View of Dhaka from the 19th floor of the BRAC Centre

My literature review and theoretical framework mainly consist of Alter’s theory of the mutual influence of individual health and social health (Alter, 2004), and the Foucauldian concept of discipline (Foucault, 1977) complemented by Mosse’s ideas of development and agency (Mosse, 2004). Other significant points are: the relevance of prison ethnography (Bandyopadhyay, Jefferson, and Ugelvik, 2012) in supporting the idea of individualized rehabilitation; the concept of positive criminology (Ronel, Frid, and Timor, 2013); the idea of rehabilitation by means of a collaborative process of forgiveness and repairing of relations among the parties (Lacey and Pickard, 2015). All these arguments emerged by combining literature with a preliminary analysis of the collected data, further reinforced by a discourse analysis. Firstly, I summarized data and identified relevant topics and categories. Secondly, I recognized my informants’ multifaceted perspectives and narratives as different, valid interpretations of reality which might have societal and institutional effects and functions. Therefore, I analysed the inconsistencies in individual participants’ answers, I identified regular patterns in the variability of different informants’ accounts, and I searched for “the

basic assumptions and starting points (in Foucauldian language, “statements”), that underlie a particular way of talking about a phenomenon” (Talja, 1999: 466).

4.1. Alter: Individual Health and Social Health

The mutual influence of individual health and social health is a recurrent theme reported by many of my informants as well as in literature. Alter (2004: 36) writes about yoga in modern India as “a tremendously popular, eminently public, self-disciplinary regimen that produces good health and well-being, while always holding out the promise of final liberation”. His description of the transformation of such practice can be compared to the modern adaptations of meditation considered in my study. Alter (2004: 149-160) shows that individual health and Indian society are significantly connected in political and sociological ways. For instance, he examines the case of a biomedical physician who has integrated a range of yoga techniques into his practice, Dr. Karandikar of the Sunderraj Yoga Darshan – that is a private enterprise modelled on nationalist principles. He further observes how contemporary yoga supporters identify their personal health and bodily discipline with those of their nation, resulting in their possible involvement in Hindu nationalist politics. Similarly, during my fieldwork, some of my informants described the Quantum and Silva meditation methods as tools for developing not only the individuals, but also their country or the society at large. They opted for one term or the other by stressing a more political or more sociological aspect of their arguments.

Alter’s idea of intertwined individual and social health is connected to my informants’ positions towards psychological and spiritual rehabilitation of prisoners. Although by showing different levels of knowledge about spirituality, all of them supported the importance of these aspects of rehabilitation. They mentioned activities such as counselling, motivational sessions, as well as cognitive-focused, perception-focused, and spiritual initiatives like meditation. My respondents see these activities as helpful methods to meet the necessity of an individual as well as social mindset change. Some of my informants, such as Laboni Amin, a BRAC lawyer working with prisoners in Narsingdi, and Abul Kalam, the director of Silva Bangladesh, stated that both incarcerated individuals and society at large should be healed in order to create a healthy environment that does not stigmatize and instigate crime. Although by referring to an Indian nationalist ideology, Alter (2004: 156) points out a similar perspective by observing “the complex mimesis of the organic body as a diseased entity and society as a diseased organism” which “can be cured through disciplinary reform and regimented training”.

Following the above, Laboni Amin maintained the importance of separating crime to be condemned and criminal to be healed. She described this process of healing as including two phases. Crime prevention through a raise of legal awareness, equal education and job opportunities is the first important step in this direction. After reducing the number of crimes, the second step is the rehabilitation of criminals from a personal, social, psychological and spiritual point of view in order to properly reintegrate them into society with a different mentality. Some of my informants identified the mind as playing an essential role in the process of holistically healing all the individuals inside and outside the prisons. For instance, Abul Kalam understands the mind as having a strong power over body, habits and behaviour since mental stress causes the increase of diseases and crimes. Another example is provided by Professor M. Shamsheer Ali. According to his perspective, most of the diseases in the present-day are of non-somatic origin since mental stress and pressure can be manifested as physical illness. Consequently, he argued that both their cause and treatment come from the mind.

By delineating the concept of the ‘recovery’ of people affected by crime, some questions arise. If both prisoners and the society are suffering from crime, how could they heal or be healed? And what does it mean ‘to cure’ these people? On the one hand, it is related to improving their living conditions inside and outside the jails by contributing to the enforcement of their rights as human beings and to the enhancement of their confidence within society itself. On the other hand, it possibly means rehabilitating prisoners both individually and socially in order to realize their potential and reintegrate them into society with a different mindset. But what happens if the society in question no longer accepts them or allows them to find decent places to live, study and work? They are more likely to reoffend. For this reason, many of my informants defend the idea of holistically healing all the individuals inside and outside the prisons by providing equal opportunities and changing their mindset. For example, Silva Bangladesh director Abul Kalam said:

I think that we should not work only within the prisons but also within society. Our society also needs a cure. There are some unbalanced things in our society. For example, we want to become important by dragging others down, or there are people who only think of themselves and don’t want to do anything for the others. In our society, some people need help and commit crimes because they do not find help in society.¹²

¹² Translated in English from Bengali with the help of my husband.

According to my informant, both the individual and society need a cure, because they are suffering from the evil called ‘crime’. He further sustained that people are hypnotized by the external world and think they know the reality in which they live. Only by learning to know one’s ‘inner world’ a person would get closer to the reality of an intrinsic human nature of mutual help. In this regard, he considers meditation as a mental support to change mindsets through a personal path of self-rehabilitation. According to his perspective, this process is not only for prisoners. For explaining such individual as well as social healing, Abul Kalam used a metaphor which links criminals to ‘cancers’ that must be eradicated from society. In his view, the society does not understand that the illness is the crime, not the criminal. By analyzing this metaphor, it appears to reflect the anger of society towards people who are in prison without necessarily knowing the reasons why they are there, and if and how they are trying to change and improve themselves. My BRAC informant Laboni Amin supported a similar argument by stating that such an anger judges and excludes, causing further crimes:

When a prisoner is released, the problems he faces are not just his problems. If I am a prisoner and I am released, day by day I must face shame in society. I think that, first of all, we must change our mentality.¹³

In addition to the disparity of education and work, Laboni Amin identified disrespect, loss of dignity and shame as possible causes of criminal behaviour. This is due to the prejudices that society has towards prisoners, even after their potential rehabilitation and release. By rejecting a dualistic distinction between non-prisoners and prisoners, either undertrials or convicted, I consider my informants’ idea of a comprehensive mindset change as in connection with their perception of mind’s power over human behaviour and with the mutual influence of individual and social health described by Alter (2004) and my respondents themselves. Interestingly, Laboni Amin changed the subject from the third to the first person. She put herself in the prisoner’s shoes and identified possible causes of his or her behaviour partially based on family, cultural and individual background. Furthermore, she underlined the importance of cooperation in changing mentality: not only the prisoners, but the whole society should collaborate to this psychological ‘healing’ as to “create a healthy and clean environment in which to live”. Thus, my informants created a ‘medical metaphor’ which will be further analysed in the following chapter: crime is seen as an illness, and mindset change as its cure.

¹³ See above.

4.2. Foucault: Discipline and Self-discipline

According to Foucault (1977: 215), discipline “is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets”. He did not conceptualize discipline and power as abilities to be possessed by status groups or a ruling class, neither identified them with an institution or apparatus. Foucault (1977: 170) defined discipline as the specific technique of a power that ‘makes’ individuals and regards them “both as objects and as instruments of its exercise”. The Foucauldian target of discipline is the seat of habits, denoted as the ‘soul’ (Foucault, 1977: 128). According to O’Malley and Valverde (2014: 318-319), he further described discipline as fostered by creating a material structure that would give the impression of always being observed, the ‘Panoptical’ prison.¹⁴ In this way and through other minor corrections, the offenders would become ‘docile bodies’ habituated to the normative behaviour. These obedient subjects would on their own make the ‘right’ choices, without any need for external coercion. In this regard, Foucault considered discipline as a ‘technology of freedom’.

