
DIGNITY OF PRISONERS: PRISON CONDITIONS IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF THANE CENTRAL JAIL, MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

The dignity of prisoners is a central concern within India's constitutional and human rights framework, yet conditions in many prisons remain inconsistent with the guarantees under Articles 14, 21, and 23 of the Constitution and international norms. Using Thane Central Jail in Maharashtra as a case study, this paper examines how overcrowding, inadequate medical facilities, exploitative prison labour, and unsafe infrastructure collectively erode the dignity of prisoners, particularly undertrials. During a field visit, it was observed that only undertrial prisoners were housed in Thane Central Jail, with a sanctioned capacity of 1,111 prisoners (1,086 male and 25 female), but an actual population of 3,323 prisoners (3,196 male and 127 female) along with three children. The prison provides very low wages for work—₹74 for skilled, ₹64 for semi-skilled, and ₹53 for unskilled labour per day—and has only two medical officers to serve the entire population.

Against this empirical backdrop, the paper situates Thane Central Jail within the broader national debate on prison reforms and the right to live with dignity in custody. It argues that the conditions documented in Thane are not isolated anomalies but symptomatic of systemic issues across Indian prisons, such as overcrowding, under-staffing, poor health infrastructure, and neglect of basic facilities. The paper concludes by proposing concrete reforms, including the creation of a new cadre position of Police Sub-Inspector (PSI) who is also a qualified doctor (MBBS/BHMS) in every prison beyond a minimum inmate threshold, rationalisation of prison wages, decongestion strategies for undertrials

Keywords: Prison dignity, undertrial prisoners, overcrowding, healthcare inadequacy, prison infrastructure, constitutional rights, India Justice Report 2025

Introduction

*“Are prisoners persons? Yes, of course. To answer in the negative is to convict the nation and the Constitution of dehumanization...” This statement from Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer in *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*¹ affirms that prisoners retain fundamental rights under Article 21, emphasizing dignity despite incarceration.*

The concept of prisoner’s dignity is deeply embedded in Indian constitutional jurisprudence and international human rights law. While imprisonment lawfully curtails personal liberty, it does not strip a person of their basic human dignity, nor of all fundamental rights. The Supreme Court of India has consistently held that prisoners retain the protection of Article 21, which guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, interpreted to include the right to live with human dignity.² In several landmark decisions, the Court has emphasised that prison authorities cannot treat incarceration as a licence to inflict cruelty, neglect, or inhuman conditions on those in custody.

India is also a signatory to international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which recognise that all persons deprived of liberty must be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. These standards have been further elaborated in the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), which set benchmarks for accommodation, medical care, discipline, labour, and rehabilitation.

Hypothesis

Despite this robust normative framework, there remains a sharp gap between principle and practice. Official reports, academic research, and civil society studies have repeatedly highlighted persistent problems in Indian prisons, including overcrowding, lack of adequate medical services, untrained or insufficient staff, infrastructural decay, and inadequate mechanisms for grievance redressal and legal aid. Undertrial prisoners—who are presumed innocent until proven guilty—constitute a disproportionately large share of the prison

¹ *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration*, 1980 (3) SCC 488

² *Francis Coelie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi*, (1981) 1 SCC 608

population and often bear the brunt of these systemic deficiencies.

Methodology

It is in this context that Thane Central Jail, Maharashtra becomes an important site for empirical observation and critical analysis. The jail houses only undertrial prisoners, yet demonstrates extreme overcrowding and multiple violations of dignity-linked standards. The observations from a field visit to Thane Central Jail provide concrete, lived evidence through which broader issues of prison conditions and prisoner dignity in India can be examined. Rather than relying solely on secondary data, this paper uses these firsthand observations as a micro-level case study, while situating them in the broader macro-level discourse on prison reform

Objectives

- To describe and analyse the actual conditions in Thane Central Jail in terms of population, facilities, health, hygiene, and infrastructure.
- To evaluate how these conditions relate to the constitutional and human rights obligations of the State towards prisoners, especially undertrials.
- To identify specific ways in which the dignity of prisoners is compromised through overcrowding, inadequate medical care, and labour practices.
- To propose practical and targeted reforms, including structural changes such as the creation of a PSI-doctor post and improvements in wages and infrastructure.

