

Services Dispensed By Prisons Staff in India: Challenges and Impact

*Dr. Razdha Parveen

* Department of Sociology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh: 202002.

Email: razdhaparveen@gmail.com

Abstract

The functioning of Indian prisons has always been in question and certainly it is, in the present day working environment as well. The functioning of prisons has a direct link with the performance of its staff. The prisoners and prisons staff constitute a group within which their behaviour with each other as well as with the authorities is of great importance. Prisons staff have several roles with a focus on control and security within a high risk environment balanced with health care for people with complex characteristics. They have to dispense their services in the prevailing environment of overcrowding, congestion, and inadequacy of prisons staff. They have to face many times the different attitudes and threats of hardcore professional criminals. Thus, the prison authorities find maintaining law and order as one of the most difficult and challenging task in the prisons. These challenges affect not only their performance appraisal but also their

own wellbeing and family life. In this backdrop this paper attempts to discuss the adverse conditions in which prisons staff dispense their services and highlight the challenges that impact on their performance of duties as well as of their all wellbeing.

Key Words: *Prisons Staff, Prisoners, Prison Environment, Services, Challenges and Impact.*

Introduction

Prison administration occupies an important place in the police system, law and order system as well as criminal justice system. As per the constitution prison is a State subject therefore, rules and regulations governing jails vary state to state. Changing time is having their effect on the jail and its operation. Social change in the community has resulted in changes in the composition of the jail population. The criminal justice system is also affected and in turn, the

circumstances of jail commitments. The trend towards developing community programs for jail prisoners is changing the function of the jail bringing new goals and high visibility. In the face of these changes the administration in order to gain the confidence of the community, must be capable of demonstrating competence in the numerous skills required to operate a modern jail. The qualities of the prisons staff are key to successful management of prisons. The role of staff can play in establishing and maintaining a secure, safe, well ordered and humane prison, with a regime conducive to the rehabilitation of prisoners is to a large extent more important than the material conditions of imprisonment (Goel, 2014).

Effective prison system provide health care to a standard equivalent to that available in the community which can only be achieved when prison management and staff all understand and promote health and health care within a healthy prisons approach. Good health in prisons cannot flourish without an environment of safe custody and good order as well as without prisoners and staff feeling safe. There is a

significant opportunity for staff to create a healthy prison system that benefits prisoners, staff and the wider community because good prison health is essential to good public health. Further, prison is a place where detainees live and staff work often each group perceives that they lead separate lives, but prisoners and staff have many aspects in common often similar social backgrounds, and in small communities possibly similar social networks. In prisons staff and prisoners share the same space, air for breathing and water for washing and drinking and face the same physical hazards of the prison environment. Prisons staff have several roles with a focus on control and security within a high risk environment balanced with health care for people with complex characteristics and problems (Enggist et al, 2014).

Traditionally prison systems have been regarded particularly by the staff who works within them, as static and hierarchical organizations. They are seen as static in that their objectives are clear and unchanging. The task of prison staff is to implement that sentence in a decent and humane manner. In so far as this task never changes, the prison



system can be described as a static organization. Secondly, prisons system are hierarchical in that they are disciplined organizations in which orders are passed down from above and the responsibility of staff at lower levels is simply to obey these orders. It has sometimes been argued that this organizational structure is necessary because of the operational demands of prison life. It can be said that to a certain extent prisons reflect some of the values of the society in which they exist. The use that a country makes of imprisonment is likely to affect the internal management of prisons. When prisons are overcrowded and under-resourced management may well be restricted to providing the basic necessities of life for those who are under their care. In addition, custodial settings are high risk environments. This is reflected in the prominent place risk management has in inmate management and in correctional system governance arrangements. Despite the significant structural, managerial, supervisory and operational effort directed at controlling the risks of the custodial setting, periodically incidents occur in which a system may fail, or revealed to have been inadequate, or where an individual may have

let down the many and which all would rather not have occurred. These incidents may have tragic results (http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/managing_prisons_0.pdf).

