
PRISON CONDITIONS IN INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

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ABSTRACT

Human civilization has always included crime and criminality, which presents ongoing difficulties for the criminal justice system. The prison system has gradually changed from being primarily designed as a place of punishment to a tool for rehabilitation and reformation. Since social norms and humanitarian ideals have changed, the modern jail system prioritizes reformative approaches above punishing ones. India's prison circumstances reflect the criminal justice system's overall challenges in finding a balance between punishment and reformation. This article focuses on vocational and educational rehabilitation while critically analysing prison conditions. The application of the Nelson Mandela Rules, which set universal fundamental requirements for prisoner treatment, in the Indian setting is evaluated. Additionally, it examines the 2016 Model jail Manual, which was distributed to States and Union Territories as a framework to align local jail operations with global standards. The study uses data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) to determine the primary barriers to the successful implementation of educational and vocational programs in prisons. The emphasis is on how these initiatives can support prisoner's rehabilitation, aid in their reintegration into society, and reduce the stigma attached to incarceration. The analysis points out persistent systemic and administrative problems and recommends practical adjustments at the operational and policy-making levels. The study comes to the conclusion that education and vocational training are essential tools for reformation, and that their successful implementation might greatly enhance prison conditions and fortify the Indian criminal justice system.

Keywords: Prison Conditions, Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, Human Rights, Reformation, Reintegration

1. INTRODUCTION

Crime has always existed in every society, and no nation can truly claim to be free of it now. A range of social, cultural, and economic factors influence human relationships, which frequently result in disputes that occasionally turn into criminal activity. Therefore, one of the most crucial duties of any criminal justice system is to deal with such behaviour. Prisons are an integral aspect of this system because they have traditionally been used for both punishment and imprisonment. But over time, they have evolved from being purely punishing establishments to progressively becoming acknowledged as hubs for rehabilitation, reintegration, and correction.¹ According to historical reports, prison-like establishments with names like Bandigrah or Karagar have long existed in India. The punitive culture of the era, when punishment was viewed as a means of maintaining order under the ruler's Raj dharma, had a significant impact on these early organizations. They did not base their actions on the contemporary concept of reformation. But as criminology and social standards have changed, so too has our understanding of incarceration. Prisons are increasingly viewed as "Sudhaar Grah"-places where prisoners can change and gain the knowledge and abilities needed to live happy, law-abiding lives after their release. The Indian judiciary has consistently emphasized the reformatory purpose of imprisonment. In *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* (1978),² the Supreme Court held that prisoners do not cease to be human beings and continue to enjoy all fundamental rights except those curtailed by law. Similarly, in *Charles Sobhraj v. Superintendent, Tihar Jail* (1978),³ the Court reiterated that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to live with human dignity even within prison walls.

The States are still in charge of managing prisons on a daily basis, despite the Centre's support for reforms through committees, legislation, and the publication of the Model Prison Manual in 2016. The fundamental criteria of prisoner care are based on the United Nations Nelson Mandela Rules, which place an emphasis on dignity, education, and opportunities for self-improvement. In a same vein, the purpose of prisons has expanded from simple incarceration to include reform. In India, state administrations are primarily responsible for prison administration since "prisons" are included in the State List under the Seventh Schedule of the

¹ See K. D. Gaur, *Criminal Law in India* (6th ed., 2020) 12–15; N. Ramachandran, *Prison Reform and Rehabilitation in India* (Indian Law Institute Publication, 2018) 45–48.

² AIR 1978 SC 1675

³ AIR 1978 SC 1514

Constitution.⁴

With an emphasis on educational and vocational rehabilitation, the current study attempts to evaluate India's prison system critically. It aims to identify the administrative and institutional obstacles to effective execution, evaluate the degree to which such programs can support inmates reformation, and suggest strategies to ensure that prisons fulfil their reformative role within the larger criminal justice system.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE INDIAN PRISON SYSTEM

Four primary forms of punishment were recognized by the ancient Indian criminal justice system: monetary penalties, corporal punishment, strong reprimand, and mild admonition. These could be employed singly or in combination, depending on the severity of the offense. "Dharma was Supreme" was the cornerstone of early Indian society. Violators were therefore often tolerated. But as time went on, this tolerance shifted and the consequences became more rigid and varied. Yajnavalkya, Kautilya, and other scholars developed Manu's beliefs, which at the time formed the primary intellectual foundation for justice.⁵

