



February 10, 2023

Jail Mail Prison Reforms in Karnataka: Our Impact Story*

Dear friends,

CHRI's Prison Reforms Programme hopes that the year 2023 has brought in hope, happiness, and new aspirations for you.

For our first newsletter in 2023, we want to share a positive story of reforms in prisons of Karnataka - an example of successful collaboration between the prison department, state legal services authority and civil society to initiate sustainable reforms within prisons.

Our journey: In 2018, Karnataka State Legal Services Authority (SLSA), in collaboration with the Karnataka Department of Prisons and Correctional Services (hereinafter, the Prison Department) commissioned CHRI to prepare a study on prison conditions in Karnataka. Thereafter, CHRI undertook a comprehensive review of prison conditions through visits to all the 51 operational prisons (9 Central, 21 District, 14 Taluk, 1 Open and 6 Revenue prisons) in 2019. CHRI also sought data from the prison administration, and interacted with prisoners, prison officers and secretaries of the District Legal Services Authorities. The findings of the review have been encapsulated into a **report 'Inside Karnataka Prisons'**, which was launched by Justice U U Lalit, former judge Supreme Court of India and the then Executive Chairman, National Legal Services Authority, in April 2022.

Structure of the Report: The report is divided into two parts – **Volume 1** provides for thematic analysis and documents the standards, issues of concern and provides

a set of practical recommendations for the consideration of the stakeholders on the various themes including prison resources, daily regime, healthcare facilities, visitation, legal aid, parole, rehabilitation, vulnerable groups, etc. **Volume 2** contains the prison-wise reports of the 51 prisons. The findings of the report were duly validated through eight zonal meetings with the prison department and the SLSA.

10 Key Findings and the Impact: As stated above, during the period 2019 to 2022, the prison department undertook several affirmative steps to implement the recommendations that emerged from the review. These are summarised below:

- 1. Prisoners living in inhuman conditions in Revenue Prisons:** The report highlighted the inhuman conditions of six revenue prisons, administered by the revenue department.

Impact: Based on an urgent report by CHRI's study team, the prison department issued directions for inmates in these prisons to be shifted to the nearest Central/District prisons. At the policy level, a proposal has also been moved by the Prison Department to transfer the management of all revenue prisons to the department which is pending at the State Government.

- 2. Lack of prison capacity and infrastructural facilities:** The report highlighted that 33 of the 51 prisons were constructed before the year 2000 and required upgradation to accommodate facilities such as legal aid clinics, video-conferencing systems, CCTV cameras and western toilets.

Impact: Karnataka's prison department has undertaken the creation of an additional prisoner capacity of 5,500 at a cost of Rs. 450 crores with plans to construct new prisons and to renovate the older ones. All the prisons in the state have now been provided with the several safety measures, infrastructural facilities and Fire Fighting Systems.

- 3. Lack of hygiene and sanitation:** The number of toilets and bathrooms were reported to be highly inadequate with the toilet-prisoner ratio being 1:200 in two sub-prisons. No central jail had the adequate ratio as per the Model Prison Manual, 2016.

Impact: By April 2022, Karnataka state government had sanctioned Rs. 5.55 crores for constructing 60 additional toilets and 322 bathrooms, at par with the standards prescribed in the Model Prison Manual 2016.

- 4. Lack of clean and safe water:** The report highlighted that 50% of district prisons and 67% of taluk prisons did not have a water treatment plant.

Impact: By April 2022, Karnataka Prison Department confirmed that all prisons were equipped with operational RO water plants.

- 5. Inadequate facilities for communication with outside world:** The interview rooms were found to be in deplorable conditions with phone facilities only available in Central prisons.

Impact: All central prisons have now upgraded interview rooms with glass partitions and intercom phones on both sides. The 'prison call system' is also available in district prisons and Taluk prisons now use landlines and CUG (Closed User Group) facilities for prisoners' communication with families.

- 6. Lack of prisoners' access to health facilities:** The data showed that only one medical personnel, including visiting medical officers, was available for every 250-300 inmates. There was a dearth of necessary medical personnel (regular doctors, specialists, nurses and lab technicians) to even administer the NHRC proforma of medical examination upon admission of a new inmate. Ambulances were available in less than half the prisons in the state.

