
EDUCATION IN PRISON: DOES IT REALLY HELP IN REHABILITATION OF PRISONERS? AN INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Education has always played a major role in social justice as well as being a critical pillar of support for a country's growth and economy. Education for all, in principle, focuses on universal equality and freedom, to educate citizens equally, and fulfilling the promise of the right to education under Article 21E of the Indian Constitution. Today, there is one setting in which the question of education plays an even bigger role – the prisons. Having access to education in prison, as well as understanding its role in the lives of the prisoners, is crucial for the development of the society as a whole. Time and again, evidences have shown that fellows who participate in education and vocational programmes during incarceration are more likely to have positive impacts on their rehabilitation and reintegration upon release. In this context, the current paper tries to understand if education in prison really helps in rehabilitation of prisoners, and suggests means to provide a more robust mechanism of prisoners' education, so that it can fulfil its goal of rehabilitation and reformation.

Keywords: Education, Prison Education, Rehabilitation

Introduction

“Education is the key that unlocks the golden door to freedom.”

-George Washington Carver.

Education is one of the important foundations of human development and societal progress and is recognized globally not only as a basic human right but also as a powerful instrument for influencing individual and societal transformation.

Realizing the centrality of education in building a progressive society, India has also made the right to education a Fundamental Right by inserting Article 21-A into the Constitution of India through the Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002. The Supreme Court of India, in the landmark case of *Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka* (1992), first recognized the right to education as an integral component of right to life under Article 21, which was further reinforced in *Unnikrishnan v. State of Andhra Pradesh* (1993), wherein it was laid down that every child until the age of 14 has the right to free education, subject to the economic capacity of the state.

Despite the constitutional guarantee and legislative framework, access to education in India still has marked disparities and systematic barriers. Sharma, 2020. These become even more significant in the context of correctional facilities. Provision of educational opportunities within correctional facilities is a uniquely important dimension of the broader right to education, carrying profound implications for rehabilitation, recidivism reduction, and social reintegration.

Prisoners are among the most educationally under-privileged sections in Indian society. According to the latest data recorded in National Crime Records Bureau Prison Statistics 2023, there were around 32384 illiterate prisoners, while 58827 were below class X and a total of 2489 with a post-graduate degree. This educational deficit has not only contributed to criminal conduct but also causes huge problems in their attempt to settle down into normal life upon release.

We must remember that the purpose of education within a prison environment goes well beyond basic skills in literacy and numeracy to the deeper level of attitude, values, and self-perception that true rehabilitation requires.

Education in correctional settings thus has transformative potential; it develops cognitive, vocational, and moral competencies crucial for rehabilitation (Davis et al., 2014). Available evidence supports that prison education has reduced idleness and strengthened prosocial identity while enhancing self-efficacy and significantly lowering recidivism rates (Hall & Killacky, 2008).

International human rights norms, including the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners-the Nelson Mandela Rules-establish education as an integral element of regimes within prisons, for which programs must be available to all prisoners who can benefit from them, especially illiterate prisoners and young prisoners.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study goes well beyond the prison walls, touching families, communities, and the broader social fabric of the country. Where there is cycling in and out of prison, the strain is felt at the community level-public funds that can be used for schools, healthcare, and other initiatives are instead continually diverted to manage recidivism and overcrowded prisons (Aos et al., 2006). For children of parents who have been imprisoned, the impact is even more profound-growing up with emotional instability, social stigma, disrupted schooling, and heightened risks of entry into the justice system (Murray & Farrington, 2008). In such light, education becomes more than a prison service; it is a lifeline. Research has demonstrated that good-quality education in prisons not only reduces reoffending but helps individuals rebuild dignity, find purpose, and reconnect with society in meaningful ways (Davis et al., 2014). Understanding how these programmes work, and how effective they truly are, is essential for shaping humane evidence-based policies that enable rehabilitation and healthier communities across India.