By focusing on these dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on prison reforms, not merely in an abstract sense, but grounded in the concrete reality of one of Maharashtra's key central jails.

National Prison Crisis: Data and Context

The India Justice Report 2025 presents an unambiguous indictment of India's correctional facilities. With over 5.7 lakh (570,000) prisoners housed against an authorized capacity of 4.39 lakh (439,000), the national occupancy rate stands at 131%. This aggregate obscures the severity of regional overcrowding: twelve prisons exceed 400% capacity, while 89 facilities operate above 250% occupancy. Among these critically overcrowded institutions

is Maharashtra's Thane Central Prison, operating at 401% capacity—a statistic that transitions from numerical abstraction to human catastrophe when one witnesses the actual conditions. The composition of India's prison population reveals another crisis within the crisis: 75.8% of all prisoners are undertrials—individuals legally presumed innocent, yet subjected to indeterminate custody while their cases languish in overburdened courts. Many undertrial prisoners spend more time in custody awaiting trial than the maximum imprisonment period prescribed for their alleged offenses, rendering the concept of "presumption of innocence" a constitutional fiction. This reality demands examination not merely as a legal pathology but as a dignitary catastrophe, where individuals are punished through delay rather than judgment.

Legal and Human Rights Framework on Prisoners' Dignity

The starting point for any discussion on prison conditions in India must be the Constitution of India. Three provisions are particularly significant in the context of prisoner dignity:

- **Article 14**³ guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, implying that prisoners cannot be subjected to arbitrary or discriminatory treatment.
- **Article 21**⁴ guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which the Supreme Court has interpreted expansively to include the right to live with human dignity, access to basic necessities, and protection from torture, cruel or degrading treatment.
- **Article 23**⁵ prohibits forced labour, which has implications for prison labour that is either unpaid or grossly underpaid, especially when coerced.

Judicial decisions have repeatedly affirmed that prisoners retain their fundamental rights, subject to reasonable restrictions inherent in the fact of incarceration. The Court has recognised the rights to healthcare, legal aid, speedy trial, and protection from custodial violence as integral components of Article 21. Undertrial prisoners, in particular, are entitled to be treated in a manner consistent with the presumption of innocence.

3 INDIAN CONST. art 14

4 INDIAN CONST. art 21

5 INDIAN CONST. art 23

Further, the Model Prison Manual, 2016, issued by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, sets out detailed guidelines on prison administration, including standards for accommodation, medical care, classification of prisoners, labour, and infrastructure. It calls for adequate medical staffing, regular health check-ups, proper ventilation, and humane living conditions, and stresses reformatory and rehabilitative approaches rather than purely punitive models.

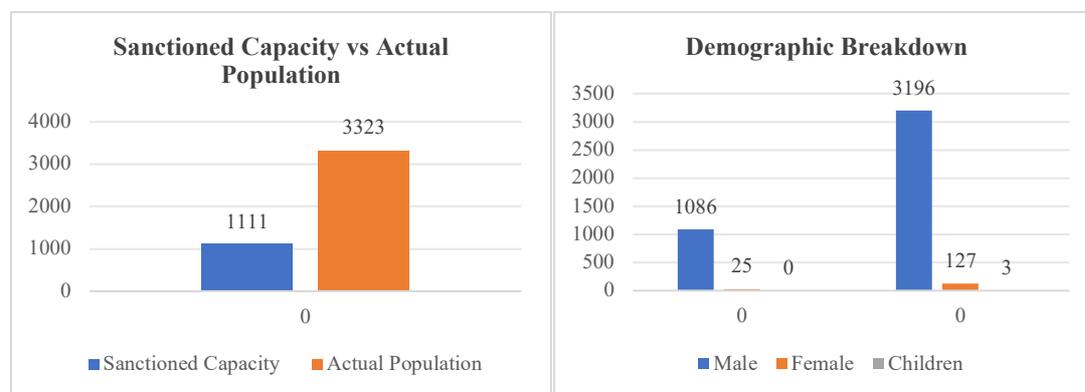
However, the empirical reality in many Indian prisons, including Thane Central Jail, often diverges from these standards. The following sections show how, despite this strong normative framework, conditions on the ground systematically undermine the dignity of prisoners.

