



**Prisoners and Allotment of Work During Penal Punishment on the Basis of
Caste: A Constitutional and Human Rights Analysis**

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Abstract

The Indian prison system has historically reflected social hierarchies existing outside prison walls. One of the most controversial practices has been the allocation of prison labour based on caste identities of prisoners. Such practices have raised serious concerns regarding equality, dignity, non-discrimination, and human rights. The Constitution of India guarantees equality before law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of caste. Despite these constitutional safeguards, prison manuals in certain states have contained provisions assigning specific tasks to prisoners according to their caste backgrounds. This paper critically examines the constitutional validity of caste-based prison labour, analyses judicial interventions, and evaluates the issue from a human rights perspective. The study concludes that caste-based allocation of prison work is incompatible with constitutional morality and international human rights standards.

Keywords: Prison Labour, Caste Discrimination, Prisoners' Rights, Human Dignity, Equality, Constitution of India, Human Rights.

1. Introduction

Prisons are institutions established for the custody, correction, and rehabilitation of offenders. Although imprisonment restricts personal liberty, prisoners do not lose their fundamental rights except to the extent permitted by law. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality and dignity to all individuals, including prisoners.

Historically, Indian society has been characterized by a caste system that influenced social and occupational divisions. These caste-based divisions occasionally found their way into prison administration, where prisoners belonging to particular castes were assigned specific forms of labour such as cleaning, sanitation, cooking, or manual work. Such practices reinforced social stigmas and perpetuated discrimination even within correctional institutions.

The issue gained national attention when courts examined prison rules that explicitly linked prison labour to caste identities. These practices raised important constitutional questions regarding equality, dignity, and the role of prisons in a democratic society.

This paper examines whether caste-based allocation of prison labour is legally and morally justified and analyses the constitutional and human rights implications of such practices.

2. Statement of the Problem

The persistence of caste-based work allocation in prisons undermines the constitutional promise of equality and dignity. It creates a discriminatory environment where prisoners are treated differently solely because of their caste identity. Such practices contradict modern principles of correctional administration and rehabilitation.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the concept of prison labour in India.
2. To analyse caste-based allocation of prison work.
3. To study constitutional provisions relating to equality and dignity.
4. To evaluate judicial decisions on caste discrimination in prisons.
5. To examine the issue from a human rights perspective.
6. To suggest reforms for ensuring equality within prison administration.

4. Research Methodology

The present study is doctrinal in nature. It relies upon primary and secondary sources including constitutional provisions, statutes, judicial decisions, prison manuals, academic books, journal articles, government reports, and international human rights instruments. Analytical and descriptive methods have been adopted to evaluate the legal issues involved.

5. Prison Labour in India

Prison labour has traditionally been regarded as an essential component of prison administration, discipline, and rehabilitation. It is intended to engage prisoners in constructive activities that promote responsibility, skill development, and personal reform. Meaningful work opportunities help prisoners acquire vocational abilities, maintain mental well-being, and prepare for successful reintegration into society. However, prison labour must be administered in accordance with constitutional principles, human dignity, and human rights standards. Work assignments should be based on individual capability, health, skills, and institutional needs rather than caste, religion, or social background.

1. Development of Work Skills: Prison labour provides inmates with opportunities to acquire practical and vocational skills that can improve their employability after release. Activities such as carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, handicrafts, and manufacturing help prisoners develop self-confidence and economic independence. Skill-based training contributes to rehabilitation by enabling prisoners to secure lawful employment and reduce the likelihood of reoffending upon their return to society.

2. Maintenance of Discipline: Work programmes play a significant role in maintaining order and discipline within correctional institutions. Structured work routines encourage responsibility, punctuality, and adherence to institutional rules. By keeping prisoners engaged in productive activities, prison authorities can reduce misconduct, conflicts, and disruptive behaviour. Well-organized labour programmes create a stable prison environment that supports both security and the overall objectives of correctional administration.