Both in the literature and in my data, spiritual practices like yoga and meditation are associated with the concept of discipline. For instance, Alter (2004: 13) delineates yoga as a regimen based on direct experience that transcends belief and that implies self-discipline and rigorous practice by not requiring faith and ritual. By taking into account Alter’s analysis of yoga and Foucault’s idea of discipline, I associate meditation in this study with mental self-discipline for self-observation, self-awareness and potential self-transformation of prisoners, both as individuals and as a community. In support of this argument, some of my informants connected the concept of discipline with the spiritual and psychological rehabilitation of prisoners. For instance, the BRAC lawyer Laboni Amin stated that psychological care and spiritual exercise are necessary to increase inmates’ mental level and to develop their discipline. Silva Bangladesh director Abul Kalam provided another example by describing how Kiran Bedi merged spirituality and discipline in India’s Tihar Jail:

In India, Kiran Bedi was assigned to the prison to inflict punishment on prisoners. [...] But once she arrived to the prison what did she do? She turned the prison into an *ashram*. She taught people to wake up in the morning, to pray, she put discipline into their lives, she provided skills to people who could develop those skills. Then, people went to jail as offenders and came out changed.

¹⁴ For a further study on the ‘Panoptical’ prison and the panopticism, see Foucault, 1977: 195-228.

By reworking and connecting my informants' narratives and Foucault's ideas, meditation practice is here presented as an alternative 'technology of freedom'. The observation is replaced with self-observation of the inmates, which would act on their 'soul' by changing their habits. The 'correction' of the offenders would not be their mere transformation into Foucauldian 'docile bodies', but their rehabilitation as the personalized realization of their potential. The teacher of Silva meditation Arpita Saha, with whom I had a telephone interview, expressed a similar idea by talking about her meditation experiment with female prisoners of Narsingdi Prison in 2001. She argued that each person can be a better person through a self-transformation and development of their peculiar qualities, but she also mentioned the importance of external help towards change, especially through education:

And talking about the girls' prison that I have come through, then I have asked the jail's appointer [...] "how can we change them? [...] Giving them some divergent life, giving them some education of life, and why not do appreciate them in their talent? Because everybody is talented in their own ways. Everybody has something, some good qualities. Why not develop those qualities and make them better persons in their own life, in that place even?"

This idea may be connected to the concept of agency, for instance, in the field of development anthropology. By providing ethnographic information about the constitution of a British development project in India, Mosse (2004: 6-16) argues that the practice of development is not driven by policy, but by the complex network of social relationships, necessities of organizations, and dynamics of power. In this way, he aims at revealing the agency of all the actors involved in the heterogeneous development institutions. Mosse (2004: 104) shows divergent interests, professional identities, and participatory strategies within the project itself, described as "an arena in which people with different responsibilities, tasks and different constructions of reality competed for power". By considering the agency of people towards whom a project of development can be oriented, the question of whether self-development might be a feasible strategy in addition to external help arises. Furthermore, do they need and want to be helped in the ways other people propose? How many of them would benefit from such interventions? Would it be possible to set up different interventions according to diverse people's necessities? All these questions – which will be further explored in the next sections – can also be related to the prisons' population and their personal path of rehabilitation.

4.3. Towards an Individualized and Collaborative Rehabilitation

Although I did not have the occasion to directly look into the inmates' and jails' realities, I consider prison ethnography in this study as a relevant support to the idea of prisoners' individualized rehabilitation and self-rehabilitation. Such approach would be operationalized by means of a positive collaboration among the parties – the offender, the offended, supportive figures and external people – towards recovery, acceptance and forgiveness.¹⁵ In this regard, the relevance of prison ethnography is explained by providing anthropological perspectives and complementing them with the concepts of forgiveness, punishment, and positive criminology. Cunha (2014) reviews ethnographies of prisons and penal confinement by exploring the prison-society relation and the articulation between intramural and extramural worlds of both prisoners and institutions. For instance, some ethnographic studies which look beyond the institution's physical walls examine “how the effects of the prison's penal stigma project onto its immediate spatial vicinity”; others, which are more prisoner-centred, explore “the prisoners' social and subjective world behind bars, from its cultural forms, social relations, and structures, to the forms of power, adaptation, and resistance deployed in the specific moral and material world of confinement institutions” (Cunha, 2014: 222-224).

For a comparative understanding of prison-specific and culture-specific aspects of carceral worlds, Cunha (2014) includes prisons ethnographies based in non-Anglo-American contexts, where the dominant framing of prison studies occurs. In this way, she considers “how different cultural varieties of incarceration can combine with globalized forms of penal power” (Cunha, 2014: 226). Bandyopadhyay (2010) provides a relevant example of a non-Western prison ethnography, conducted in Kolkata in the late 1990s. This study reveals the prisoners' living conditions within the jail and the strategies through which they make sense of their lives. Further, it explores the connections between everyday life, specific aims of prison reforms, and organizational work. By means of her interactions, negotiations, and friendship with the inmates, she offers an account of different practices among the prisoners themselves, such as the personalization of their spaces and the development of kinship patterns and erotic relations.

¹⁵ The term ‘recovery’ has a medical connotation and I used it to take up the subject my informants created around the idea of crime as an individual and social illness. In this section, I connect it with the concept of collaborative forgiveness provided by Lacey and Pickard (2015).

Bandyopadhyay, Jefferson, and Ugelvik (2012: 28) argue that the growing field of prison ethnography plays an important role in narrating prisons and prison life in culturally specific representations. It allows to go beyond the typical perception of jails as spaces of dehumanisation and hopelessness. In connection with my data and personal expectations, it also can be used as a strategy to promote a more active and collaborative perspective towards the ‘recovery’ of people affected by crime, such as the offender, the offended party and the other individuals in society. Prison ethnography, in Indian as well as in Bangladeshi jails,

can reflect on the binaries that the prison space creates, for example: agency vs. denial of selfhood; self-assertion vs. dehumanisation; rehabilitation vs. punishment; freedom vs. surveillance etc. But it can do much more. Prison ethnography also has the potential to narrate the many manifestations of totality beyond prison walls, challenging the special character of the total institution and revealing the numerous prison-like conditions in society (Bandyopadhyay, Jefferson, and Ugelvik, 2012: 29).

By taking into account the potentially strong impact of prison ethnography on the construction of an aware, active, and cooperative rehabilitation path, another relevant idea arises in connection with meditation. Ronel, Frid, and Timor (2013) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of prisoners in recovery from substance dependency who participated in a Vipassanā course in Hermon prison, Israel. They found several constructive changes within the jail in relation to perceived goodness, positive social atmosphere, and relationship with the prison staff. Through their study, Ronel, Frid, and Timor (2013: 134) contribute to expanding the research on meditation as a rehabilitative measure by using the useful concept of ‘positive criminology’:

Positive criminology is a perspective associated with different theories and models in criminology that refer to integrated influences that share two common features: First, they are experienced by target individuals as positive, and second, they may assist these individuals in refraining from criminal or deviant behaviour.

But how is it possible to know what can be experienced as positive by single prisoners? Prison ethnography may help explore their necessities and subjectivities. Another strategy consists of internal communication systems among prisoners and the prison staff, such as Kiran Bedi’s idea of the mobile petition box (Bedi, 2006: 117-123). From NGOs’ side, a range of reform measures implemented through the available resources would be adopted by different prisoners as their own rehabilitation path. Furthermore, by providing psychological counselling and spiritual initiatives the inmates would have the chance to reflect on their mind. According to Professor M. Shamsher Ali and Silva Bangladesh director Abul Kalam, this aspect of rehabilitation is essential since human mind can strongly

influence positive and negative experiences. In this regard, Kabat-Zinn and Davidson (2011: 30) offer an interesting perspective by explaining the significance of Buddhist meditative practices for understanding the inescapable “physical and emotional pain” and the potential relief of “adventitious suffering: what the mind adds to a negative experience”.

