

It is a shame that a country which likes to be known as the largest democracy in the world, promotes the worst forms of tyranny and perversion in most of its prisons. Rules and manuals are thrown to the winds; the local superintendents turn the prisons into their personal fiefdoms, and sadistic violence seems to be the order of the day. MANUSHI recently received a letter from a prisoner in Warangal jail, describing and protesting against the inhuman conditions that the inmates are made to bear. As a rule, we avoid publishing anonymous letters, but in this case we make an exception because of the obvious risks to the life of the person concerned. A similar tale was recounted in a petition lodged by prisoners of Chanchalguda jail. We appeal to the National Human Rights Commission to enquire into the matter and take appropriate steps.

—Editor

Tales of Horror & Repression

A Letter From an Andhra Prison

Gabbeta Chandramouli an undertrial in Warangal jail and a rickshaw-puller, died on May 14, 1998. The general and political prisoners, numbering over a thousand, went on indefinite hunger strike in protest and to condole the death of Chandramouli.

Instead of solving the mystery of Chandramouli's death, the Superintendent of the jail, Laxma Reddy, with the help of about a 100 policemen, brutally beat up the prisoners in their barracks. Eight political prisoners who were called individually to the main gate of the jail, were brutally beaten up and then put into a single cell meant for only one person. Fearing that the prisoners may disclose the unlawful incident to the court, they were not allowed to attend court. This is a most regrettable act on the part of the jail authorities.

The conditions prevalent in jails today are terrible. This is evident from the fact that every 15 days, a prisoner dies of negligence because of lack of proper medical aid.

In the same manner that the police concoct reports of deaths of Naxalites in fake encounters, the jail authorities are concocting stories of prisoners having been seriously ill, who actually died of medical neglect. Jail barracks, which have a capacity for housing a 100 prisoners, are crammed

with double the number. On account of this, prisoners get infected with skin diseases and other ailments. Their lives are hellish. Many prisoners also remain under illegal detention because of delays in court hearings, cases not being resolved for years, and so on.

The quality of food too is abysmal. The morning tiffin (*khichdi*) is full of stones, and it is not uncommon to find two or three iron pieces as well. Curries contain insects while the curd is full of water. The tea served is nothing but hot water. Mutton which contains waste is served to the prisoners. On festival days and birthdays of important leaders, or on death anniversaries, organisations supply fruits, sweets, etcetera for the prisoners. Only a third of this is distributed to them while the rest is shared among the jail officials. Similarly, fans, TVs and other facilities that are donated, are not used in the service of prisoners but sent to the homes of jail officials.

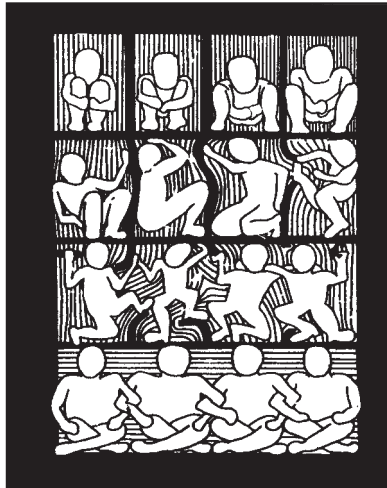


The jail manual has a provision to supply 150 litres of water for bathing and drinking to each person. However, this is never followed. Due to non-availability of water in latrines, old newspapers from the jail libraries are used for cleaning after defecation. In 1993, a woman lawyer in the High Court filed a petition regarding shortage of water in the jails, and the High Court gave a ruling that in case of shortage of water, the jail and municipal authorities should supply water through municipality water tankers. Even so, old newspapers are still required to be used. Prisoners compete with each other for a bath in the morning, and they pick up bugs because of unavailability of water for bathing. Male prisoners have no shaving-blades as the jail manual does not have a provision for these.