Policy Framework in India: Model Prison Manual

The Model Prison Manual 2016, prepared by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, represents the most comprehensive and updated policy framework governing prison administration in India. The Model Prison Manual 2016 explicitly articulates that reformation and rehabilitation constitute the ultimate objective of imprisonment in India along with

opportunities for diversified education¹.

Chapter XIV of the *Model Prison Manual, 2016* explains that education plays a significant role in reducing the tendency to commit crime, which in turn contributes to the effective overhaul of the prison system (*Model Prison Manual, 2016, p. 159*). The chapter outlines a comprehensive framework for educational programming tailored to prisoners at multiple learning levels. It includes provisions for basic literacy instruction for illiterate prisoners, as well as opportunities for intermediate and advanced education. The Manual further highlights the objective of educational programmes, “The objective behind educational programmes in prisons may be to channelise prisoners’ energies into constructive and creative pursuits, instilling in them a sense of confidence, developing amongst them social responsibility and consciousness, fostering amongst them habits and attitudes necessary for adjusting in the community, creating amongst them an awareness of the futility of leading a criminal life and uplifting them morally, mentally and socially” (*Model Prison Manual, 2016, p. 159*).

Current Educational and Vocational Training Programs in Indian Prisons

Educative and vocational training programs installed within the Indian prison system represent a serious intervention in rehabilitation processes, mending the fundamental educational deficits that mark the majority of the prison population. Various studies have indicated that prisoners who receive education are about 10 to 20 percent less likely to recidivate compared to those not receiving interventions, thus providing a firm empirical basis for prioritizing education among prisoners (Singh, 2018). Indian prisons have thus developed a range of programs through strategic partnerships with institutions of open education, NGOs, and private sector organizations, recognizing that traditional models of classroom-based education are impracticable in correctional environments where security concerns, heterogeneity of population, and resource constraints demand innovative approaches (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010; Sharma, 2025).

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Prison Education Initiative

IGNOU acts as a forerunner and game-changer in prison education, being the first university

¹ Programmes for the treatment of offenders shall be individualized and shall aim at providing them with opportunities for diversified education, development of work habits and skills, change in attitude, modification of behaviour and implantation of social and moral values (Bureau of Police Research & Development, Model Prison Manual, 2016, p.11)

in India to implement a comprehensive distance education program specifically for the country's inmates. India Vision Foundation, 2024; Sehgal & Singh, 2019 It aims explicitly at democratizing education and reaching out to the most disadvantaged sections of society. The attempt by IGNOU toward prison education manifests innovative modes of inmate education, catering not only to academic needs but also to psychological and social rehabilitation (Singh, 2017; Singh & Dhull, 2019).

National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)

NIOS supplements the higher education mission of IGNOU with basic education and secondary schooling opportunities that specifically target the fundamental literacy deficits characteristic of the majority of the prison population. The NIOS has, on its part, recognizing that ensuring appropriate and adequate education to prisoners constitutes an enormous step toward their reformation and successful reintegration into society, taken the initiative to educate and provide skill training programs free of cost to jail inmates across the country.

Vocational Training Programs

Vocational training meets the immediate and practical need for employable skills, while at the same time directly addressing the economic factor contributing to recidivism. Research proves that vocational training in prisons equips inmates with marketable skills, increases employability upon their release from prison, and drastically reduces recidivism rates (Madhava, 2017; Sharma, 2025). Indian prisons put into practice various vocational programs according to demand in the market, the prisoners' capabilities, and resources available. In this regard, Model Prison Manual 2016 expressed an emphasis on individualized planning, depending on age, mental and physical health of the prisoner, and sentence length (Ministry of Home Affairs 2016; Sharma 2025).

Various studies conducted in Indian prisons have documented that vocational training leads to a number of rehabilitative effects beyond skill acquisition, such as improved self-esteem, structured daily activities, and healthy peer associations. The constitution of Boards of Skill Development Programme and Vocational Training headed by an Inspector General at the prison headquarters level reflects an institutional response to the need to integrate vocational programming across different jurisdictions.