Following the above, my argument is that prisoners’ rehabilitation should be personalized and supported by a positive collaboration among all the involved parties. Since it appears as a difficult goal to pursue, a fundamental first step in this direction can be a gradual psychological change towards forgiveness and both self- and other-acceptance. In support of this argument, Lacey and Pickard (2015: 666-667) explore two universal human responses to wrongdoings: the acts of blaming and forgiving. By taking both into consideration, they support a collaborative process of forgiveness and repairing of relations among the parties as a more consistent choice for reducing the risk of future re-offending. Even though my informants did not directly mention the concept of forgiveness, it emerged as a fundamental part of the rehabilitation process of prisoners and society at large in order to ‘recover’ from crime and stigma. In order to reduce criminal behaviours and change individual as well as social mentalities, the director of Silva Bangladesh Abul Kalam expressed the necessity of correcting wrongdoings rather than punishing people:

Currently the prison is seen like this: if someone does something wrong, they must be punished and the prison is the punishment. I think that there is no reason to punish people, that is, we must not punish people but we must correct the wrong actions.

Despite such a rejection of punishment, a reconceived idea of it may be strictly connected to the concept of forgiveness. According to Lacey and Pickard (2015: 668), “punishment [should] be reconceived as an institutionalised form of forgiving: the imposition of consequences in response to responsibility for crime, [should be] enacted with forgiveness in that these consequences ought to be constructed, so far as possible, to embody reparative and corresponding risk-reduction strategies”. Punishment is not considered as mere retribution or as correction of deviant behaviours, but as a process of forgiveness and collaborative repairing of relations, which may be seen as a form of rehabilitation. Other participants in my study, such as the BRAC lawyer Laboni Amin, mentioned the contrasting conception of punishment and rehabilitation as a basic assumption. She emphasized the fact that she is collaborating in the process of changing mindsets of and towards prisoners not only by offering legal support. This because she realized that prisoners “do not need punishment but to be rehabilitated”. As I just explained, however, one thing does not necessarily exclude the other.

5. Would You Promote and Support Meditation in Prison?

When designing the interviews for my informants, a question started echoing in my mind: would you promote and support meditation in prison? Thus, I decided to ask their opinions and expectations about it in order to investigate the reasons for using meditation-based rehabilitation with prisoners. Before analysing their answers, I would ask the same question to myself and describe my personal expectations. I assumed that one of the main purposes of offering meditation to prisoners was connected to the improvement of prisoners' social and individual living conditions, by attempting to enhance their discipline, constancy and concentration. This could lead in turn to a possible reduction of agitation, aggressiveness and recidivism. Both literature and ethnographic data focused on the rehabilitation of prisoners towards crime reduction, and, as detailed in the last section of this chapter, meditation is considered as a practice for both discipline and health by some of my informants, especially from Silva Bangladesh and Quantum Foundation.

Religion is another interesting factor, especially in a majority Muslim country like Bangladesh. Meditation does not seem to be a traditional religious practice for Muslims in the way that it is for the region's Hindus and Buddhists. Possibly for this reason, new forms of meditation are promoted in Bangladesh, and even in prisons, by claiming to be scientifically proven and compatible with all religions. Religious and scientific aspects of meditation are further analysed in this chapter. In addition, I considered the economic variable by seeing the use of meditation in prisons as a cost-effective tool for inmates and administrators. Nonetheless, as detailed in the following sections, without a real interest in implementing similar initiatives, available resources seem to be currently used in different ways. Although not mentioned by my informants, I supposed that another possible reason for introducing meditation to the local prisons was related to the pacific nature of such an activity. It would keep the prisoners busy by excluding any potentially harmful and violent use of it against the other inmates.

I also expected that the introduction of meditation to many Indian and Bangladeshi prisons¹⁶ was partly associated with its high attractiveness and popularity worldwide. Numerous researchers¹⁷ define it as a context-related effective tool for rehabilitating

¹⁶ Jaipur Central Jail, Nashik Road Central Jail, Tihar Jail, Vadodara Central Jail in India, and Dhaka Central Jail, Narsingdi Central Jail and Pabna Central Jail in Bangladesh.

¹⁷ In the third chapter, I reviewed many studies of these researchers, such as Ariel and Menahemi (1997), Bedi (2006), Khurana and Dhar (2000), Perelman et al. (2012), Simpson et al. (2007), Sumter, Monk-Turner, and Turner (2009), Yoon, Slade, and Fazel (2017).

prisoners, and as a potentially beneficial psychotherapeutic practice. From the ethnographic perspective, many practitioners' personal narratives describe meditation as a positive transformative experience. For instance, Nishat Tasnim Khan translated for me fifteen experiences of Quantum meditators presented at the Quantum Method conference I attended. Among them, two cancer patients, a student, a researcher, a lawyer, a professor at Dhaka University, and even the secretary of the government of Bangladesh, described their healing and transformative process with the help of meditation. Although I did not have the occasion to personally investigate meditation in prison, I considered that this practice can also be ineffective or experienced negatively due to misconceptions and misinformation about it. Especially regarding prisoners, positive and negative experiences may depend on their motivations and expectations, that is, by perceiving meditation as a mentally liberating way out of the material jail – as reported by the Quantum meditation instructor Pranjit Lal Shil – or as an additional psychological prison.

Before and during my fieldwork, I supposed that possible unproductive or negative outcomes of inmates' meditative experiences could have an influence on future meditation-oriented initiatives for prisoners. I did not find any data about it, but I realized that expectations play a significant role for meditators as well as for the actors engaged in the tentative rehabilitation of prisoners, such as organizations' members, meditation teachers serving in jails, government officials, and prisons' inspectors. Even though I did not have the access and time to interview the last two categories of informants, the motivations which shape the positions of my respondents towards meditation as a reform measure in jail are a significant component of this study. In this regard, I expected to find ideas ranging from personally- or culturally-based bias or skepticism to the idealization and romanticization of meditation. Interestingly, maybe partly influenced by their awareness of my interest in such a practice, none of my informants reported a totally negative idea of meditation.

My informants, as local people and mostly NGOs' members, showed different perceptions of meditation and its relevance in the field of prisoner rehabilitation. Exploring such perspectives may help understand the reasons why introducing it to the prisons and keeping on using it as a reform measure or not. Many of my informants, such as the director of Silva Bangladesh Abul Kalam and the BRAC lawyer Laboni Amin, recognized some factors which influence re-offending. For instance, they mentioned the issues of stigma and of prisoners' education, as well as their professional, economic and social status. Other respondents, especially from Silva Bangladesh and Quantum Foundation, stressed the importance of inmates' mental and physical health, as well as their self-control and attitudes.

My DAM informant Amir Hussain mentioned the relevant aspect of alcohol and drug abuse in addition to many prisoners' psychological conditions. Importantly, all my informants agreed that both detainees' lives and civil society can be improved by reflecting on these variables and designing different rehabilitative measures aimed at transforming criminals into aware and law-abiding citizens. Furthermore, people outside the prisons can theoretically be sensitized towards rehabilitated prisoners who come back into society in order to reduce suspicion and stigma.

As mentioned before, some of my respondents promote reform measures based on legal and skill-development trainings or drug-related services – BRAC, BLAST, DAM, whereas others are more focused on spiritual and psychological aspects in relation to self-control and relational attitudes – Silva Bangladesh, Quantum Foundation. But are there any reformatory approaches that can actually have a completely positive and constructive impact on prisoners' lives?¹⁸ Which difficulties can be recognized for the realization of such innovative projects? Why precisely meditation? I suggest that meditation is not a panacea against all aspects of criminality. However, if used voluntarily and correctly,¹⁹ it has the potential to improve prisoners' conditions both inside and outside the jail by increasing their self-awareness towards a change of mindset and habits. For instance, meditation may be used by bringing to inmates' everyday life the awareness of emotional and impulsive reactions to thoughts and bodily sensations. Such statement is supported by many of my informants' answers, particularly from Silva Bangladesh and BRAC. They stressed the importance of developing prisoners' awareness in any form, and of changing mindset of and towards prisoners, as well as about the current prison system, in order to reduce crime.

In connection with my data analysis, contemporary adaptations of meditation practices can be defined as tools for self-development and self-awareness which recognize the agency of prisoners in their process of transformation. Moreover, they may be seen as possibly useful reform measures in combination with other reformatory approaches like educational, vocational and legal training. In this regard, my attempt to answer the questions raised in this research is combined with a search for new positive and productive cooperation strategies among organizations promoting different approaches to prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society. These organizations are united by the same aim to develop

¹⁸ Since a complete resolution of this question is beyond the scope of this study, this issue is further analysed in the following sections by only providing a partial answer.