The jail manual also states that no work should be extracted from undertrials. Even so, they have to clean latrines, do kitchen work and so on. There is a barrack exclusively to wash clothes, but the prisoners are never allowed to use it for the purpose. Undertrials are made to wash the clothes of officers and their relatives, and do the ironing. This service is also available to prisoners who can afford to pay for it. The jail manual states that it should always be available to all prisoners.

Receiving visitors is another problem. *Mulakatis* are allowed to talk with inmates only from the outside, through an iron mesh. There are usually 20 visitors in a group. Each prisoner has one to three visitors, and they can barely hear each other.

After the visiting period of 15 minutes, amid the cries of the kith and kin, the *jawans* forcefully drag the prisoners away. It is unbearable to see how the prisoners and their relatives suffer. Those who pay money are allowed to talk for hours. Every visitor is charged



Rs 10-20 by the jail authorities. Those who cannot pay are detained upto eight hours. There are instances of visitors who left after 5.00 pm without meeting the prisoners concerned.

Those who speak against the jail authorities are kept in confinement in barrack No.18. From there they are dragged out and then put in solitary confinement. Prisoners, out of fear, adjust themselves to the worst of facilities. Only Naxalites do not tolerate the atrocities. I have been under remand in many jails (central, district, sub-jails) for theft and other cases for the past 15 years, and I found that only Naxalites stood up to protest against the jail conditions. They are struggling to bring changes in the jails. It is lack of cooperation among general prisoners that encourages the jail authorities to do as they please. Owing to the solidarity and selflessness among Naxalites, the authorities are afraid of them.

On May 17, 1998, in Warangal jail, some prisoners on a hunger strike were severely beaten up by the jail authorities on the third day, with the help of the civil police. As soon as they heard of this, the Naxalites went on a hunger strike. From May 18, 1998, a relay hunger strike was undertaken by six

prisoners daily. All Naxalite prisoners observed a black day on May 21. Between 7.30-8.00 am and 5.30-6.00 pm daily, the Naxalites would raise slogans in support of the prisoners who were participating in the relay hunger strike. They called for a statewide relay hunger strike by all prisoners from May 26. Immediately, the general prisoners, who prefer to please the officers, carried this information to them.

The Naxalites' demands are as follows:

1. A judicial enquiry be conducted by a High Court judge into the death of undertrial Gabbeta Chadramouli, and into the police *lathi-charge* on the fasting prisoners of Warangal jail.
2. Suspension of DIG (Prisons) M.R. Ahmed, Warangal jail Superintendent Laxma Reddy and town DSP Chandramouli for torturing prisoners and taking the law into their hands.
3. Preventive action to stop deaths in jails and exgratia payment to the kith and kin of those who are killed in prisons.
4. Bar on the entry of the intelligence and civil police into jails as well as their interference in the affairs of correctional homes.
5. Provision of basic facilities for the prisoners as per the jail manual.
6. Provision for separate escort arrangement, under the control of the superintendent of jails, to send ailing prisoners for special treatment to well-equipped hospitals outside the jails.

None of the demands is meant to benefit Naxalites alone. Chandramouli was not a Naxalite. He was accused in a theft case and was a general prisoner. The relay hunger strike programme was taken up to protest against the fascist action of the jail and civil police.

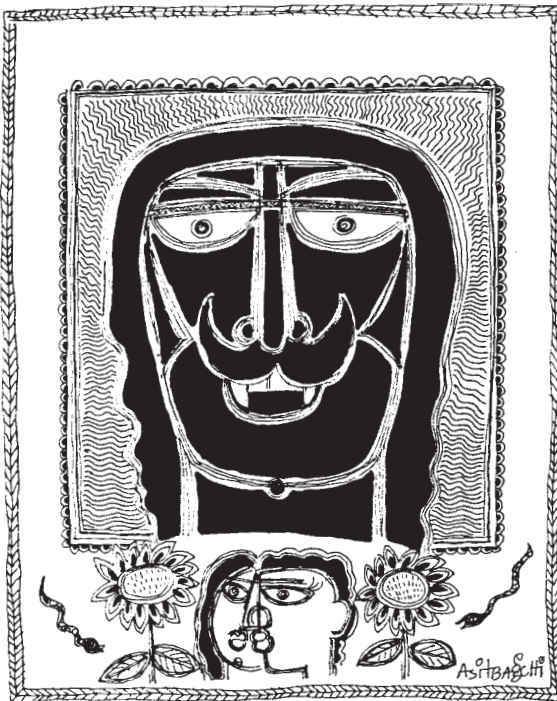
I appeal to all people who love humanity to support our struggle for the just demands made above.

