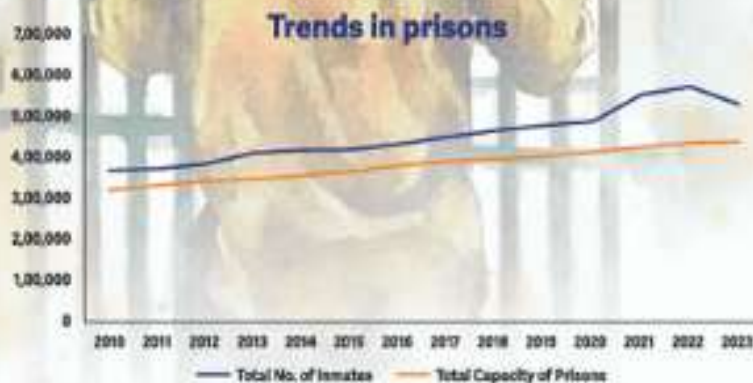


National Conference on Human Rights of Prison Inmates



16th October 2025



National Human Rights Commission, India
October, 2025

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The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India celebrated its 32nd Foundation Day on 16th October 2025. As part of the Foundation Day celebrations, the Commission also organised a National Conference on the theme **Human Rights of Prison Inmates**, at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi. The conference focused on three topics, namely:

- i.) Enhancing the Quality of Life of Inmates: Ensuring Dignity, Well-being, and Human Rights Behind Bars;
- ii.) Female Inmates and Their Children – Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Gender-Sensitive Prison Reforms; and
- iii.) Undertrial Inmates: Tackling Judicial Delays, Strengthening Legal Aid, and Promoting Alternatives to Incarceration.

The Foundation Day was graced by Hon'ble Former President of India, **Shri Ramnath Kovind**, who also inaugurated the conference. In his address, he mentioned that the human rights of prison inmates are a subject of profound importance, as it reminds us that the true test of society is reflected in how those who are most vulnerable are treated.



He emphasised that it is the duty of the prison officials to ensure that inmates are treated with dignity, as any form of violence or inhuman treatment is against our constitutional and moral values. He expressed his appreciation to the NHRC on inclusion of the unique challenges faced by female inmates and their children as a focus area in the conference, stating that it was essential to incorporate gender-sensitive and child-friendly practices in prisons. He concluded, stating that prisons are not merely places of confinement, but places of reform, rehabilitation and hope.



The purpose of the National Conference on Human Rights of Prison Inmates was to facilitate a meaningful dialogue among key stakeholders on the protection of prisoners' rights in India. It aimed to assess the existing state of prison administration, identify systemic gaps, and propose actionable reforms for humane and rights-based incarceration.



The Conference sought to highlight critical issues concerning the quality of life of inmates, undertrial prisoners, and female inmates with children. Ultimately, it strived to develop a roadmap for collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable prison reforms in alignment with national and international human rights standards. The list of participants is **annexed**.

Session I: Enhancing the Quality of Life of Inmates: Ensuring Dignity, Well-being, and Human Rights Behind Bars

The session was chaired by **Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian**, Chairperson, NHRC and featured distinguished panellists, namely, **Shri Rakesh Kumar Pandey**, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs; **Shri Valay Singh**, Co-founder and Lead, India Justice Report; **Prof (Dr.) Vartika Nanda**, Founder, Tinka Tinka Foundation; and **Ms Maitreyi Misra**, Director of Mitigation and Mental Health and Criminal Justice, Square Circle Clinic.



Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian began in his opening remarks began with tracing the journey of the evolution of prison laws in India and spoke of the international standards pertaining to the rights of prison inmates. He elaborated on the United Nations standards, namely the Nelson Mandela rules, Bangkok Rules, and the Tokyo Rules and stated that despite their existence, multiple challenges continue to persist in the criminal justice system across the world.