¹⁹ It is difficult to precisely define what is a correct use of meditation. In this study, I only partly assess this issue by considering the aspects of spontaneous will and expectations which influence the experiences of meditators.

awareness among prisoners, although in different forms: self-awareness, awareness of laws and rights, awareness of drug use and health issues, awareness of individual and social skills. Criminality is thus associated with a lack of awareness. For this reason, it is considered as a fundamental part of criminal rehabilitation.

In relation to this finding, many of the interviewed organizations' members conceive rehabilitation as the personalized realization of one's own potential. According to my BRAC informants, legal awareness can realize poor and marginalized people's potential; similarly, respondents from Silva Bangladesh see meditation and self-awareness as a way to realize one's own potential, even inside the prison. This approach seems to be oriented towards an individualized rehabilitation path. However, by looking at the general tendency of Bangladeshi organizations working in this field, a collective line toward group-targeted and more standardized measures stands out. As detailed in the next section, these different approaches may influence what local authorities and NGOs' members perceive as priorities. I suggest that a more comprehensive and non-binary perspective would include both creative and pragmatic initiatives in order to contribute to the improvement of prisoners' lives and their rehabilitation.

5.1. Prioritizing Other Reform Measures

A topic that emerged from my informants' answers was the urgency, sustainability, and potential success of the different rehabilitation-oriented activities. For instance, I expected to find out that the use of meditation in prisons could be a cost-effective reform measure for inmates and administrators. However, the DAM clinical psychologist Amir Hussain mentioned the problem of priorities for economic reasons in an economic-oriented reality. The IRSOP project focuses on reducing overcrowding and providing legal training and aid as well as other rehabilitation activities which are considered by the government, jail authorities and organizations as long-term sustainable. They work on capacity building, legal and drug-related services and skill-development trainings, and pay little attention to general counselling and spiritual development of inmates. The priority of the government and organizations working in this field seems to be more focused on finding and implementing programmes which rapidly result helpful and long-term sustainable for the major number of prisoners. Differently, the subjective and gradual impact of meditation on individuals and groups is not easy to measure and evaluate.

The topic of NGOs' and authorities' priorities is connected with my informants' expectations about the necessity and usefulness of meditation in prison. My informants

showed different levels of knowledge, conviction and expectations towards meditation as spiritual rehabilitation of prisoners. The majority of them described it as a potentially beneficial practice for the inmates, although not yet perceived by most of the local population as really necessary. According to Silva Bangladesh respondents, meditation would be a rehabilitative supporting tool to improve prisoners' living conditions and unearth their good qualities. Differently, some BRAC members see meditation for prisoners as a possible step after accessing more education. In addition, BLAST and DAM informants described meditation as a potentially useful reform measure for prisoners after sensitizing authorities and society. Finally, the Quantum Foundation members I interviewed understand meditation as a fundamental form of rehabilitation because it enhances the effectiveness of all the other activities and because it is experienced by prisoners as mental freedom from inside the prison.

As previously mentioned, I expected to find both enthusiastic and skeptical positions, but none of my informants seemed particularly suspicious regarding the rehabilitative and transformative potentials of meditation. They mostly recognize its possible usefulness, but some of them doubt its actual necessity by prioritizing other more 'feasible' activities. Quantum Foundation and Silva Bangladesh promote meditation in Bangladesh by organizing events and programmes of meditation in schools, police stations, working offices, and even in prisons. However, these organizations are not directly related to the work on prisoners' rehabilitation and have little power to introduce meditation to prisons in a long-term sustainable way. In the current scenario, the director of Silva Bangladesh Abul Kalam mainly supports education and counselling as priority reforms for prisoners which can be more realistically promoted and implemented. According to his perspective, meditation would be a relevant support for the other activities.

In a different way, the Silva Bangladesh member Shawn Kabir SaLihee argued that "meditation should be a basic facility for prisoners, together with the counselling service". His statement ascribes high relevance to the use of meditation with prisoners, and seems to exclude or ignore different perspectives which might consider the potential non-functionality of meditation in some socio-cultural and religious contexts, with different subjects and through different practices. Nevertheless, all my Silva Bangladesh informants repeated several times that the rehabilitation or healing path of each individual should be based on personal needs and peculiarities. Aaur Rahman of the Quantum Foundation provided another enthusiastic perspective of meditation. His expressions 'life instant changes' and 'anyone can participate' showed his particular interest in promoting such a practice. These

idioms also reflect the alleged need of many contemporary people to find easy and quick methods for reaching their goals: magic bullets, so to speak. Yet, meditation can be conceived as the opposite of a magic bullet: a gradual and demanding practice which can have an effect or not, and which is heavily influenced by the practitioner's expectations. This may be one of the reasons why meditation is perceived as a less necessary rehabilitative activity by organizations and authorities.

Amir Hussain, the IRSOP project coordinator working in the Health Sector of Dhaka Ahsania Mission, provided a different perspective. He considers meditation as a 'special intervention' and an 'extra expectation' of the jail supervisor of the prison where it was implemented in Dhaka. The expressions he used seem to suggest the idea of a difficult rehabilitation strategy which is infeasible over the long term. Even though he would welcome any kind of supporting activities, Amir Hussain stressed the problem of scarce resources and small capacity. As a clinical psychologist, he described the psychological rehabilitation of inmates –



Figure 6: DAM Centre, Health Sector

mainly composed of psychotherapeutic counselling – as an essential process for changing their mentalities and behaviours. He also mentioned that he is working in Dhaka as a change maker and that DAM aims at the social and spiritual development of the whole human community. Yet, it seems he reconsidered these aspects in the face of what he perceives as the most important rehabilitative interventions for prisoners, such as drug counselling and skill-development training. Although he speculated about a possible future for meditation-based rehabilitation, he stated that he would not currently include it among the other initiatives since he is still working on other more urgent reform measures.

Aside from the economic, religious, educational, and pragmatic reasons for introducing meditation to Bangladeshi prisons, the ideas of individualism and collectivism

emerge as influential factors.²⁰ Such cultural and personal orientations are investigated by Goncalo and Staw (2006) in relation to group creativity. Their study consists of a pre-discussion survey, a decision-making task, a brainstorming session, as well as ideas selection and rating phases with a numerous group of American students divided for orientation (individualism-collectivism) and instructions (creative-practical). They found out that, although a collectivist approach results in a better mobilization of people's efforts, cooperation and productivity, an individualist orientation produces more innovation and creativity. I considered their results as relevant material for my research from a terminological point of view. Moreover, the application of their outcomes is presented as not necessarily limited to their research context. Differently, they seem to be focused on defining typical features resulting from individualistic and collectivistic approaches of organizations working in the most diverse fields.

In their research they mention values which would be better promoted by individualistic- or collectivistic-oriented organizations, such as independence and interdependence, uniqueness and conformity, creativity and pragmatism. According to Goncalo and Staw (2006: 98), “[t]o the extent that conformity limits the expression of dissenting viewpoints, it can stifle a group’s ability to think of novel solutions to a problem”. Although they describe common tendencies and not absolute characteristics, it seems that they separate such values in a definite way. But would it be appropriate to suppose that actual creativity considers pragmatism as an essential requirement to implement new policies? In other words, might it be possible to propose innovative and functional solutions by constructing a non-binary understanding of individualism and collectivism?

In Bangladesh, more precisely in Dhaka, the collectivist approach seems to be the most widespread and followed by the NGOs in order to solve the urgent problems of overcrowding in prison and rehabilitation of prisoners. In such a collectivist setting, the tendency is to prioritize in-group goals, explain them as communal, and pay more attention to external processes as influential factors of social behaviour. A new alternative approach to realistically and positively change the Bangladeshi correctional system might be the establishment of a middle ground between the two extremes, properly adapted to such a cultural context. By analyzing the individual necessities of the prisoners, new rehabilitative

²⁰ The debated concepts of individualism and collectivism are here intended in relation to the work approach inside the organizations and even the prisons, and are meant as in the article by Goncalo and Staw, 2006: 96-109.

activities would be proposed in order to recognize their singular agency in a personal path of rehabilitation.