3. Productive Engagement of Prisoners: Prison labour ensures that inmates remain actively involved in constructive tasks during their incarceration. Productive engagement promotes physical and mental well-being while reducing boredom and frustration. Participation in meaningful work allows prisoners to contribute positively to prison operations and society. Such engagement fosters a sense of purpose, personal achievement, and social responsibility, which are important elements of the correctional process.

4. Rehabilitation and Reintegration into Society: One of the primary objectives of prison labour is the rehabilitation of offenders and their successful reintegration into society. Work experience helps prisoners develop positive attitudes, improve interpersonal skills, and cultivate a strong work ethic. Vocational training and employment-oriented activities enhance self-reliance and social adjustment.

Effective rehabilitation programmes prepare inmates to lead productive and law-abiding lives after completing their sentences.

5. Reduction of Idleness within Prisons: Idleness is often associated with negative psychological effects, including stress, anxiety, and indiscipline among prisoners. Prison labour helps utilize inmates' time constructively and minimizes the risks associated with inactivity. Regular participation in work activities promotes routine, productivity, and personal development. By reducing idleness, prison authorities can create a healthier correctional environment that supports rehabilitation and institutional management.

However, prison labour must be administered fairly and without discrimination. Work assignments should be determined by prisoners' abilities, skills, health conditions, and institutional requirements rather than caste identity. Such an approach is essential for upholding constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and human rights.

6. Constitutional Framework

The constitutional framework governing prison administration in India is founded upon the principles of equality, dignity, justice, and protection of fundamental rights. Although prisoners are deprived of certain liberties as a consequence of lawful incarceration, they do not lose their status as citizens entitled to constitutional protections. The Constitution of India prohibits discrimination and upholds the inherent dignity of every individual, including prisoners. Provisions such as Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 provide safeguards against arbitrary, degrading, or discriminatory treatment. In the context of prison labour, these constitutional guarantees require that work assignments be based on objective criteria such as skill, aptitude, and institutional needs rather than caste identity. The constitutional framework thus serves as a vital safeguard against caste-based discrimination in prisons and promotes a correctional system consistent with human rights and social justice.

Article 14 – Equality Before Law

Article 14 guarantees equality before law and equal protection of laws. Any classification based solely on caste lacks reasonable justification and violates the principle of equality.

Article 15 – Prohibition of Discrimination

Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Although prisons involve certain restrictions, caste-based work allocation directly conflicts with constitutional values.

Article 17 – Abolition of Untouchability

Article 17 abolishes untouchability in all forms. Assigning sanitation-related tasks to prisoners solely because of their caste may amount to perpetuation of practices associated with untouchability.

Article 21 – Right to Life and Personal Liberty

The Supreme Court has interpreted Article 21 to include human dignity. Prisoners retain the right to be treated with dignity despite incarceration. Caste-based labour assignments undermine this constitutional guarantee.

1. Sukanya Shantha v. Union of India

Citation: Writ Petition (C) No. 1404 of 2023, decided on 03 October 2024.

Bench: D. Y. Chandrachud, J. B. Pardiwala and Manoj Misra.

- **Key Findings:**

- Caste-based segregation of prisoners is unconstitutional.
- Allocation of prison work on the basis of caste violates Articles 14, 15, 17, 21 and 23 of the Constitution.
- Assigning cleaning and sweeping work only to marginalized castes and kitchen work to upper castes amounts to discrimination and forced labour.
- All States and Union Territories were directed to amend their prison manuals within three months.

Important Observation for Quotation:

“The right to live with dignity extends even to the incarcerated.”

2. In Re: Discrimination Inside Prisons

Case No.: SMW(C) No. 10 of 2024. This is the continuing monitoring matter where the Supreme Court is supervising compliance with the directions issued in *Sukanya Shantha*.

Relevance:

- Monitors implementation of prison reforms.
- Examines caste-based discrimination and dignity of prisoners.
- Requires compliance reports from States and authorities.