Impact of Education on Prisoners

The effectiveness of imprisonment education in facilitating prisoner rehabilitation can be gauged based on a number of empirical measures: recidivism rates, post-release employment outcomes, behavioral changes during incarceration, and psychological well-being. A body of research evidence from Indian and international contexts is growing, which demonstrates that such educational interventions do create measurable positive changes across these domains, therefore justifying prioritizing educational programming within correctional frameworks. (Davis et al., 2013; Sharma, 2025)

1. Recidivism Reduction

Recidivism-the tendency of formerly incarcerated individuals to reoffend and return to prison-represents the most critical metric for evaluating correctional effectiveness, given that it directly measures whether imprisonment achieves its stated objective of protecting society by preventing future criminal behavior.

Empirically, studies prove that prisoners involved in education and vocational programs have significantly lower recidivism rates compared to those not receiving these interventions, thereby establishing a strong causal link between participation in education and reduced reoffending. A landmark meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2013 found that inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison within three years compared to those who did not participate, representing one of the most substantial recidivism reduction effects documented across any correctional intervention.

A study by the Indian Council for Social Science Research, which evaluated Open Distance Correctional Services, observed a recidivism rate among the participants that was 20 percent less than for non-participants, thus validating international findings within the Indian context.

2. Employment Opportunities

Employment after release is one of the most important preventive factors against recidivism, responding to economic precariousness and social marginalization, which impel property crimes and hamper efforts to impede criminal activity (Bozick et al., 2018;

Visher et al., 2008). Studies have indicated time and again that former prisoners who find stable work in the months immediately following release have drastically lower recidivism rates than those who continue to be unemployed, making employment a principal means through which rehabilitative interventions effect long-term change in behavior (Visher et al., 2008).

Education and vocational training foster job market competitiveness directly through the provision of marketable credentials, technical skills, and soft skills such as communication, punctuality, and teamwork that employers value. Employment after release is 13 percent higher among prisoners who took part in either academic or vocational education programs compared to those who did not, with participants in vocational training showing 28 percent higher employment rates. Employment provides legitimate income that addresses the primary economic motivation for property crimes and reduces the financial precarity that drives recidivism. In addition, stable employment forms a structure of routine, prosocial networks, and investment in conventional society that acts as a strong protective factor against reoffending.

3. Behavioural and Psychological Improvement

Beyond the measurable outputs in terms of recidivism rates and employment statistics, educational programs generate fundamental qualitative changes in prisoner behavior, psychological well-being, and institutional climate that are a precondition for successful reintegration, even if they are difficult to quantify through conventional metrics. Prison administrators indicate, time after time, that participating in prison education is associated with better inmate morale, fewer discipline issues, better relations with others, and a more positive institutional environment.

According to administrators at Yerawada Central Prison, Pune, there is a great improvement in the behavior of education participants: incidents of violence have reduced, lesser number of rule infractions, and more cooperation with correctional staff and programming. (Madhava, 2017)

This is corroborated by the documented significant increases in hope, future orientation, self-esteem, and sense of personal agency in participants within the Nagpur Central Prison study on prisoners enrolled in IGNOU distance education programs (India Vision

Foundation, 2024). Theoretically and empirically, such psychological changes are linked to desistance from crime, since those who develop positive self-concepts, beliefs in their capacity to change, and investments in conventional futures show dramatically lower recidivism rates than those maintaining criminal identities and fatalistic worldviews (Maruna, 2001).

Limitations and Challenges with Prison Education

While there is clear evidence that prison education is effective in reducing recidivism, enhancing employment opportunities, and improving psychosocial well-being, the educational activity within prisons in India is fraught with systemic barriers that severely restrict its reach, quality, and transformative effect (Business Standard, 2023; Sharma, 2025). These barriers exist at multiple levels: structural, administrative, pedagogical, and sociocultural, which all act as barriers to realizing the rehabilitative promise of education in correctional environments (Jain, 2025). Commitment and understanding of these barriers is vital to developing evidence-informed policy interventions that will serve to strengthen prison education systems and their capability to contribute to prisoner rehabilitation and successful reintegration.