Thane Central Jail: Profile and Overcrowding of Undertrial Prisoners

Thane Central Jail in Maharashtra is a central-level correctional institution which, at the time of the visit, housed only undertrial prisoners. This in itself is significant: every person confined in this facility had not yet been convicted, and their presence in custody was solely on the basis of pending trial or investigation.

Data Analysis:

- **Sanctioned Capacity:** 1,111 (1,086 Male + 25 Female)
- **Actual Population:** 3,323 (3,196 Male + 127 Female & 3 Children)
- **Occupancy Rate:** ~299%



This means the prison is operating at almost three times its authorized capacity. In percentage terms, the occupancy rate is close to 299%. Such extreme overcrowding has several

direct and indirect implications for the dignity and well-being of prisoners:

- Space per prisoner is drastically reduced, leading to cramped and congested cells and barracks, where basic privacy is non-existent.
- Overcrowding puts pressure on sanitation, water, and food systems, often resulting in unhygienic conditions and longer waiting times for basic needs.
- It has a cascading effect on the quality of supervision and security, increasing tensions and the likelihood of violence, bullying, and exploitation among inmates.
- It severely strains medical services, counselling, and legal aid, as staff-to-prisoner ratios become unmanageable.

The Supreme Court in *Re-Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons*⁶ declared that overcrowding is a violation of human rights. At nearly 300% capacity, the prisoners are denied basic personal space, leading to sanitation crises and the spread of communicable diseases.

Furthermore, the structural design exacerbates this suffering. The observation that cells are covered by fibre cement or metal sheets indicates a violation of the right to protection from extreme weather. In the humid heat of Thane/Mumbai, metal roofing transforms cells into heat traps, which the courts have previously equated to a form of torture.

In *Charles Sobhraj v. Superintendent Central Jail, Tihar*⁷ Supreme Court held that Imprisonment does not spell farewell to fundamental rights. The right to life includes the right to live with human dignity.

In a jail that houses only undertrials, such overcrowding also raises serious questions regarding the right to speedy - as established in the landmark *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar*,⁸ where the Supreme Court held that speedy trial is an essential part of Article 21 - and the functioning of the criminal justice system as a whole. Many undertrials remain incarcerated for long durations due to delays in investigation, filing of charge-sheets, or conduct of trial, despite having the constitutional right to be tried within a reasonable time. The overcrowded

⁶ *Re-Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons*, 2016 (3) SCC 700

⁷ *Charles Sobhraj v. Superintendent Central Jail, Tihar*, 1978 (4) SCC 104.

⁸ *Hussainara Khatoon & Ors. v. Home Secretary, State of Bihar*, 1980 (1) SCC 98.

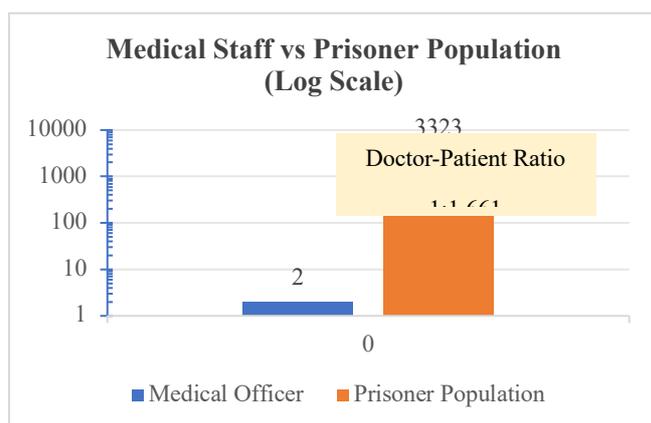
state of Thane Central Jail is thus not only a logistical issue but a symptom of deeper systemic failures in policing, prosecution, and adjudication.