One of these methods may be meditation. Since meditation is essentially an individual experience and chance for self-enquiry and self-transformation, it is still not really common in Bangladesh, where faster, group-targeted, and more standardized measures are prevalent. A change of mentality in different personalized ways towards a mixed approach which promotes both cooperation and creativity is a possible alternative way of designing policies and realizing one's own potential, inside and outside the prisons. Successfully rehabilitated people would come back from the jails into society with singly transformed personalities. The organizations' members would also be considered as individuals with different opinions and ideas within their group. They would personally, but also collectively, aim at proposing new strategies for prisoners' rehabilitation in a cooperation towards the implementation of a wide-ranging solution. In the field, the NGOs' members expressed personal opinions which do not probably conform with other ones in their organization, but both as individuals and as organizations they can push the authorities – individuals in turn, but with more power – to put into practice their ideas.

In this way, collectivity and individuals might potentially collaborate by balancing the organization of work and the proposal of new initiatives. The first problem in order to carry out this idea is the issue of awareness, will and commitment. As described in the last section of this chapter, meditation and other new personalized rehabilitation activities cannot be actually implemented without a sensitization of society and authorities. Economic and social pressures, as well as ignorance and suspicion, may hinder the promotion of novel initiatives without even considering their potential usefulness. A second problem is related to the sustainability of the proposed measures. A possible solution is provided by Kiran Bedi's model of self-organized and self-sustainable prison – with the help of external donations – through the waste disposal, the mobile petition box, and the teachers' recruitment among the inmates (Bedi, 2006: 159-166). This approach would offer the chance of a multi-activity personalized rehabilitation and self-rehabilitation process through a constructive use of time and space.

5.2. Spirituality, Religion and Science

Spirituality, religion and science are relevant intertwined issues developed by my respondents. Spirituality is often associated with religion. In fact, when I asked about spiritual rehabilitation, some of my informants mentioned also religious aspects. For

instance, the BLAST member Rashedul Islam associated meditation with prayer, and stated that they can help prisoners develop their self-awareness in similar ways. Furthermore, the professor, Muslim physicist and meditation practitioner M. Shamsher Ali described the purpose of meditation as becoming as close as possible to God²¹ – together with prayer and good works – and overcoming our ego²². Therefore, religion is seen as a tool to develop the spiritual self. In his perspective, meditation has a religious connotation. Thus, at least during our conversation, he did not distinguish between lay, spiritual, and religious approaches to meditation. On the contrary, religion may be conceived in a completely different way. As reported by the Narsingdi's BRAC lawyers Mohetosh Sarkar and Laboni Amin, it may even be dangerous because it can be used to build social cohesion and powerful groups within enclosed spaces like prisons.

By analysing the interconnections between meditation and religion, it is worth considering some differing perceptions of the popularity of meditation in Bangladesh. My informants from the BRAC Centre, BLAST, and Quantum Foundation see meditation as currently very popular in Bangladesh. Conversely, respondents of Silva Bangladesh, BRAC offices in Narsingdi, and Dhaka Ahsania Mission perceive it as not yet enough common in Bangladesh. These different perceptions, possibly due to personal expectations towards the potential diffusion of meditation, are also related to the organizations' success in that direction. For example, Quantum Foundation is much more popular than Silva Bangladesh in Dhaka, although the Silva Method arrived in Bangladesh in 1990, before 1993's establishment of the Quantum Method. Additionally, Abrar Hossain Sayem from Silva Bangladesh explained that, unlike India, meditation in Bangladesh is still not known enough to be promoted in jails, and is generally perceived as incompatible with Islam. By contrast, the organizations promoting meditation in Bangladesh see meditation and religions as non-conflicting. Quantum Foundation even claims that meditation helps practice religion with more sincerity and devotion.

My informants frequently relied on scientific explanations to justify the spiritual significance of meditation. For instance, Quantum Foundation members define meditation as the 'science of living' by emphasizing the scientific nature of meditation in any practitioner's everyday spiritual life. Ataur Rahman also mentioned the observer effect in

²¹ Professor M. Shamsher Ali made connections among different religions and names of God by even saying that they are essentially the same. However, he mentioned only monotheisms such as Islam, Christianity and Hebraism, and did not include other ways to see God and religion.

²² Ego is here associated with the egocentric self that can only partially see and attend reality. Professor M. Shamsher Ali talked about the idea of grasping the reality beyond the surface through meditation.

quantum physics, where the observation of a subatomic particle changes its behaviour. In this way, the observer returns to having a role that he thought he did not have. Similarly, the observation of thoughts, bodily sensations, or visualizations during a meditation session allows the meditator to recognize their own role as the observer in order to develop self-awareness and self-transformation. By associating the scientific and the spiritual observer, quantum physics is used as a scientific and reliable analogy for how meditation can develop a spiritual consciousness. Silva meditation is also explained from a scientific perspective. For example, according to the director Abul Kalam, meditation is based on the thought process that brings neurons to a frequency level called alpha. In this way, the right and the left sides of the brain are balanced so as to make it more productive. By browsing its website, I noticed that Silva Bangladesh seems to be more focused on scientific aspects of meditation – by emphasizing its practical usefulness – than on its religious origins and spiritual connotations.

These and other scientific accounts about meditation capture the attention of many people, including physics professor M. Shamsheer Ali, who described how meditation is connected with Islam, Sufism, and science. For instance, he stated that some miracles can be explained by the quantum mechanics by giving the example of the scarce but technically existent probabilities to surmount a wall after trying thousands of times. In addition, he approximately calculated that one cubic centimetre of nuclear matter weighs more than the present average weight of all people on the Earth. The reason is that the human body and all other normal matter contain a lot of empty spaces. Such voids are referred to as vacuum or *khola*, the only condition in which the Higgs boson, the so-called God Particle, exists. Through such an explanation and calculations, he suggested that we humans should be humble and overcome our ego with meditation since we are nothing compared to the vacuum.

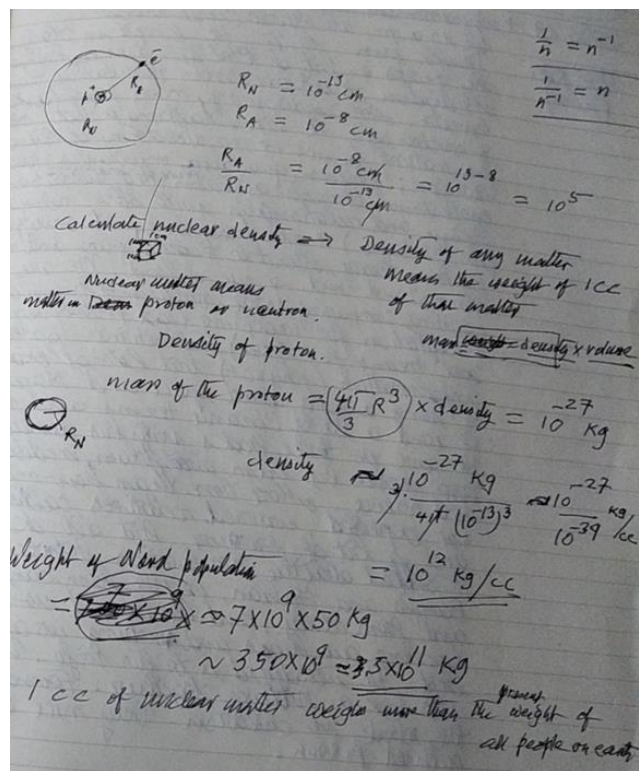


Figure 7: Notes by Professor M. Shamsheer Ali about nuclear matter and vacuum

Such ideas of intertwined aspects of science, spirituality and religion seem to be increasingly popular.²³ In this regard, the mentioned meditation techniques promoted in Bangladesh purport to be compatible with all religions and scientifically efficacious, leading to a number of claimed health-related benefits. Consequently, my informants from Quantum Foundation and Silva Bangladesh define such contemporary adaptations of meditation practices as scientific meditation. The use of this term can be associated with a search for legitimation, reliability and public approval in order to be more broadly accepted and practiced in a country where meditation does not seem as common as in many other parts of the world. Through the merging of discipline, health, science, and spirituality, meditation is described as something concretely useful not only for self-development and spiritual growth, but also for individual and social well-being. A visual example of the attention towards scientific aspects of meditation is a poster found at the Quantum Foundation conference reporting a short text about ‘*bijñan o meḍiteśon*’ – that is ‘science and meditation’, and the cover pages of many Western magazines showing eye-catching images and titles regarding the research on meditation.