He cited statistics from the report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, stating that the global prison population was 11.5 million in 2022, and one-third of this population remains in pre-trial detention. This situation not only highlights the challenge of overcrowded prisons across the world but also brings to focus the deteriorating conditions in prisons globally due to budget, resource and capacity constraints. He then elaborated on the recent prison statistics in

India and stated that the issue of overcrowding challenges the criminal justice system in India as well. He then opened the session for the panel discussion.

The first panellist, **Shri Rakesh Kumar Pandey**, highlighted key government initiatives, such as the Model Prison Manual (2016), the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act (2023), and modernisation schemes aimed at rehabilitation, transparency, and mental health support for inmates. **Shri Valay Singh** emphasized the issue of overcrowding and the importance of protecting the dignity of undertrial prisoners, calling for improved monitoring, budget allocation, and training of prison staff, while **Ms. Maitreyi Misra** focused on the lack of mental health infrastructure in prisons and advocated for professional training, systemic reforms, and integration of health services under the health department. Lastly, **Prof. (Dr.) Vartika Nanda** concluded the session by presenting the transformative role of prison radio as a tool for emotional well-being, reform, and rehabilitation, demonstrating how communication initiatives can restore dignity and purpose among inmates.



The discussions during the conference underscored a wide spectrum of challenges within India's prison system, such as overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, mental health neglect, and systemic gaps in rehabilitation efforts. It was emphasized that India's prisons are overcrowded and require urgent reforms to align with both national legislation and international standards. Panellists also highlighted the need for uniform adoption of the Model Prison Manual (2016) and the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act (2023) across prisons in the country. Further, the need for improved living conditions, and stronger mechanisms for legal aid and speedy trials to address the high proportion of undertrial inmates was also underscored. The discussions also revealed the shortage of mental health professionals in prisons, outdated practices in handling psychiatric issues, and the absence of standardised care protocols.



Recommendations included enhanced training for prison staff on psychological first aid, integrating prison healthcare under the health department, promoting peer counselling models, and expanding vocational and educational programs to aid rehabilitation. Emphasis was also placed on improving communication between inmates and the outside world, eliminating discriminatory practices within prisons, ensuring gender-sensitive infrastructure, and promoting creative engagement programs such as prison radio to uphold the dignity and emotional well-being of inmates. The need for updating the existing 'Advisory to Mitigate Deliberate Self-Harm and Suicide Attempts by Prisoners' issued by NHRC according to the present challenges faced by inmates with mental health issues, was also highlighted by panellists. Overall, the discussions called for a shift from punitive incarceration toward a humane, reformative, and rights-based correctional framework.

Session 2: Female Inmates and Their Children – Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Gender-Sensitive Prison Reforms

The second session was chaired by **Smt. Meeran Chadha Borwankar**, Former Director General, Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) and Core Group Member, NHRC and the panel included **Ms. Tripti Gurha**, Chairperson, NCPCR, and Additional Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development; **Dr. K.P. Singh (IPS)**, Former Director General of Police, Haryana, and Distinguished Professor, Rajiv Gandhi National Law University, Punjab; **Professor Vijay Raghavan**, Core Group Member, NHRC, and Project Director, Prayas and **Ms. Monika Dhawan**, Director, India Vision Foundation.



Smt. Meeran Chadha Borwankar started the discussion, and in her opening remarks urged panellists to focus on the diverse issues faced by female inmates. She highlighted the administrative challenges, particularly the inadequacy of police escort facilities, which delay trials and prolong under-trial detention and stated that it was the collective responsibility of institutions to improve the lives of incarcerated women and their children. Further, **Ms. Tripti Gurha** emphasised on the need to include children of prison inmates in the juvenile justice system, while noting the lack of data on children living outside prisons whose mothers are incarcerated. **Dr. K. P. Singh** brought to focus how the male-centric criminal justice system fails to meet women inmates' specific needs. He then enlisted key systemic deficiencies faced by female inmates, which included inadequate sanitation, medical facilities, menstrual hygiene support, recreational and educational opportunities, and recognition of reproductive rights.