Impact: By a government order (vide GO HD 3 PRA 2017, dated 01.08.2019) new posts of 7 chief medical officers, 6 psychiatrists, 20 staff nurse and 20 new posts for psychiatric counsellors have been sanctioned for the state prisons. In addition, 34 paramedical officers from the Health and Family Welfare Department will be on deputation to fill the existing vacancies for medical staff in the prisons, by another GO (HD 19 PRA 2017), dated 25.07.2019. Further, a proposal to transfer healthcare facilities to the Department of Health and Family is under consideration by the State Government which is aimed at providing adequate access to medical facilities to prisoners in the state.

- 7. Lack of work opportunities and rehabilitation programs for convicts:** Prisons in the state were unable to provide sufficient employment to those able and willing to work due to the outdated nature of opportunities available in prison. Additionally, several prisoners were unable to open bank accounts and consequently were unable to secure wages.

Impact: Karnataka is among the few States in the country to enact the [Prison Development Board Act](#) in October 2021. The Act aims, "to contemplate the appropriate correctional programs which can enable the prisoners to re-assimilate in the society, to develop the prison industries and formulate plan for modernization of prisons and job-oriented programmes including technical programs in different areas and trades to earn the incentives and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." Further, Jan Dhan accounts have been opened for all convicts in all prisons and a proposal to increase the wages of prisoners is currently pending with the State Government.

- 8. Inadequate staff accommodation & lack of attention to staff welfare:** Not only prison barracks but staff accommodation too was found in a deplorable state in several districts. Further, almost all the personnel expressed high levels of stress due to the closed work environment and the arduous tasks with no formal grievance redressal mechanism available for them.

Impact: The Police Housing Corporation has been requested to construct 300 new staff quarters in different districts in the states, particularly where the quarters are old and in dilapidated condition. For stress management, prison personnel are engaged in yoga classes through *Navchethana* initiative. The DIGs North and South periodically visit prisons in their jurisdiction to redress the grievances of prison staff.

- 9. Lack of monitoring of prisons:** As of 31 December 2018, only 52% of the prisons had Non-official Visitors (NoVs) appointed to serve in the Board of Visitors (BoVs), and only one in five prisons in the state had a functional BoV.

Impact: As of April 2022, the BoV meetings by official visitors are taking place in all prisons regularly. A proposal to appoint the new NOV is also pending with the State Government. Additionally, the Principal District and Sessions Judges, DLSA Secretaries and the Chairpersons and Members of various statutory bodies are regularly visiting prisons and using the CHRI's Prison Inspection Formats for prison inspections. The reports are submitted once every two months to the SLSA.

- 10. Issues regarding prison regime:** Due to shortage of staff, prisoners were locked up for longer hours in some prisons. Not all prisons had the space for a separate admission room.

Impact: As of April 2022, separate admission rooms are now demarcated in all prisons. Efforts are made in all prisons to segregate young inmates from older prisoners, in separate barracks. All prisons now have increased staff and the lock-up hours as per the provisions of the manual are being followed.

For further details, please read the Executive Summary of the report (attached) and [Volume 1](#) and [Volume 2](#) of the report. The reports are also available on the website of the Karnataka State Legal Services Authority at <https://kslsa.kar.nic.in/library.html>

What can you do?

- **As representative of the State Legal Services Authority**, initiate an all-prisons study in your state/UT to have an assessment of the current prison conditions and coordinate with other stakeholders of the criminal justice system to usher prison reforms.

- **As representative of the Prison Headquarters**, initiate a series of micro-studies on different aspects of prisons to understand the policy and implementation gaps in-order-to create an action plan with short-term and long-term strategies to address some systemic issues plaguing the system.
- **As representative of the civil society**, seek information, either through an application under the Right to Information Act 2005 or by initiating collaborative research to document evidence-based work and advocate for step-by-step change on the ground.
- **As representative of media**, raise the voices of those behind bars by regularly reporting on issues concerning prison conditions and also write about the good practices prevalent in prisons.

Please feel free to write to us at chriprisonprog@gmail.com with your comments and suggestions.

With best regards,

Madhurima Dhanuka
Programme Head, Prison Reforms Program
Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
3rd floor, 55A, Siddhartha Chambers I,
Kalu Sarai, New Delhi-110016 Tel: +91-11-
4318 0200, 9331127001, 9748927001

**This jail mail has been prepared by Sugandha Shankar, Senior Programme Officer, Prison Reforms, Access to Justice Programme, CHRI.*