Figure 8: Poster entitled ‘Science and Meditation’ by Quantum Foundation

Similarly to meditation, another discipline that was recently and frequently related to science is yoga in modern India. According to Alter (2004: 32), the literature about yoga in India frequently defined it as a science. Interestingly, yoga practitioners claim that such practice is based on direct experience and looks at transcending knowledge and realizing absolute truth. In contrast, science aims at understanding and explaining reality through the production of knowledge, not at experiencing it. In addition, Alter (2004: 35) presents a distinction between yoga as a science unto itself and yoga as an object of scientific research and explanation, resulting in the science of yoga’s subtle body and the science of biology

²³ A further example in the literature used in this study is the converging approach towards meditation used in Kabat-Zinn and Davidson (2011).

and anatomy. Intersections between these two sciences create epistemological and ideological problems since “the confusion of one kind of science with other kinds of knowledge and experience has created a kind of hybrid trajectory of knowledge that is neither subjective nor objective, physical or metaphysical” (Alter, 2004: 36). A similar effect, described by Alter as a ‘mistake’, may be also ascribed to meditation in many parts of the world, including India and Bangladesh, where such practices, hardly measurable and quantifiable, are studied in a rational and objective way.

5.3. Changing Mindset, Raising Awareness

During my fieldwork in Bangladesh, I looked into my informants’ opinions about a potential cooperation among their organizations in order to provide a confluence of reform measures in Bangladeshi prisons. The prisoner rehabilitation methods could include paralegal, educational, vocational and skill-development trainings, as well as counselling and voluntary meditation practices. By observing the reactions of many of my informants, it is clear that those who do not work with meditation find it difficult to define and discuss it. Similarly, people who are not directly involved in the work on rehabilitation of prisoners do not seem to know much about the other organizations’ prison reform activities in Bangladesh. All of them sincerely seem willing to combine different approaches to inmates’ rehabilitation, but they do not know each other enough in order to effectively do so.

Importantly, they also claim to need government support and to feel economic pressure when using resources to implement new reform measures. For instance, BRAC lawyers Md Ekramul Haque and Laboni Amin, Silva Bangladesh directors Abul Kalam and Abrar Hossain Sayem, and the DAM clinical psychologist Amir Hussain expressed the necessity to sensitize authorities, organizations, and society at large in order to realize such collaborations. They did not mention who exactly these authorities are. This apparently suggests that they would need to get more information in this regard in order to turn their own interest into practice and thus involve both themselves and local authorities in such sensitization. Amir Hussain and Abul Kalam also speculated about a more positive future of these collaborative initiatives after the amendment of the current laws and with a possible rise of interest in and understanding of meditation.

The Quantum method teacher Pranjit Lal Shil stated that the authorities should realize that meditation is necessary for prisoners. Although he directly worked with the inmates, he takes a firm position by ignoring or excluding from his discourse the possibility that meditation might not be one of their primary necessities, or that it may have a different

impact on each individual in each context. In contrast, Amir Hussain expressed a more nuanced opinion about meditation. As an IRSOP project coordinator, he maintained the importance of combining efforts by not taking problems as separate: although he has different priorities, the spiritual and psychological rehabilitation of prisoners should not be overlooked. Abrar Hossain Sayem from Silva Bangladesh pointed out the idea of raising awareness through and of meditation in order to overcome suspicion towards ‘new things’:

The government is not flexible toward new things, not really willing to change or adapt new things. They think more about security issues, but there should be some strategies also to work on them. The government should be sensitized and social reports should be more aloud to have an impact. And on the other side, efforts as well.

The Narsingdi’s BRAC lawyer Laboni Amin provided another example of the perceived necessity of offering psychological and spiritual support together with the legal one, because “otherwise one by itself does not work”. She mentioned the need to increase people’s mental level by also developing their spirituality. Moreover, Laboni Amin stated that prisoners see the paralegals as people who can help them out of prison quickly, but not as supporting figures. The question arises, how to win their trust and make them feel that their necessities are understood and accepted? I suggest that Kiran Bedi’s holistic approach to



Figure 9: BRAC Regional Office in Narsingdi

rehabilitation is a relevant example. As mentioned before, it could be designed and implemented through the available and internally created resources. Even though prisoners at the beginning just want to get out of the jail, a similar model would provide different activities, counselling services and communication systems in order to listen to the inmates’ needs, and give them the chance of a personalized path of rehabilitation.²⁴

²⁴ This idea is related to the concept of agency that can be recognized to the prisoners in their personal rehabilitation process. I mentioned it in the previous chapter by describing Mosse’s (2004) study in the field of development anthropology.

Significantly, Laboni Amin described crime prevention as more important than the rehabilitation of prisoners, as it would reduce the number of crimes and criminals through a mindset change on a social level. In order to realize such a goal, my informant suggested to offer regular psychological counselling services both inside and outside the jails. In many contexts throughout the world, especially in Western settings, psychological and spiritual support is widely provided to free citizens. According to my respondents, spiritual practices like meditation are available in Dhaka, even in schools and offices. Nevertheless, the introduction of such practices to Bangladeshi prisons seems to be hindered by relevant issues like their acceptance, funding, and implementation. Further, through the narratives of many of my informants, such as Professor M. Shamsher Ali, Abul Kalam and Laboni Amin, egocentric indifference and perpetual suspicion emerge as serious problems for realizing a social mindset change. What do we really know about who is in prison? My informants described the jail as a distant reality for those who did not experience it. Yet, they emphasized that raising interest in and awareness of the prisoners' realities would help make society a healthy environment. In this regard and in connection with my data, meditation may be a potential tool for self-analysis and analysis of what and who we perceive as extraneous to our sensitivity.

Based on these conversations and interviews, it appears that a multi-layered sensitization would be necessary to foster cooperation among different organizations and to provide a confluence of reform measures in Bangladeshi prisons, leading toward holistic rehabilitation. Raising awareness in different forms – self-awareness, awareness of laws and rights, awareness of drug use and health issues, awareness of individual and social skills – is interrelated with the change of mindset which could transform both prisoners and society at large. In order to understand why or why to include meditation in the holistic reforming process, it is relevant to investigate how meditation is related to prisoners' rehabilitation and health in Bangladesh. More precisely, how do local NGO members perceive meditation in connection with prisoners' discipline and health? Do informants connect the use of meditation in Bangladeshi jails with healing prisoners' criminal minds or with cultivating self-discipline?

To answer this question, it is important to clarify that most of my informants did not make a distinction between convicts and undertrials when talking about prisoners. They were perfectly aware that not all inmates are criminals, but they described rehabilitation in relation to the whole prisoner community. Since personal rehabilitation can be positively influenced by a collaborative process of awareness and forgiveness, all people would have the chance

to benefit from it, the innocent ones included. In particular, meditation is promoted as helping to improve discipline and self-development, as well as the process of healing of anyone is willing to do that through practicing it. For this reason, the voluntary aspect of participating in meditation sessions is fundamental. Identifying the motivations for prisoners to meditate or not is beyond the scope of this study, but the meditation's proponents in prison may be motivated by the awareness of inmates' necessities and by the introduction of new laws and new reform measures aiming at a holistic rehabilitation of prisoners.