Inadequate Medical Facilities

One of the most striking findings from the visit to Thane Central Jail was the severe inadequacy of medical facilities.

Data Analysis:

- **Prisoner Population:** 3,323
- **Medical Officers:** 2
- **Doctor-Patient Ratio:** 1 : 1,661



This ratio is woefully below the standards set by the Model Prison Manual 2016 (which suggests 1 Medical Officer for every 300 prisoners) and the World Health Organization guidelines.

Such a ratio is grossly insufficient by any reasonable standard. It compromises the ability of medical staff to:

- Conduct timely health screenings and routine check-ups.
- Attend to acute medical emergencies such as injuries, heart conditions, or infections.
- Provide ongoing care for chronic illnesses like diabetes, hypertension, tuberculosis, or

mental health disorders, which are known to have higher incidence in prison populations.

- Ensure proper maternal and child healthcare for female prisoners and the children living with them.

In practice, the shortage of medical officers means that prisoners may face long delays before being seen by a doctor, incomplete follow-up of treatment, and possibly inadequate documentation or monitoring of their health status. For undertrial prisoners, this amounts to a serious compromise of their right to health, which is an integral component of the right to life and dignity under Article 21.

To address this chronic gap, this paper proposes a specific structural reform: the creation of a new post of Police Sub-Inspector (PSI) who is also a qualified doctor (MBBS/BHMS) for every prison exceeding a certain minimum number of inmates. The key features of this proposal are:

- **Qualification:** The PSI should possess a recognised medical degree such as MBBS or BHMS, ensuring that they meet professional standards for medical practice.
- **Cadre integration:** As a PSI, the officer would have both administrative authority and medical expertise, improving coordination between custodial and health-related decisions.
- **Minimum population threshold:** For prisons with populations above a specified number (for example, 500 or 1,000 inmates), at least two PSI-doctor post should be mandatory, with larger prisons like Thane Central requiring more than two.
- **Scope of responsibility:** The PSI-doctor would oversee routine health check-ups, chronic care, emergency response, health education, mental health referrals, and coordination with external hospitals and specialists.

Such a position would not replace dedicated civilian medical officers but would supplement and strengthen the prison health system, ensuring that healthcare is integrated into day-to-day prison management rather than being treated as an external or occasional service.

By institutionalising a PSI-doctor role, the State can make a concrete move towards aligning actual practice with its constitutional and international obligations regarding the health

and dignity of prisoners.

Prison Labour and Extremely Low Wages

Another key dimension of prisoner dignity concerns the conditions of prison labour. Work can, in principle, serve rehabilitative purposes by providing skills, discipline, and a sense of purpose. However, when labour is inadequately paid, unprotected, or coercive, it can amount to economic exploitation and even forced labour, contrary to Article 23 of the Constitution.

In Thane Central Jail (Overall Maharashtra), the wage structure for prisoner labour, as observed during the visit, was as follows:

- **Skilled labour:** ₹74 per day
- **Semi-skilled labour:** ₹64 per day
- **Unskilled labour:** ₹53 per day

In the case of *State of Gujarat v. Hon'ble High Court of Gujarat*⁹ the Supreme Court held that prisoners cannot claim the exact minimum wage due to the costs of their upkeep (food/clothing), the court mandated "reasonable wages." ₹53 in 2024-25 is manifestly unreasonable and exploitative.