Older Landmark Cases You May Also Cite

1. Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration – Prisoners retain fundamental rights except those necessarily curtailed by imprisonment.
2. Charles Sobhraj v. Superintendent, Central Jail – Prisoners are entitled to human dignity and constitutional protection.
3. State of Andhra Pradesh v. Challa Ramkrishna Reddy – Fundamental rights do not cease at prison gates.

7. Findings

1. Evidence indicates that in some prisons, work assignments have historically reflected caste hierarchies, with certain prisoners being assigned menial or sanitation-related tasks based on caste identity rather than individual capability.
2. Caste-based allocation of prison labour is inconsistent with Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 of the Constitution, which guarantee equality, prohibit discrimination, abolish untouchability, and protect human dignity.
3. Assigning work based on caste perpetuates social stigma and undermines prisoners’ dignity. Such practices reinforce historical prejudices and adversely affect prisoners’ psychological well-being and self-respect.
4. Prison labour aimed at rehabilitation becomes ineffective when based on caste considerations. Skill development, vocational training, and reintegration opportunities are compromised by discriminatory work allocation practices.
5. The study highlights the necessity of revising prison manuals, strengthening oversight mechanisms, and implementing anti-discrimination policies to ensure fair and equitable labour practices within prisons.
6. Effective prison administration requires adherence to constitutional values and human rights standards. Labour assignments should be based on skills, health, aptitude, and institutional requirements rather than social or caste backgrounds.

8. Suggestions

1. Prison authorities should ensure that no prisoner is assigned work solely on the basis of caste, religion, or social background. Work allocation must be based on skill, aptitude, health, and individual preference.
2. A comprehensive national policy should be formulated to regulate prison labour practices across all states, ensuring compliance with constitutional principles of equality and dignity.
3. Independent monitoring committees should periodically inspect prisons to identify and prevent discriminatory labour practices.
4. Prison labour should focus on vocational training and rehabilitation rather than reinforcing traditional caste occupations. This would improve prisoners' prospects for social reintegration after release.
5. Regular training programs should be conducted for prison officials regarding constitutional values, human rights, and anti-discrimination principles.
6. Existing prison laws and manuals should be amended to expressly prohibit caste-based discrimination in work assignments and prison administration.
7. Prisoners should have access to confidential and accessible complaint mechanisms to report discriminatory treatment without fear of retaliation.
8. Governments should maintain and publish data regarding prison labour allocation to promote transparency and accountability.
9. Courts should continue to exercise vigilant oversight to ensure that prison administration conforms to the mandates of Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 of the Constitution of India.
10. Prison reforms should be guided by the principle that imprisonment results only in the loss of liberty and not the loss of human dignity or equal treatment.

9. Conclusion

The allocation of prison labour on the basis of caste represents a significant challenge to the constitutional values of equality, dignity, and social justice in India. Although imprisonment lawfully restricts personal liberty, it does not extinguish the fundamental rights guaranteed under the Constitution. The continuation of caste-based occupational practices within prisons reflects deeply rooted social prejudices that are inconsistent with Articles 14, 15, 17, and 21 of the Constitution of India. Such practices not only perpetuate historical discrimination but also undermine the rehabilitative objectives of the prison system. Judicial interventions and human rights discourses have increasingly emphasized that prisoners remain rights-bearing individuals entitled to equal treatment and protection from degrading or discriminatory practices. The assignment of sanitation or menial work to prisoners solely on the basis of caste violates the principles of human dignity and equal opportunity. Prison labour should instead be guided by considerations of skill, aptitude, vocational training, and rehabilitation. Meaningful prison reforms require the elimination of caste-based work allocation, strengthening of oversight mechanisms, sensitization of prison officials, and alignment of prison administration with constitutional morality and international human rights standards. Ultimately, a humane and non-discriminatory prison system is essential for realizing the transformative vision of justice embedded in the Indian Constitution.



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