By considering Dhaka-based NGO members' perceptions of meditation in relation to prisoners' rehabilitation and health in Bangladesh, I found that the practice of meditation in prison may be analysed through two relevant concepts. The first one is the notion of medicalization, which can be defined as "the process by which nonmedical problems become defined and treated as medical problems often requiring medical treatment" (Conrad and Bergey, 2015). This concept is relevant if and when meditation is interpreted as a therapy for mental healing – from the symptom of ignorance and from the evil of crime. The second one is the notion of mechanization, that in the field of technology denotes the "[u]se of machines, either wholly or in part, to replace human or animal labour" (Curley, 2019). In this study, I rely on this concept if and when meditation is considered as a source of discipline to automate people's mind towards the respect of laws and of behaviour social rules. In this regard, Silva Bangladesh director Abul Kalam described his ideal prison system through two similes: prison as a school, a place of education; prison as a 'factory to build people'.²⁵ In two different part of his speech, Abul Kalam stated:

Prison should become like a school [...]. It should provide education at the level that people need. Prison should become a place to develop one's skills, not just of meditation. Meditation should be a support to do this. People need a mindset that makes them understand that they need education, and why they need education.

Prison should become like a factory for building people. If this happens, then the prisons will succeed.

My informant associated prisoners with children since both of them must learn through an institution that should provide education based on who is learning and under which conditions. It is worth noting that the image of the factory is contradictory to that of the school, and to the concept of personalized education and rehabilitation. The factory

²⁵ Abul Kalam's idea of the prison as a factory can be seen as a different way of conceiving Foucault's (1977) idea of the 'Panopticon' prison, mentioned in the previous chapter. Although it is not based on an architecture of the gaze, it might be seen as a system which, to varying degrees, automatically transforms the offenders into obedient subjects to the normative behaviour (O'Malley and Valverde, 2014: 318-319).

mechanically mass-produces, and for the subjects in question it is not necessary to have an active role in their ‘formation’. In contrast, school systems have recently started to recognize the agency of the subjects being trained, who must contribute to their personal ‘formation’. Abul Kalam also mentioned prisons and hospitals more than once in the same sentences, by associating residents for their suffering conditions. According to his perspective, people would need these structures much less frequently if they would change their mindsets towards both prisoners and meditation.

The mechanistic perspective is also reflected in the words of Aatur Rahman from Quantum Foundation. He considers meditation as “a very useful tool to build oneself in all aspects: physically, mentally, in one’s career and study”, and to realize “life instant changes”. The list of the aspects of oneself that, according to his perspective, meditation helps build appears to me as composed by bricks mechanically placed one above the other as to make a wall. This analogy clashes with the idea of meditation practices and prison reforms as personalized strategies for rehabilitating prisoners. Though perhaps unintentionally, my informant conveyed the idea of using meditation to rapidly ‘build’ one’s body, mind, career, and education, thus reflecting a possible automatism in the construction the meditator’s personality and relations. Similarly, the Quantum meditation teacher Pranjit Lal Shil described the human mind by using a simile that may be also interpreted as mechanistic. He associated the mind with a storehouse, an external object which appears to be easily – or even automatically – ‘cleanable’ through meditation:

Mind is like a storehouse; you can fill up the storehouse with necessary goods or junks. Most of the people fill the storehouse with junks and they’re the suffering of their life, mostly. So, if they can get out all junks from their storehouse and fill it totally with good emotions, good impressions, good thoughts, then this mind will be very helpful for them. And meditation is the most easy and sure way to clean your mind.

A different interpretation of my informants’ perceptions of meditation is the medicalized one. As previously mentioned, it is reflected in some of my informants’ idea of healing individuals and society through the ‘magic bullet’ of meditation. Furthermore, I attended the testimonies of fifteen Quantum Method practitioners who were mainly oriented towards the alternative or supporting ‘medicine’ of meditation to relieve the pain of cancer patients and to treat sleeping problems, migraines, sinusitis, and depression. By making a parallel with yoga in modern India, it is relevant to observe that Alter (2004:152-158) describes Dr. Karandikar’s idea “to cure disease by turning sick people into disciplined practitioners of Yoga” as leading both to the medicalization and mechanization of yoga

itself. This doctor's model of therapy implies a medicalized fragmentation of the body, which is manipulated into yogic postures in a mechanical way through technological means. Further, the condition of passively rather than actively practicing yoga is connected with the concept of agency outlined in the previous chapter by drawing upon Mosse's development ethnography (2004).

Notwithstanding the mechanistic ideas of the human mind, meditation, and prison, discipline is not merely a tool to automatically realize prisoner rehabilitation. At the same time, despite the medicalized approach to meditation as a therapy to improve prisoners' mental health, their healing does not necessarily imply a pathology to be cured. Discipline and healing also mean raising prisoners' awareness in all its forms. Therefore, both mechanistic and medicalized perspectives do not exclude the use of discipline, potentially developed through meditation, in order to educate and 'heal' prisoners in a self-personalized way.

6. Conclusion

By investigating the reasons for and modalities of the introduction of meditation to Bangladeshi prisons, I found that my informants from BRAC and BLAST contribute to the rehabilitation of prisoners by providing legal literacy and aid, from Dhaka Ahsania Mission focus on skill-development training and drug counselling, from Silva Bangladesh and Quantum Foundation propose meditation as a support to other facilities based on education and counselling. However, many of them perceive meditation as not seen by most of people and authorities as a priority for different reasons. One of them is the perception that prisoners are still spiritually immature for meditation due to lack of education. Another explanation given was that, unlike India, meditation in Bangladesh is not yet known enough to be used in jails. Although promoted as compatible with all religions, meditation is also described as possibly perceived by many local people as alien to the Muslim religion. Another obstacle to the use of meditation in prison is related to its subjective and gradual impact on individuals and groups which is not easy to measure and evaluate. For this reason, the priority of the government and of rehabilitation-oriented organizations seems to be more focused on using the available resources to implement programmes which rapidly result helpful for the major number of inmates.

Regarding the ongoing introduction of meditation to Bangladeshi jails, the gradual process of increasing attention towards the psychospiritual rehabilitation of prisoners seems to reflect a slowly rising will to heal the whole individual as well as the whole society, which shape and influence each other. Furthermore, my informants maintain the importance of education and mindset change in order to create a healthy environment that would not stigmatize and instigate crime, and that would allow new rehabilitative initiatives. The intertwined relations between meditation, science, religion and spirituality are another relevant topic. In the field, meditation was frequently described as a psychospiritual scientific practice for both religious and lay people. It was also defined as a discipline for prisoners' mental 'healing', a significant perspective for analysing the mingling between the dimensions of health and discipline in connection with meditation and rehabilitation.

By considering my informants' perceptions of meditation, it may be seen as a discipline for self-awareness and self-rehabilitation – that is the realization of one's own potential, experienced through and together with a mindset change. Although none of them reported a negative idea of meditation as spiritual support in combination with other rehabilitative services, collaborations among organizations aiming at holistically

rehabilitating prisoners with a confluence of different reform measures are still not happening in Bangladesh. Further, meditation programmes in local prisons have been scarcely experimented, and only one weekly course in Pabna Central Jail is still going on for the inmates.

6.1. Finding Answers

By elaborating the answers to my research questions, I found several interesting points in connection with my data analysis and literature review. My first argument is based on a rejection of a dualistic distinction between non-prisoners and prisoners, either undertrials or convicted, to realize an individual and social ‘recovery’ from crime. It is supported by my informants’ idea of the need for a comprehensive mindset change of and towards prisoners in connection with the mutual influence of individual and social health described by Alter (2004: 149-160) and my respondents themselves. Secondly, I constructed the idea of meditation as a self-discipline by reworking Foucault’s (1977: 170) concept of discipline. Observation is replaced with self-observation and self-awareness to act on prisoners’ ‘soul’ by changing their habits. This argument is complemented by Mosse’s (2004: 6) intention of reinstating the “agency of actors in development at every level”, revised as to point out the idea of the necessity of prisoners’ self-rehabilitation. It is further sustained by the mentioned organizations’ aim of rehabilitating prisoners through the realization of individual potential by raising awareness in different forms.

Following the above, prisoners’ rehabilitation should be personalized, supported by a positive collaboration among all the involved parties, and carried out through a gradual psychological change towards forgiveness and both self- and other-acceptance. My informants stressed the importance of overcoming stigma and suspicion toward rehabilitated prisoners through a multi-layered sensitization of and towards the inmates themselves and new reforming approaches. Such sensitization would also be necessary to realize a potential cooperation among different organizations to provide a confluence of reform measures in Bangladeshi prisons towards a holistic rehabilitation. Lacey and Pickard (2015: 666-667) also reinforce my argument by promoting a collaborative process of forgiveness and repairing of relations among the parties in order to reduce the risk of future re-offending. Further, they encourage criminal justice practices that move the focus from blame to forgiveness, an ability that can be also developed through meditation.