Structural Composition of Prison Administration in India

The structure and organizational aspects of Indian prisons have not altered much since colonial times. If changes are made, they are simply tacked on to the existing system, sometimes ineptly and awkwardly, without any change in the ethos or culture of prison management. Prison management requires an ethos that differs from that of the police or the civil service and yet the top jobs in the department are reserved for police and civil service persons in the hope that the department would then be highly regarded in the general criminal justice structure. Managing prisons must have its own philosophy and importing senior staff from other services cannot be a substitute for the culture that needs to be in place to guide the department. Lower staff is variously recruited and trained in different states, and contemporary thinking about prisons all

over the world is out of their reach. Adding more scattered and fragmented laws cannot substitute for an updated national prison document with inputs from state functionaries and informed members of the civil society who realize the gravity of assigning prisons to the warehouse status that it has had so far. Insignificant attempts by particular states to improve prison practices merely to earn acclaim as (progressive) winners among competing states, have proved to be counter-productive and misleading for an ill informed public (Shankardass, 2012).

Prison administration has basically three levels. The **management level** (IG/DIG/DG), the **supervisory level** (the superintendent/deputy or assistant superintendent/jailors etc) and the **grassroots level** (Head Warden/Wardens etc.) The officers at **management level**, majority of them are on deputation from the police service, consider this as a punishment posting and are generally too demoralized to contribute significantly to the building up of the department. Most of them are merely time servers. The **supervisory level**, consisting of staff belonging to the prison

service, too is demoralized because of poor conditions, lack of career opportunities and low public esteem. At the **grassroots level**, the department has people who remain inside the prison walls, interacting with prisoners most of the time. This factor, combined with their pathetic service conditions, has the effect of dehumanizing them. Sometimes socio-structural circumstances forced them to join hands with criminals.

The management of prisons is a fascinating subject for study. There is a wide literature on the theory and practice of management in general and also on the management of large public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, but comparatively little has been written on the management of prisons. This is partly because the world of prisons itself remains relatively closed. It is also because until quite recently it was not acknowledged that there is a particular set of skills required to manage prisons properly. In several countries the management of the prison system was, and in some cases such as India remains even today, the responsibility of the police force. A posting to take charge of a



prison often came about as an informal sanction as a result of some failing elsewhere. Bright police officers made sure that they completed their spell as a prison manager as quickly as possible before being transferred back to mainstream police duties (http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/managing_prisons_0.pdf).

Prisons Staff Working and Service Conditions

The protection and promotion of human rights in prisons is linked to the service and working conditions of the prisons staff, though it is also stressed that the poor working conditions could not be regarded as an excuse for violation of prisoners rights. Central to the prison administration is the problem of demoralization and lack of motivation of the prisons staff. The conditions in which the lower levels of the prisons staff live are in some cases worse than those of the prisoners. This is an important factor contributing to the poor functioning of the prisons, apathy of the prisons staff towards the plight of the prisoners, corruption and the overall deprivation of their basic amenities. Such

substandard conditions of service produce a culture of frustration and dehumanization in the service which often spills over and gets translated into aggression on prisoners. The conditions of work create an environment that discourage initiative leadership qualities and enlightened rights based approach. In common with all other large public institutions, prison systems are influenced in a variety of respects by the environments in which they exist.

Prisons vary greatly in their purpose and nature. There are low-medium and high-security prisons, closed and open prisons; prisons specifically for men, women and juveniles among others. Some prisons accommodate thousands of detainees while others house only small numbers. Each prison has its own atmosphere and set of shared values about the way things are done. While in some importance is placed on professionalism, respect and rehabilitation, others are characterized by a climate of anxiety, distrust and abuse. It is useful to keep in mind that the organizational culture of a prison has a significant influence on the working conditions and experiences of prison officers employed within it. A study



aimed at measuring the quality of life in prison observed that there was much similarity in how prisoners, staff and managers described the positive ethos of the prison. The ethos, structure and practices of these institutions naturally influence the conditions in which prison officers work.