The Middle Ages saw the preservation of many elements of the legal system's ancient roots. Muslim monarchs generally refrained from interfering with India's established criminal justice and legal institutions, even though they controlled a sizable chunk of the country. While incorporating elements of Islamic jurisprudence, the Mughal government primarily adhered to Quranic sources of law. Under this system, crimes were commonly categorized as offenses against the State, against God, and against persons.⁶

The greatest changes occurred during the British colonial era. The colonial authorities' jail system frequently featured cruel and harsh treatment of inmates. Formal reforms, however, also began at this time. The British made systematic modifications to prison administration, though not always with the welfare of prisoners in mind. Their approach was mostly utilitarian and meant to advance imperial goals.

⁴ Seventh Schedule; State List 4th Entry "Prisons, reformatories, Borstal institutions and other institutions of a like nature, and persons detained therein; arrangements with other States for the use of prisons and other institutions

⁵ Gupta, Sakshi. "System of Prison: Its History and Types in India." Legal Services India E-Journal, <https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-4501-system-of-prison-its-history-and-types-in-india.html>.

⁶ Sarkar, Jadunath. *Mughal Administration*, quoted in Bhushan, V. *Prison Administration in India*.

After achieving independence, India carried out several reforms with the help of numerous commissions and committees. These initiatives sought to make the criminal justice system more humane, rehabilitation-focused, and consistent with constitutional values.⁷

Indian Perspective on Prison Statistics India 2021 and the Model Prison Handbook 2016 India has progressively altered its criminal justice system as a welfare-focused country. The Union government made the first significant step toward defending the rights of prisoners after independence in the 1960s. Since then, a number of committees have been formed, and the Indian government has published a number of Model Prison Manuals based on their recommendations. Despite these efforts by the government, the issue of effectively rehabilitating convicts persists. To find the gaps and offer long-term solutions, the Ministry of Home Affairs 2016 Model Prison Manual and the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) Prison Statistics India (PSI) must be analysed simultaneously. While the Prisons Statistics India provides empirical insights into the realities of jail conditions across the country, the Manual provides normative standards and best practices to standardize prison management in conformity with international human rights laws. Consequently, both are helpful tools for understanding and overcoming the challenges associated with the educational and occupational rehabilitation of prisoners.⁸

3. PRISON STATISTICS IN INDIA – 2021 (NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS)

The Prison Statistics India 2021 study offers a comprehensive explanation of how the criminal justice system functions using original data collected from States and Union Territories. It demonstrates that two of the biggest obstacles to rehabilitation are the absence of structured financial support mechanisms to assist prisoners in reintegrating into society and the dearth of possibilities for vocational training. The research also details positive practices in a number of states. For example, Andhra Pradesh has worked with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and open institutions to provide educational possibilities, and it has set up computer laboratories in central jails. In a same vein, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu have taken significant

⁷ Pachauri, S. K. "History of Prison Administration in India in 19th Century: Human Rights in Retrospect." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 55, 1994, pp. 492–98. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44143401>. Accessed 29 June 2024.

⁸ Ayers, J. D. "A Model for Prison Education Programs and Guidelines for Their Operation." *Journal of Correctional Education*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1979, pp. 3–8. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23291717>.

steps, with Gujarat even setting up a spoken English program at the women's prison in Vadodara, showcasing creative approaches to inmate rehabilitation.

This paper focuses on two primary aspects:

1. The age profile of inmates, to identify the demographic group most vulnerable to incarceration; and

2. The educational background of prisoners, to explore the correlation between illiteracy and involvement in criminal or antisocial behaviour.

According to the Prison Statistics India (2021) report, the majority of convicts fall within the 18–30 years age group, followed by those above 50 years. This younger demographic represents the nation's most productive labour force, and their high representation in prisons reflects how inadequate education and limited access to employable skills can shape criminal tendencies. The likelihood of recidivism can be substantially reduced if this segment of inmates receives structured education and vocational training, thereby facilitating their reintegration into society. The report also provides detailed data on the educational profile of prisoners. As per Prison Statistics India, 2021:⁹

- 40.2% of inmates had education below Class X,
- 25.2% were illiterate,
- 24% had completed education above Class X but below graduation,
- 7.5% were graduates,
- only 1.8% were postgraduates, and
- 1.3% held technical diplomas or professional qualifications.