1. Inadequate Funding

The most important barrier to prison education in India is a severely inadequate allocation of funding, which reflects and sustains a lack of prioritization of rehabilitative functions in contrast to custodial security functions within correctional budgets (Business Standard, 2023, Sharma, 2025). According to the National Crime Records Bureau's Prison Statistics India 2021, the total budget allocation for all prisons in India for 2021 - 2022 was a mere ₹7,619.2 crore, with an actual expenditure of ₹ 6,727.3 crore, equating to 88.3 percent of the allocated budget (Business Standard, 2023; PRS India, 2023). Yet, a mere 0.6 percent of the spending on prisons—out of ₹6,727.3 crore—was spent on education and vocational courses, reinforcing the low priority associated with rehabilitative programming.

2. Infrastructure Deficits and Overcrowding Crisis

Indian prisons face a severe overcrowding problem that creates many obstacles to effective educational programming and seriously damages the quality of all correctional services (IJLLR, 2025; National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2024). Official prison statistics

show that many facilities operate at over 130 percent of their approved capacity. This results in extreme population density that puts significant pressure on infrastructure and resources (NCRB, 2024; Sharma, 2025). In these crowded facilities, every available space must be used for housing prisoners, leaving no room for dedicated classrooms, libraries, computer labs, or vocational workshops (IJLLR, 2025; Probono India, 2024). Educational activities must compete with other functions for limited space, leading to makeshift, inadequate learning environments. Overcrowding stops the establishment of quiet study areas where prisoners can engage in self-directed learning (Kumar & Singh, 2018). Without these spaces, prisoners must study in noisy, chaotic conditions that do not support concentration or intellectual work.

3. Administrative Barriers

Prison administrative priorities often focus on security and control instead of rehabilitation. This creates a culture where educational programming is seen as secondary (IJLLR, 2025; Sharma, 2025). This security-first mindset creates obstacles when it puts minor security concerns above rehabilitative opportunities (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016; Probono India, 2024). Many senior administrators lack training in or commitment to rehabilitative programs (Hayat, 1983; Sharma, 2025). When they see education as unimportant, they do not push for necessary resources or supportive policies (IJLLR, 2025; Probono India, 2024). Regulations aimed at security may unintentionally limit educational innovation, preventing the use of effective teaching methods identified by research (IJLLR, 2025; Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016).

Recommendations for Strengthening Prison Education in India

Policy-Level Reforms

1. Statutory Framework and Legal Recognition

Prison education needs to be established as a legal right through detailed legislation that goes beyond optional policy guidance in the Model Prison Manual 2016. This would create enforceable rights aligned with constitutional rights under Article 21-A and court rulings in *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016; SPRF, 2024). This legal framework would allow prisoners to seek help when denied educational

opportunities and elevate education from a secondary function to a key part of correctional work with adequate resources and accountability.

2. Centralized Coordination Mechanism

A national body for prison education, similar to UGC or NCERT, should be created to ensure standardized curriculum development, quality checks, and coordinated resource distribution across various state systems, acting on the Mulla Committee's suggestion for a National Commission on Prisons (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016; SPRF, 2024). This body would help share knowledge between states, develop national standards, and reduce current geographical inequalities in educational access.

3. Performance Metrics and Accountability

All prisons must collect systematic data on enrollment, completion, credentials, post-release jobs, and repeat offenses to enable evidence-based evaluation of policies and programs (Sharma, 2025). Standardized reporting tied to performance-based funding would encourage quality programs while providing data to identify effective practices and show the return on investment.