A common aspect of prison culture is that prison officers see themselves as part of an unvalued, unappreciated occupational group. This often includes a perception that managers are bureaucrats who do not understand the nature of the operational work, the dangers and difficulties involved, and that prison management does not properly support officers. Trust, legitimacy and fairness are as important for prison officers as they are for prisoners. Professional leadership by senior managers is therefore of key importance. Prison officers frequently have a strong *esprit de corps*, which emphasizes solidarity with fellow officers. There can be significant peer pressure from prison officers as a group about *the way things are done*, and officers who do not conform may suffer. In extreme cases, prison officers can suffer violence from colleagues as part of their training or

initiation rites as a way of socializing them into a punitive culture. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR) considers that when state agents responsible for the custody of persons deprived of their liberty are themselves subjected to torture or cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment by their own colleagues, the system is being turned on its head and distorted. Discrimination is common within prisons and is likely to affect staff as well as prisoners. Minorities may be discriminated against by managers, peers and prisoners. This can range from direct abuse to indirect forms of discrimination such as racist or other discriminatory language being tolerated by managers, or to simply not being professionally encouraged or being overlooked for training and promotions. This not only violates the human rights of staff, but also affects their motivation, attrition and consequently how they treat prisoners.

Over the last few decades, an increasing number of women prison officers have been employed, including in men's prisons around the world, with recognized benefits. However, women prison officers

often experience gender-based discrimination, in particular in the masculine environment of a prison. Studies have documented that this includes remarks about their appearance, sexual joking and teasing, false rumors about sexual involvement with inmates or other staff, obscene phone calls, and constant reminders of their *female status*. Women prison staff may also be disadvantaged professionally because of a mistaken perception that they are unable to perform prison officer work to the same standard as men (<https://www.apt.ch/content/filesres/factsheet-3staff-working-conditions-en.pdf>).

As far as the vast majority of the public is concerned, prisons are a closed, unknown world and this secretiveness increases their fascination. This can have important consequences. Interest in prisons is only aroused when something goes wrong and there is a riot or an escape. In that respect, the success of the prison is often measured in the eyes of the public by the absence of failure. As far as prisons staff is concerned in many respects they are a forgotten group of public servants, largely unrecognized in the criminal justice sector.

They carry out their duties away from the public view. In common with prisoners, they are hidden behind high prison walls. In a alarming number of countries they are poorly trained, badly paid and are given little respect from their governments, from other public officials or from the rest of society

(http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/managing_prisons_0.pdf). The service conditions are worse at the lower rank level. It may also be due to the factor that the training of the prisons staff has been completely neglected by the prison department. Wherever training is available it is in the hands of those members of the police and prisons staff who are found redundant for active service and are transferred to the training department. The deplorable service conditions of the prisons staff and their lack of motivation and self esteem seem to logically extend into a culture that encourages corruptions and malpractices. There is a lack of mechanisms that could ensure an element of transparency and accountability in the prison administration. Further, an important factor responsible for lack of follow up action has been the absence of political will, leading

finally to bureaucratic apathy towards the requirements of prison administration. This apathy is reflected in the scarcity of funds spared by the Governments out of their annual budgets for prison administration (<https://www.scribd.com/document/21248755/Prison-Staff-Problems>).

Challenges Faced by Prisons Staff

The growing scale of penal institutions worldwide, and rising expectations from and duties imposed on them, means that urgent attention should be given to the pressure on staff. Current problems that affect staff and prisoners alike include *overcrowding, intercultural conflicts, violence and gang crime, language problems drug use, ageing buildings in poor repair* and, frequently *insufficient staff levels with poor training* to support them. The problems of the rising *crime rate*, the newly emerging forms of *social deviance*, as also the inadequacy of the traditional means of *social control* on the one hand and an increasing *stress* on the protection of *rights of offenders* on the other have cast on the Government and the institute and an onerous responsibility devising more effective means of social defense. There is a dilemma whether these

function of staff as per the wishes of the political master under whom they function or for the people or the purpose for which they have been appointed. In these paradoxical situations, these force work very less than the potential in them. They are always thinking as what to do and what not to do. This indecisiveness provides the wrong elements in the society to prevail upon them and reduce their efficiency of performance (Goel, 2014). Every day from morning to night they are over stressed. Such a situation is very harmful for society and the country. The need of hour is to make serious effort to change the structural and cultural pattern of prison system.