These figures are extremely low when compared with prevailing minimum wages for similar categories of work outside prison. Even allowing for the provision of basic food and accommodation by the State, such wages fall far short of any reasonable standard of fair remuneration. In practice, this means that:

- Prisoners have very limited ability to save money for their families or for their own reintegration after release.
- The value of their labour is not recognised in a manner consistent with their inherent dignity as human beings.
- There is a risk of compulsion, where prisoners may feel forced to work under these poor

⁹ *State of Gujarat v. Hon'ble High Court of Gujarat*, 1998 (7) SCC 392

terms because of institutional pressures or fear of disfavour, raising concerns under Article 23.

A dignity-based approach to prison labour would call for a restructuring of the wage policy. Some possible directions include:

- Aligning prison wages to a fixed proportion of the official minimum wage for the respective category of work in the State, such as 50–75% of the external minimum wage.
- Ensuring that a part of the wage can be used for family support, a part for savings to be released upon discharge, and a part to contribute (if legally mandated) towards the cost of maintenance, but always in a way that respects prisoners' rights.
- Providing skill certification recognised by external agencies so that prisoners' work experience inside the jail translates into better employment opportunities after release.

Until wages are brought in line with such principles, the current wage structure at Thane Central Jail remains an example of systemic undervaluation of prisoners' labour, inconsistent with a robust concept of prisoner dignity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the dignity of prisoners in India through a focused case study of Thane Central Jail, Maharashtra, with particular attention to overcrowding, medical facilities, prison labour, and infrastructure. The findings from the field visit reveal a prison that is severely overcrowded—housing 3,323 undertrial prisoners in a facility designed for 1,111—with only two medical officers, very low wages for prison labour, and infrastructure that includes a dangerously unstable post-independence building and heat-intensifying fibre or metal sheet roofing.

These conditions stand in tension with the constitutional guarantees of equality, life, and dignity under Articles 14 and 21, as well as the prohibition on forced labour under Article 23. They also fall short of the standards articulated in the Model Prison Manual, 2016, the Nelson Mandela Rules, and broader principles of human rights. The fact that all inmates in Thane Central Jail are undertrials—presumed innocent—makes the situation even more troubling from a justice and rights perspective.

The paper has argued that the problems observed at Thane Central Jail are not isolated anomalies but are emblematic of systemic deficiencies in the Indian prison system, including chronic overcrowding, under-investment in health, lack of professionalized custodial staff, and neglect of basic maintenance and infrastructure. These systemic issues, in turn, are linked to broader failures in the criminal justice process, such as delays in investigation and trial, inadequate legal aid, and limited use of non-custodial measures.

To restore and protect the dignity of prisoners, this paper proposes several key reforms:

- **Medical Reform:** Creation of a dedicated PSI-doctor post (MBBS/BHMS) in every prison with a minimum threshold of inmates, to strengthen healthcare delivery and integrate health considerations into prison administration.
- **Decongestion Measures:** Systematic use of bail, plea bargaining, undertrial review committees, and alternative sentencing to reduce overcrowding, especially in undertrial-only prisons such as Thane Central Jail.
- **Fair Wages for Prison Labour:** Revision of the wage structure so that prisoners receive substantially higher remuneration, linked to a reasonable proportion of the official minimum wage, with safeguards against coercion and provisions for savings and family support.
- **Infrastructure Safety and Climate-Appropriate Design:** Immediate structural audits and repairs of unsafe buildings, replacement of dangerous or unsuitable roofing materials, and improved ventilation to ensure safe and humane living conditions.

Ultimately, the measure of a democracy is not only how it treats its free citizens but also how it treats those whom it has deprived of liberty. Prisons are a test of the State's commitment to dignity, equality, and justice. The conditions at Thane Central Jail, as documented in this study, highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and sustained prison reforms in India. Addressing these issues is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency; it is a constitutional and moral imperative to ensure that every person, even behind bars, is treated as a human being with inherent dignity.

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