In connection with my arguments, I found that the different NGOs I considered in my study have the same aim to develop awareness among prisoners, although in different

forms: self-awareness, awareness of laws and rights, awareness of drug use and health issues, and awareness of individual and social skills. Thus, lack of awareness is an important element which causes criminality. Another finding is related to my first research question: among economic, religious, educational and pragmatic reasons for introducing or not introducing meditation to Bangladeshi prisons, the cultural prevalence of the collectivistic orientation over the individualistic one has a significant role in this process. In Bangladesh, faster, group-targeted, and standardized measures are prioritized and prevail over the individual ones like meditation.

Based on this result, I argue that both innovative and functional and cooperative solutions can be found and implemented by constructing a non-binary understanding of individualism and collectivism. This statement is supported by data, since my informants promote the idea of prisoners' rehabilitation as the realization of their individual potential even by following a collective line. According to my argument, inmates' rehabilitation would be both an individualized and collaborative process with the aim of raising awareness of prisoners and towards the prison system. In this way, new wide-ranging solutions to the problem of recidivism can be individually as well as collectively explored.

I further found that meditation's proponents mostly frame its spiritual significance through scientific explanations, such as the role of the observer in the quantum physics, the neurons' alpha level of frequency, and the role of vacuum in overcoming ego. This finding can be explained through a search for legitimation, reliability, and public approval in order to make meditation more broadly accepted and practiced in a country where it does not seem as widespread as in many other parts of the world. Such statement is supported by my data on the popularity of meditation in Bangladesh and my observations in the field, such as the poster by Quantum Foundation about science and meditation which refers to Western research. As a further explanation, I included Alter's (2004: 35-36) idea of the confusion of the sciences of yoga's subtle body and of biology and anatomy. I compared it with the hardly measurable and quantifiable practice of meditation which has been studied in a rational and objective way in Bangladesh and worldwide.

My last finding is related to my second research question: meditation and prisoner rehabilitation are related to each other through medicalized and mechanistic perspectives, recognized both in my data and literature – through Alter's (2004: 152-158) description of medicalized and mechanized yoga in modern India. The first perspective reflects the idea of meditation as a therapy for mental healing from the symptom of ignorance and from the

illness of crime. The second one relates to meditation when interpreted as a source of discipline to automate people's minds towards the respect of laws and behaviour social rules. Consistent with my data analysis on my informants' mechanistic similes and medicalized understandings of meditation and prison, I argue that discipline is not merely a tool automatically leading to prisoner rehabilitation, and that healing does not necessarily imply a pathology to be cured. Enhancing prisoners' discipline and health also mean cultivating their awareness in all its forms.

By connecting these perspectives on meditation and rehabilitation of prisoners with the other findings, the concept of awareness emerges as a key element. My data and results reflect the problem of a lack of awareness that instigates crime, as confirmed by the NGOs' purpose to develop different levels of awareness among prisoners by likewise enhancing their discipline and health. My results shed light on the necessity to go deeper into prisoners' holistic rehabilitation in Bangladesh. Further ethnographic research, especially based on the local inmates' perspectives about their own rehabilitation, would significantly contribute to such a project. Finally, it is worth remembering that Kiran Bedi's work influenced the ongoing introduction of a new reform measure like meditation to Bangladeshi jails (Rahman, 2010; Ethirajan, 2010). In this regard, I suggest that further looking at her prison model and adapting it to the context of Bangladesh would be a relevant cooperative and innovative approach to prisoners' holistic rehabilitation. In order to start such a project, drawing attention to Bangladeshi people's evolving perceptions about meditation in prison could be a useful way to sensitize local authorities towards new strategies of coping with crime reduction and recidivism, and of improving prisoners' living conditions.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Significant limitations of this study are related to the short time and limited research area which resulted in a small sample. Another one is the restricted access to the detention sites where it would be possible to meet and interview the correctional personnel and even the prisoners themselves. For this reason, future research oriented towards prison ethnography could contribute to expanding the study of reform measures, including meditation, for the rehabilitation of prisoners in Bangladesh, India, other countries in South Asia, and indeed worldwide. Prison ethnographies would possibly include other relevant perspectives, especially the prisoners' ones. By investigating inmates' necessities and peculiarities, organizations and jail authorities could collaborate to design a range of reform measures to realize a holistic rehabilitation of prisoners.

A further limitation is that my informants showed ideas of the meditation potential which range from very positive to neutral ones. Since I could not include eventual negative reactions to meditation in my ethnographic data, more skeptical positions should be considered as potential responses in future studies. Another suggestion for future research is to study the effectiveness of meditation in rehabilitating prisoners in Bangladesh by observing and evaluating its effects over the long term. In this way, it would be possible to investigate its potential usefulness together with other reform measures in order to holistically support the inmates and develop different levels of awareness. Finally, the idea of promoting productive and innovative cooperation strategies among different organizations could be further assessed and analysed in detail with the aim of improving the prison system.

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Appendix

List of Informants:

Name	Gender	Organization	Occupation	Interview/ Conversation Language	Interview/ Conversation Place	Interview/ Conversation Date
Abrar Hossain Sayem	M	Silva Bangladesh	Director	English	Uttara, Dhaka	17.04.2019
Abul Kalam	M	Silva Bangladesh	Country Director, Silva Meditation instructor	Bengali	Uttara, Dhaka	17.04.2019
Amir Hussain	M	Dhaka Ahsania Mission	IRSOP Project Coordinator, Clinical Psychologist	English	DAM Centre, Health Sector	23.04.2019
Arpita Saha	F	Silva Bangladesh	Silva Meditation instructor	English	Telephone interview and conversation	17.04.2019
Ataur Rahman	M	Quantum Foundation	Medical Counsellor, Research Department	English	Kakrail, Dhaka	20.04.2019
Laboni Amin	F	BRAC	Advocate, District Project Officer, IRSOP	Bengali	Narsingdi	18.04.2019
M. Shamsher Ali	M	/	Professor Doctor (Physics)	English	Dhanmondi, Dhaka	25.04.2019
Md Borkot Ali	M	BLAST	IRSOP project member	English	BLAST Centre, Dhaka	16.04.2019

Md Ekramul Haque	M	BRAC	Advocate, HRLS Programme Manager	English	BRAC Centre, Dhaka	10.04.2019
Mohetosh Sarkar	M	BRAC	Advocate, Senior District Manager, HRLS	Bengali	BRAC office, Narsigdi	18.04.2019
Nishat Tasnim Khan ²⁶	F	Quantum Foundation	/	English	Kakrail, Dhaka	22.04.2019
Pranjit Lal Shil	M	Quantum Foundation	Quantum Meditation instructor	English	Kakrail, Dhaka	20.04.2019
Rashedul Islam	M	BLAST	Assistant Director, IRSOP project member	English	BLAST Centre, Dhaka	16.04.2019
Sandhu Kumar Nandi	M	BRAC	HRLS programme member	English	BRAC Centre, Dhaka	10.04.2019
Shawn Kabir SaLihee	M	Silva Bangladesh	Manager and Program Coordinator	English	Uttara, Dhaka	17.04.2019

²⁶ I included Nishat Tasnim Khan among my informants because, during the Quantum Foundation conference, she was my personal interpreter of the Quantum meditators' testimonies and of the speech of the organization's leader Gurujee Shahid El-Bukhari Mahajataq.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that my thesis with the title:

MEDITATION IN PRISON: REHABILITATING PRISONERS FROM INDIA TO BANGLADESH

1. is the result of my own independent work,
2. makes use of no sources or materials other than those referenced,
3. that quotations and paraphrases obtained from the work of others are indicated as such,
4. and that I have followed the rules and recommendations stated in Heidelberg University's guidelines on „Verantwortung in der Wissenschaft (Responsibility in Science)“.

Heidelberg, 19/12/2019

Signature: Francesca Trasarti