The quality of prison life is affected by pressure on prisons staff, and the extra demands on staff caused by ever-increasing number can lead to cancellation of work and can limit the opportunities for inmates to engage in useful activities i.e., educational programmes and in leisure activities. As well as affecting the day to day quality of life in prisons, poor conditions exacerbated by overcrowding, have been linked with prison disturbances and with increased *suicides* within prisons. This condition also

leads to the fear of *full-scale riot* that occurred time to time in prison. Another aspect of prison life that is affected by increased numbers and poor conditions is *prison security*. As well as affecting the living standards within prisons, large rises in the prison population make it more difficult for prisons staff to supervise and work with prisoners in tackling reoffending (Marsh, 2004).

Further, a traditional jail environment cultivates a fear-hate syndrome which means that the inmates and the staff hate each other. This happens because of the fact that in the traditional jail setting, the basic inequality between the prisoners and the staff is emphasized and there is undue subjugation of the personality of the inmates. The prison authorities find maintaining law and order as one of the most difficult and problematic task in the men prisons. Prisons are also sometimes places of violence and danger. Violence is often takes place not only between inmates but also between inmates and prisons staff (Madhurima, 2009). Studies have drawn attention to the paradox of high levels of discontent not due primarily to stress from

working with prisons, but to organizational conditions and relationships between authorities and staff. Studies conducted on the issues of the health of prison staff have outlined problems arising from stress, particularly reflecting on the interaction between work and distinct factors in the prison setting.

Moreover, Erving Goffman recognized that prison staffs work in a closed and total system, with a high degree of professional isolation. Strict routines and regimes, hierarchy, depersonalized relationships and bureaucracy serve to remove some amount of control for staff over their work circumstances. Communication between authorities and staff in prisons and old methods of personnel management compound these problems. Staff members need support to define their roles and identities with respect to the prisoners and to work through the divide between the necessary activities of security and basic services and growing expectations for their involvement in the care and rehabilitation process.

Prison systems also often fail to recruit diverse staff, representational of the



prison population, despite evidence that this increases the legitimacy of the organization and can bring other concrete benefits such as improved communication and cooperation with prisoners. Sometimes, new officers are deliberately placed in some of the most difficult roles or shifts in a prison. In order to cope, they can feel forced to abandon principles and values conveyed in trainings and accept the practices of a less respectful, punitive or even abusive prison culture (http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/managing_prisons0.pdf).

Impact on the Prisons Staff

Prisons can be hazardous locations. They are crowded and can be inadequately staffed while holding the most dangerous individuals in the community are capable of harm to others, including other prisoners and members of staff. The net effect of prisons that do not address these realities shows in stress that affects people mentally, physically and cognitively. Adverse events and long-term poor working environments can result in post-traumatic stress disorder and similar conditions. While absence

levels, vacancy rates and staff turnover may rise or remain high, other matters (such as misuse of coffee, cigarettes and alcohol, poor eating habits and use of medication) are also indicators of a poorly functioning workplace (Marsh, 2004).

Research conducted in the UK indicates that, in summary, the effects on staff of work in the custodial setting manifest themselves in three ways: cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally, and that these effects can be revealed not just in the custodial setting, but also in the personal and social lives of Correctional Officers and within the person.

Cognitive Effects: Correctional Officers responses to their environment include the development of a rational and pragmatic approach, born of experience, which places a premium on ending each day without incident or harm. Over time, Officers also develop a realistic assessment of what their work can achieve, no doubt informed by the recycling of familiar faces through the criminal justice system. Included in the cognitive effects on staff of prison life is the well founded belief that

their work is stressful, undervalued and misunderstood.