Programmatic Enhancements

1. Expanded IGNOU-NIOS Partnership

The successful collaborations with IGNOU and NIOS that have enrolled over 20,000 prisoners must be expanded to assure sufficient support infrastructure—study materials, tutors, exam facilities, and motivational programs—in every central and district jail (Singh & Dhull, 2019; India Vision Foundation, 2024). Establishing Special Study Centres in all facilities would make higher education accessible to incarcerated individuals.

2. Market-Aligned Vocational Training

Vocational programs should be redesigned based on labor market studies to ensure training aligns with real job opportunities, not outdated trades. This involves partnering with industry groups and employers to create relevant curricula and post-release job paths (Madhava, 2017; Sharma, 2025). Certifications recognized by industry can boost job

chances and credibility after release.

3. *Technology Integration*

Comprehensive digital literacy programs need to prepare prisoners for workplaces that rely on technology through computer training, following suitable security measures (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010; Sharma, 2025). Educational technologies like recorded lectures, software, and online platforms in controlled settings would improve teaching methods while addressing the digital gap faced by released prisoners.

4. *Holistic Curriculum*

Educational programs must focus on cognitive growth, vocational skills, social abilities, and emotional control through comprehensive subjects like life skills, financial literacy, conflict resolution, parenting, and health education, along with academic content (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016). Integrated psychological counseling would help deal with trauma and motivation issues while fostering identity change necessary for avoiding repeat offenses.

5. *Peer Education Programs*

Training educated prisoners as peer tutors effectively utilizes their cultural awareness and credibility while addressing teacher shortages in a cost-efficient way (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2010). Incentives like certificates, reduced sentences, and job references would encourage participation, and organized training would ensure teaching competence.

Infrastructure Development

1. *Dedicated Educational Facilities*

Prison complexes should have dedicated buildings for educational activities, equipped with proper classrooms, lighting, ventilation, and teaching materials instead of makeshift spaces (Probono India, 2024; Sharma, 2025). This dedicated infrastructure shows institutional commitment and creates stable learning environments crucial for adult learners with past educational challenges.

2. Modern Library Systems

Every facility must have well-stocked libraries with up-to-date materials, quiet study spaces, extended hours, and computer access to support self-directed learning and intellectual growth (Kumar & Singh, 2018). Libraries offer constructive ways to pass time, reducing mental decline from forced idleness while supporting formal studies.

3. Vocational Workshops

Workshops must be properly equipped with industry-standard tools and safety gear to facilitate real skill development applicable to external jobs (Madhava, 2017; Sharma, 2025). Regular updates of equipment will keep training relevant with changing workplace technologies, making vocational programs credible and effective.

4. Address Overcrowding

Education reform needs to address the overcrowding that exceeds 118 percent nationwide since it hampers the educational setup and results in conditions not suitable for learning (NCRB, 2024; Sharma, 2025). Speeding up the processing of undertrials, broadening non-custodial sentences, and building new facilities would create humane conditions necessary for effective programming.

Personnel Development

1. Competitive Compensation

Salaries that are competitive with regular education jobs must be offered to attract qualified teachers, trainers, and counselors, along with additional pay for working in challenging correctional environments (Sharma, 2025). Investing in human resources through competitive salaries is essential for program quality.

2. Specialized Training

Educators must undergo mandatory training in correctional education principles, trauma-informed teaching, adult learning methods, and cultural awareness to prepare for the unique challenges faced by incarcerated learners (Probono India, 2024; Sharma, 2025). Establishing training institutes and certification standards would professionalize the field

and improve educational quality.

3. Career Pathways

Clear opportunities for advancement and professional development programs would help reduce burnout and turnover while attracting dedicated professionals (Sharma, 2025). Recognition through awards and professional honors would validate educators' contributions and enhance the status of correctional education.

4. Mental Health Integration

Counselors and psychologists must address issues like trauma, learning disabilities, addiction, and motivation struggles that affect educational participation (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016; Probono India, 2024). Bringing together mental health and educational services would create synergies where mental healing supports learning, and achievements improve well-being.

