

Reports from UP

Prisoners in Varanasi Oppose Inhuman Conditions of Prisons

The incident which occurred on April 2, 2016 in Varanasi (UP) District Jail has, once again, brought to the fore how worst are conditions in the jails in our country and how frustrated are the prisoners at these conditions.

As reported in the press, the details of the incident are like this: In Chowkaghat jail, the prisoners gathered at a place for their morning parade. They came into an altercation with prison guards. The inmates alleged that a couple of them were assaulted by the prison guards. When the senior officials led by Jail Superintendent Ashish Tiwari rushed to the spot, the inmates allegedly held him hostage and went on a rampage. They attacked jail officials and guards with bricks, stones and rods. The prisoners took control of a section of barracks and some attempted to escape. The additional police forces including the CRPF and the PAC personnel were rushed to the spot. A team of the National Disaster Response Force was also dispatched to the jail.

The situation has, however, cooled down with the intervention of local Samajwadi Party leaders. The prisoners agreed to free the officials after they were assured of a probe.

It is needless to say that the conditions of jails were the cause of discontentment and anger of prison, inmates. Explaining their grievances in a letter to the administration, the prisoners have said that they are served a poor quality of food; the officials are corrupt and fleecing them for services; the prisoners are subjected to violence and jails are overcrowded. They also demanded the immediate removal of the Deputy Jailer and the Superintendent, and the improvement in jail conditions. (These two officials were later suspended and a judicial inquiry was ordered by the District Magistrate.)

According to the source of information collected by the Hindu, 'an overwhelming 90 percent of jails (60 of a total of 67 jails) in UP are officially "overcrowded". The total capacity of these jails-district, central and special combined was 52,572 as per data dated 31st December, 2015. However, the actual number of prisoners lodged in the jails was 88,747 (including 62,827 under trails).....'

Even today, the Prison Act of 1895 and the Prison Manual of British Colonial period are in vogue in UP and other parts of our country. Except in some places where the prisoners had won some rights through struggle and improvement of jail conditions almost the same old jails, barracks, conditions and treatments continue in rest of the places. In addition to this, the prisons are groaning in jails for years and decades together. They include those against whom the court trails has not yet started or completed or their cases are in the appealate courts; there are those who are convicted, there are those who entered the jails when they were young but turned old by the time their trail was completed and acquitted; there are those who lost their lives before or after the completion of trails. Long periods of trails or judicial process are condemning the families of the prisoners to untold economic sufferings and ruination. This kind of trail had, in reality become a form of according punishment without a conviction.

The UP Jail Minister Balwant Singh Ramoowalia has visited the jail after the incident. He admitted that 'Overcrowding' was "a serious matter". He shed tears for the prisoners. He said, "How can there be peace in prisons when there is an atmosphere of anguish and depression"? He has announced some measures to improve the conditions in jails and meet the demands of the prisoners.

It is the experience of people that the governments appear to be responding to the people's demands whenever the suffering people raise their protesting voice powerfully as the prisoners in Varanasi have done and whenever the rulers feel that some palliative measures are necessary to stem the growing disenchantment among the people. But shedding tears and taking some eye washing measures is not what the people want. Comprehensive reforms and improvement in the conditions of jails, prison laws and the system of justice delivery and the attitude of the prison and police authorities towards the prisoners is need of the hour. The struggle to realise them is long for the prisoners and democratic forces in our country.