Emotional Effects: There are emotional impacts which take their toll on the quality of the life and well-being of the Correctional Officer. Frequently Officers become more hardened, cynical and detached which serves to reinforce their emotional resilience when confronted by traumatizing events, such as deaths, self harm incidents or assaults. Managing this is clearly important; being too detached over an extended period of time may numb some to indifference or humanity. Maladaptive processes which may be employed by Officers to control their emotions can add to their stress loads and to those of their families, who may bear the brunt of Officers' fears, anger, frustrations and concerns.

Behavioral Effects: While traumatic incidents have emotional impacts on Correctional Officers the unchanging ordinary life of the custodial setting generates other behavioral responses. These include the transference of security related instinctive behaviors into their personal lives, such as an habitual concern to lock

doors behind them, a constant assessment of their environment, a sensitivity to the sounds and indicators of impending trouble and the mental rehearsal of possible interventions. The way in which Correctional Officers communicate with inmates also influences the manner in which they communicate with and react to others outside the custodial setting

(<http://www.custodialinspector.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Accesible%20Report%20No%201%20DRAFT.pdf>).

Prison Officer Wellbeing: Prison is often a stressful and hazardous place to work and the need for staff to be aware of and to maintain their health is, therefore strong. Prison systems can experience increasing absence rates due to stress, burn out and alcohol or drug use, often connected with the conditions of work. The combination of poor health and prolonged absence from work often leads to early retirement or to retirement with physical and mental health problems, at significant costs to individuals their families and the prison system (Goel, 2014). Working in a prison is a demanding role and has a significant

emotional impact on staff. Prisons are punitive and often violent environments, with a climate of hopelessness, anxiety, fear and distress. Prison officers may experience an ever-present risk of assault, and at the same time have to deal with challenging situations such as self-harm and suicide attempts. Working day to day in such an environment has its toll, with documented effects including depression, a sense of isolation, poor physical health, sleepless nights, difficulties relaxing, bringing the job home, and emotional desensitization, sometimes resulting in alcohol and drug dependency

(www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf-file/ooo5/249188/prisons-and-health.pdf)?ua=1.

Alongside the broader emotional impact, prison officers can experience high levels of work-related stress. While traditionally considered mere turn-keys (people who just lock up and unlock prisoners in their cells) now their job is much more complex. Feeling overstrained and unable to find the necessary time for the different tasks required are common sources of stress. Some prison officers report having

difficulties knowing how to reconcile the two main aims of their work: custody, i.e., maintaining security and control, and care i.e. building relationships with prisoners and helping them to deal with their offending behaviour. Feeling unrecognized and unsupported by management can add to stress levels. In some countries, the introduction of a performance culture has led to increased anxiety among prison officers due to the shift to a less secure, more efficiency-focused work environment. Further, an inadequate staff/prisoner ratio hampers the ability of prison officers to carry out their functions and creates an insecure environment within prisons. Inadequate staffing levels can mean staffs are expected to undertake significant amounts of overtime and very long shifts in order to maintain basic security, which can lead to high levels of stress in staff and their premature burnout. The use of technology in prison settings can support officers, but also does have negative implications, for example if resulting in reduction of staff levels or in the monotonous duty of only one officer to monitor a screen for a whole day/shift

(https://www.apr.ch/content/files_res/factsheet-3_staff-working-conditions-en.pdf).

In a study, conducted in 2011 by National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Bangalore, India, it was found that a sizeable number (29.2%) of prison staffs was overweight. They were suffer from the symptoms causing moderate to high levels of stress included ulcer symptoms, headaches, worries, aches and pains inability to relax, depression and sadness, tiredness, anger/irritation, reduced sleep and backache. Majority of them were experienced high levels of overall stress, attributed to personal safety concerns, difficulties in managing prisoners, family problems, and fear of suspension, financial problems and insecurity of transfer. There morale was low because of job stress. Many of them experienced specific physical health problems however very less number were on regular medication (Math, 2011).