*An anonymous and frightened prisoner,
Central Prison, Secunderabad*

Following this letter, MANUSHI received a copy of a petition, dated October 8, 1998, sent to the Metropolitan Sessions judge, by Chanchalguda Central Jail prisoners. Their charges echo the complaints made by the Warangal jail prisoners against the authorities. What emerges is a picture of Indian jails as torture chambers, where the inmates are deprived of basic human rights and subjected to regular assaults on life and dignity.

It would appear from the petition that the jail has transformed into “a concentration camp” in the last five months since a new Superintendent, Mahender Reddy has taken over. The prisoners allege that they are being subjected to illegal restrictions and are cruelly repressed. As a result of the continuous onslaught, the prisoners staged a protest and did not participate in the functions organised by the authorities on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti on October 2 this year. The news of the boycott reached the media and embarrassed the superintendent immensely, who, in turn, intensified the harassment.

The incident is recounted... “At 11 am on October 3, the jail bell began to ring insistently. Without any warning, the prisoners were mercilessly *lathi*-charged; the prisoners allowed themselves to be locked-up without any retaliation. Then about 250 to 300 prisoners were taken out of the locked barracks, one by one, and hounded through the jail while being thrashed inhumanly...



“...The jail courtyards were doused with the blood of convicted and undertrial prisoners. Even the seriously injured were denied treatment. Unable to bear the beating, an undertrial named Mustafa tried to commit suicide...”

Superintendent Mahender Reddy, Deputy Superintendent Keshav Naidu, Jailors Nageshwar Rao, Harinath, Arjun Rao, Govind Reddy and others subjected more than 100 prisoners to the most inhuman physical torture. At 1.30 pm, the jail siren was switched on and whistles blown. These officers along with 100 jail *jawans*, went to barrack No.5, in which undertrials are lodged, and assaulted about 100 undertrials. Later, about 30 undertrials, lodged in the new jail, were tortured. Heads were broken, backs were split, hands and

legs broken. The jail courtyards were doused with the blood of convicted and undertrial prisoners. Even the seriously injured were denied treatment. Unable to bear the beating, an undertrial named Mustafa tried to commit suicide...”

Apparently, after the gruesome episode, some of the inmates who had stood up for the prisoners were transferred to other jails after being cruelly tortured. The situation has deteriorated to an extent where the Naxalite prisoners fear for their lives, since they are most vocal in their protest and exposing the jail authorities.

The prisoners recount that Mahender Reddy was earlier superintendent of Nellore Jail. During his tenure, five prisoners lost their lives—within a week. An agitation was initiated by human rights and other organisations and Reddy was suspended. The petitioners allege that due to the patronage and intervention of Home Minister Madhav Reddy, the suspension was revoked within six months. Not only this, but Reddy was also rewarded by the Chandrababu Naidu government with a promotion as Superintendent of Chanchalguda jail.

As a follow-up of the incident mentioned above, the prisoners sent a letter, dated November 2, to the National Human Rights Commission, detailing their plight and requesting an independent investigation by an NHRC team. Till the time of writing this report, the prisoners are still awaiting a hearing. MANUSHI phoned the NHRC in Delhi to find out whether there had been any follow-up in the case, the official who responded seemed to have no information on the subject. □