This suggests that almost 90% of inmates had only finished high school. The findings clearly show the connection between criminal behaviour and low educational attainment, suggesting that a significant contributing factor to criminal conduct is a lack of formal education and

⁹ Prisons Statistics India- 2021, available at: <https://www.data.gov.in/catalog/prison-statistics-india-psi-2021> (last visited on 3rd Nov 2025)

employable skills. However, the data also indicates that targeted educational and employment programs could alter prison populations by reducing stigma, deterring recidivism, and giving them the tools they need to live lawful lives.

4. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON PRISON EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Every person has a set of unalienable rights just by virtue of being human. These universal rights apply to both law-abiding people and those who are incarcerated. The most crucial of these is the right to a life of dignity, which unavoidably means having access to job and educational opportunities. Lack of education and employable skills might impair a person's ability to live with dignity. In a same spirit, prisoners have the right to education and career training, which can help them successfully reintegrate into society after their release.

Since prisoners are thought to be among the most disadvantaged groups, the United Nations (UN) has made it a priority to protect the rights of vulnerable groups worldwide. Therefore, jail should not only involve depriving offenders of their freedom but also provide them with opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to secure profitable jobs once they are released. By helping them reintegrate into society and reducing recidivism, this approach benefits society as a whole.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) mandates that prison systems prioritize reformation and rehabilitation over purely punitive measures. Furthermore, the Nelson Mandela Rules also referred to as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners include extensive rules on the humane treatment of prisoners and stress rehabilitation as the main goal of incarceration. These rules push countries to set up prison systems that prepare inmates for productive, law-abiding lives once they are released.

Data from international study further supports the need of education and vocational training for convicts. For instance, the RAND Corporation in the United States conducted a 2013 meta-analysis of correctional education programs across the country on behalf of the Department of Justice. The study found that participation in educational and vocational training programs reduced the likelihood of recidivism by 43%. Additionally, 28% of participants had greater employment opportunities upon their release compared to those who did not participate in such

programs.¹⁰

Therefore, access to education and skill development is strongly linked to the rehabilitation of inmates, as both international law and actual data demonstrate. Prison education is an essential tool for guaranteeing that prisoners may return to society as contributing members of society, not just a privilege.

5. NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON PRISON EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING : MODEL PRISON MANUAL 2016 – GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS

The Ministry of Home Affairs formed a committee in 2014 to review and update the 2003 Model Prison Manual, which led to the publication of the Model Prison Manual, 2016. This new guideline places a strong emphasis on the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners through organized education and vocational training programs.

Chapter XIV of the guidebook focuses on the education of prisoners, highlighting how access to education can reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour and, as a result, improve the overall effectiveness of the prison system. The manual provides a comprehensive framework for working with prisoners who can be classified as advanced learners, illiterate, or semi-literate. Additionally, it calls for the creation of official schools for juvenile offenders and the introduction of language classes, which will be overseen by the relevant State Education Departments.¹¹

Chapter XV discusses the enhancement of inmates skills and vocational training. It emphasizes capacity building by proposing the establishment of a Board for Skill Development and Vocational Training, led by the Inspector General at the prison headquarters. The guidebook states that labour and training programs should be meticulously planned, taking into account the age, physical and mental health, and duration of sentence of each prisoner. Giving prisoners practical skills that will increase their employment after release and facilitate their reintegration

¹⁰ RAND Corporation. “New RAND Study Shows Prison Education Reduces Recidivism by 43 Percent.” <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2013/08/22.html>. Accessed 29 June 2024.

¹¹ Chapter XIV, Model Prison Manual, 2016 : Education of Prisoners, *available at*: https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-04/PrisonManualA2016_20122024_2.pdf (last visited on 3rd Nov 2025)

into society is the aim.¹²

6. CHALLENGES AND KEY CONCERNS

India has undoubtedly made progress in many areas, but the nation's prison system continues to struggle with issues that existed before independence. Persistent problems include overcrowding, poor health, insufficient training and education, understaffing, and internal criminality. The limited results of several policy initiatives and the development of guidelines demonstrate the lack of strong political will and effective implementation. In *Suo moto* instances involving inhumane jail conditions, the Supreme Court has repeatedly stressed the urgent need for reforms; yet, much more needs to be done to create an environment that is conducive to rehabilitation and reformation.