In many contexts, prisons staff receives low salaries which may also be paid irregularly, unsurprisingly impacting negatively on the performance of their duties. Prisons are sometimes located in isolated places, away from urban

settlements, making it difficult for prison officers to access services and facilities such as shops, doctors, social activities and schools for their children. In some contexts, prison officers are required to live in a community made up only of other prison officers, making it difficult for themselves and their families to lead a normal, diversified social life. They may also be required to transfer regularly to work in different prisons, with all the challenges of relocation

(http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/repositories/downloads/managing_prisons_0.pdf).

Suggestions

This paper forwards some suggestions to improve the service and working conditions of prisons staff.

- The State Government should periodically review the requirements of different types of staff required, including medical and take steps to remove the shortage.
- A conscious policy towards the induction of more women in the prison administration is necessary to bring

about gender balance and sensitivity within the system.

- The pay-scales of lower ranks in the prison department need to be reviewed. The State Governments should not downgrade the posts of the prison department by prescribing lower pay scales for them as compared to the posts of the other department particularly when the recruitment to these posts is done by the State Public Service Commission on the basis of a combined recruitment test.
- Training is necessary to organize periodic training programmes and refresher courses for all levels in the prison administration. All State Governments should establish training institutions exclusively for the basic as well as in-service training of the prison staff. Prison staff training and addressing their needs should focus on improving work conditions, improving staff morale and cohesion, better communication with prisoners and greater sensitivity to their needs.
- There should be wider moves to alter public attitudes towards prison. management methods and structures in

some prison systems need to be modernized to allow staff more control and influence over the circumstances of their work and to enable them to challenge and influence management.

- The healthy workplace should be a realistic goal for all employers, and most countries require prison systems to comply with health and safety laws, regulations and conventions. It is fundamental that prison systems have safe systems of work and that they recognize hazards and mitigate risks.
- A member of prison staff who sustains an injury as a result of his or her work should have access to prompt and expert treatment, suitable rehabilitation and a programme for return to work that suits his or her abilities or takes residual health problems into account.

Conclusion

After looking the prevailing culture and ethos of prison management it can be said that prison system need a revolutionary change to compete with the change taking place in the modern society. Social change

in the community has resulted into changes in composition of the prison population. The criminal justice system is also affected and in turn, the circumstances of prison commitments. In the face of these changes, the administration in order to gain the confidence of the community must be capable of demonstrating competence in the numerous skills required to operate a modern prison. Successful prison systems ensure safe custody and good order for detainees as well as for staff. It also provides opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration on release back into the community. Prison system should be in a manner which would prove equally beneficial to the detainees as well as for staff members and reflect the vary soul of an institution which is established to reformation and rehabilitation of distorted personality of society, not to deform the good or pleasant member of community.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Goel, S. L. (2014). *Police governance and administration*. New Delhi: Regal Publications
- [2]. Enggist, S. Moller, L. Galea, G. Udesen (2014). *Prisons and health*. World

health organization, Europe. Retrieved from www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf-file/ooo5/249188/prisons-and-health.pdf?ua=1

- [3]. http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/managing_prisons_0.pdf

- [4]. Shankardass, R. D. (2012). *Of Women 'Inside' Prison Voices from India*. London: Routledge.

- [5]. <https://www.apr.ch/content/filesres/factsheet-3staff-working-conditions-en.pdf>.

- [6]. <https://www.scribd.com/doc/21248755/Prison-Staff-Problems>.

- [7]. Marsh, I. (2004). *Criminal justice: an introduction to philosophies, theories and practice*. London and New York: Routledge.

- [8]. Madhurima, (2009). *Women crime and prison life*. New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications.

- [9]. <http://www.custodialinspector.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Accessible%20Report%20No%201%20DRAFT.pdf>.

- [10]. Math, B. S. (2011). *Mental health and substance use problems in prisons*. National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences: Bangalore retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/1185496/mental_health_and_sustance_use_problems_in_prisons_the_bangalore_prison_mental_health_study_local_lessons_for_national_action.