After-Care and Reintegration

1. Rehabilitation Committees

The Discharged Prisoners' After-Care and Rehabilitation Committees suggested in the Model Prison Manual 2016 must become operational with sufficient funding, trained staff, and coordination with social services (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016). Effective after-care needs proactive involvement, personalized transition plans, and ongoing support during high-risk periods after release.

2. Employment Placement

Dedicated placement services should actively connect educated ex-prisoners with job opportunities through job matching, interview coaching, and follow-up support (Visser et al., 2008). Programs that offer employer incentives like tax reductions and wage subsidies could help reduce hiring bias and create reliable job opportunities.

3. Educational Continuity

Formal agreements must ensure that programs can continue after release without losing

credits or facing bureaucratic hurdles, including options for tuition aid, counseling, and mentoring (Singh & Dhull, 2019). Ongoing connections with prison education staff can provide support during crucial transition times.

4. Entrepreneurship Support

Comprehensive backing for starting small businesses through microfinance, business education, mentorship, and market connections offers alternatives to traditional jobs for those facing hiring bias (Madhava, 2017). Specialized incubation programs would give the necessary help to entrepreneurs involved in the justice system.

5. Stigma Reduction

Public awareness campaigns that showcase successful rehabilitation should challenge negative stereotypes through personal stories, research data, and promotion of second-chance jobs (Probono India, 2024). Involving media, business groups, and community organizations would help reduce discrimination that undermines rehabilitation efforts.

Research and Evaluation

1. Longitudinal Research

Thorough studies tracking participants and control groups for 5-10 years after release must produce clear evidence on the long-term impact of education in the Indian context (Sharma, 2025). Publishing findings in peer-reviewed journals would build research capability and guide data-driven policies.

2. Cost-Benefit Analysis

Comprehensive economic evaluations should show returns on investment through savings in the correctional system, tax revenue, reduced crime, and broader social advantages (Davis et al., 2013). Analyses specific to India would provide strong reasons for increased funding to policymakers focused on fiscal accountability.

3. Standardized Evaluation

Consistent frameworks that assess curriculum quality, teaching effectiveness, completion rates, and outcomes using common measures would allow for systematic comparisons and

continuous improvements (Sharma, 2025). Developing evaluation capacity within the correctional system would shift practices from "institutional inadequacy" toward data-driven effectiveness.

4. Best Practice Documentation

Successful programs like Tihar's partnerships and Nagpur's IGNOU model should be documented through case studies analyzing what worked and what didn't (India Vision Foundation, 2024; Singh & Dhull, 2019). Knowledge-sharing platforms and national awards could promote innovation and recognize excellence.

Conclusion

The evidence clearly shows that education in prison helps rehabilitate prisoners in India, though systemic challenges limit its impact. Educational programs have significant positive effects, including reduced rates of reoffending, better job opportunities, improved behavior, and mental changes. Successful programs at Tihar Jail, Yerawada Central Prison, Bangalore Central Prison, and IGNOU's nationwide initiative prove the rehabilitative benefits of education.

Prison education is not just a kind act; it is also a smart economic move. Each prisoner who is rehabilitated through education reduces future costs from reoffending, victimization, and social issues, while positively contributing through jobs and taxes. The effects can also impact future generations, breaking cycles where the children of prisoners become offenders. The way forward involves changing prison education from an optional program to a basic right, supported by the right resources, skilled personnel, quality standards, and comprehensive systems that support inmates from incarceration through reintegration. Models from other countries show that ambitious goals can be reached with strong commitment.

India must view prison education not as charity for criminals, but as crucial for public safety, economic growth, and social justice.

As Mahatma Gandhi noted, prisoners are people with "diseased minds" who want to be healed, and education might be the cure. The real question isn't whether education aids rehabilitation, but whether India will invest enough to unlock this transformative potential on a larger scale. The answer will not only shape the futures of hundreds of thousands of prisoners but also affect the safety and prosperity of society at large.

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