Key Issues and Challenges

1. Health and Hygiene

The physical and mental well-being of prisoners is critical, as a healthy mind requires a healthy body. Yet, prisons across India face numerous health-related challenges. The High Court of Madhya Pradesh, in *Anil Kumar vs. State of MP (1999)*¹³, noted that poor health among inmates is largely due to:

- Delay in medical diagnosis and treatment
- Overcrowding in prisons
- Failure to segregate infectious cases from healthy inmates
- Poor ventilation, inadequate nutrition, and unsanitary conditions
- Criminality Inside Prisons

Prisons frequently see substantial criminal activity within their walls, which runs counter to the

¹² Chapter XV, Model Prison Manual, 2016 :Vocational Training and Skill Development Program, available at: https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-04/PrisonManualA2016_20122024_2.pdf (last visited on 3rd Nov 2025)

¹³ 1978) 4 SCC 494

primary purpose of reform. Other prisoners are influenced by hardcore criminals, who force them to work long hours or make extortionate payments. Trivial issues like food distribution, sanitation, or jail tasks are common causes of conflict, which regularly turn into physical altercations. Sometimes prison officials exacerbate these problems by exhibiting partiality or ignoring wrongdoing.¹⁴

2. Overcrowding and Understaffing

Many prisons operate beyond their intended capacity, resulting in cramped living conditions and inadequate supervision. Understaffing exacerbates the challenges, reducing the ability of prison officials to maintain discipline, provide proper rehabilitation, or ensure the welfare of inmates.

3. Educational and Vocational Deficiencies

One of the most important strategies for prisoner reform and social reintegration is education and vocational training. However, many prisons lack facilities, programming, and qualified teachers. Even in cases where programs are in place, their usefulness is limited because they frequently fail to adapt to contemporary employment trends or market demands. A cycle of crime is perpetuated by inmates who do not have access to meaningful education and skill development.

4. Basic Infrastructure Deficiencies

Personal interactions with inmates, such as those at Jaipur Central Prison, reveal that basic facilities like clean water, warm clothing, blankets during winters, and hygiene supplies are often insufficient. For many prisoners, these fundamental needs take precedence over education or vocational training, highlighting the need to address infrastructure gaps first.

5. Educational and Vocational Training: A Pathway to Reform

Quality education and vocational training can serve as game-changers in Indian prisons, breaking the cycle of recidivism and equipping inmates with the skills needed to reintegrate into society. Life skills, vocational competencies, and professional training should form a core

¹⁴ S. M. A. Siddiqui, *Criminology: Problems and Perspectives* (Eastern Book Company, Lucknow, 1997)

component of rehabilitation programs, alongside moral and social education to foster responsible citizenship.

Through programs like the Model Prison Manuals of 2003 and 2016, which place an emphasis on rehabilitation as well as the provision of education and vocational training, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has made considerable strides. Numerous committees, such as the Justice Krishna Iyer Committee (1987) and the Justice Mulla Committee (1982-83), have emphasized the significance of inmate skill development as a crucial component in lowering crime and fostering social reintegration. The majority of prisoners are young individuals between the ages of 18 and 50, and many of them lack formal education or employment skills, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) Prison Statistics, 2021. This group's risk of reoffending can be greatly decreased and effective reintegration into society can be supported by offering organized education and skill-building programs.

7. CONCLUSION

The prison system in India today stands at a critical juncture between punishment and reformation. Although progressive frameworks such as the Model Prison Manual, 2016, and adherence to international human rights standards mark important policy strides, their implementation particularly in the realm of educational and vocational rehabilitation remains uneven and largely symbolic across States. Chronic issues of overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and shortage of trained personnel continue to undermine reformatory efforts. Genuine rehabilitation can only be realized when education and skill development are recognized as fundamental rights of prisoners, equipping them to rebuild their lives with dignity and self-reliance after release. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, fostering collaboration between the government and civil society, and ensuring transparent monitoring of prison programs are essential steps toward this goal. Ultimately, while the Indian prison system faces a complex web of challenges from poor health facilities and internal criminality to weak rehabilitation initiatives education and vocational training emerge as the most effective instruments of transformation. By reinforcing these programs alongside improvements in basic facilities and governance, prisons can evolve from spaces of mere confinement into true centres of correction, reformation, and reintegration.