Professor Vijay Raghavan stated that women inmates face loss of family contact, homelessness post-incarceration, psychological stress, and social stigma. He reiterated the need to cater to the distinct challenges faced by three categories of inmates' children, which include children living inside prisons, children living with extended families and children living in institutional care. **Ms. Monika Dhawan** highlighted the rehabilitation initiatives undertaken by the India Vision Foundation for the comprehensive well-being of female inmates and their children. She explained the importance of Holistic rehabilitation for women inmates and their children, which is essential for their reintegration into society.



The deliberations in this session brought forth critical issues concerning the conditions of women prisoners and the welfare of their children in India's prisons. It was highlighted that women constitute only about 4% of the total prison population, yet their unique needs remain largely unaddressed within a male-centric prison system. The discussions underscored severe deficiencies in sanitation, menstrual hygiene, healthcare, nutrition, mental health support, and access to education and recreation. The plight of children living inside prisons—often in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions—and those separated from their mothers identified as a major concern, with a lack of structured care, data, and coordination between prison authorities and child welfare systems. The need for gender-sensitive reforms, specialised infrastructure, and empathetic administrative practices was strongly emphasised.

Key recommendations emanating from the session included expanding alternative sentencing and bail options for women, especially those pregnant or with young children and the need to recognise children of inmates as Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP). The panellists also highlighted the importance of the presence of social workers, counsellors, and trained female staff in prisons; and integrating institutional mechanisms like CWCs and DCPUs for child welfare. The speakers also called for establishing Anganwadi centres in prisons, facilitating regular parent-child meetings, and strengthening post-release rehabilitation programs. The need for issuing an advisory focused on female inmates and their children by NHRC was also put forth during this discussion. The session concluded with speakers emphasising on the crucial role of collaborative efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and human rights bodies such as NHRC and NCPCR to developing a sustainable, humane, and gender-responsive prison framework that upholds the dignity, rights, and well-being of women inmates and their children.

Session 3: Undertrial Inmates: Tackling Judicial Delays, Strengthening Legal Aid, and Promoting Alternatives to Incarceration

The third session, focusing on the challenges of undertrial inmates, was chaired by **Shri Justice Rajiv Shakdher**, Former Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court. The panellists included **Shri Manoj Yadava**, Former DG (Investigation), NHRC; **Shri Niraj Verma**, Secretary (Justice), Ministry of Law and Justice; and **Dr. Rakesh Kumar**, National Executive Director, SPYM.



Shri Justice Rajiv Shakdher opened the discussion, highlighting the critical issue of judicial delays, and stated that the judiciary is presently understaffed in terms of the number of judges. He also underscored that old criminal cases constitute the majority of the pending cases and emphasised on the need to address this backlog of cases. **Shri Manoj Yadava** further elaborated the causes of judicial delays and stated that it is essential to maintain the quality of services provided even under the legal aid mechanism.

Shri Niraj Verma emphasised the significant role of plea bargaining and community service as a sentencing option in expediting case disposals at an earlier stage. Lastly, **Dr. Rakesh Kumar** underlined the rise in substance abuse, stressing that higher incarceration rates have failed to reduce community drug use. He emphasised that such individuals require care and rehabilitation rather than incarceration and concluded by stating that to curb the drug use, work must be done to reduce the demand of the drugs, rather than only focusing on the supply.

The third session in the conference brought to light several pressing challenges within India's criminal justice system, particularly judicial delays, systemic inefficiencies, and the growing

number of undertrials languishing in prisons. The discussions underscored that while judicial understaffing remains a concern, the larger issue lies in procedural inefficiencies such as frequent adjournments and an excessive caseload that burdens judges at every level. Financial inequality further compounds the problem, as high legal costs and inadequate quality of free legal aid limit access to justice for marginalised individuals. The shortage of mental health professionals in prisons was identified as another critical gap in this session as well. The conversation also drew attention to the over-criminalisation of drug-related offences, where many individuals suffering from substance dependence are incarcerated instead of receiving treatment and rehabilitation.

Key recommendations emerging from the discussion included ensuring merit-based judicial appointments, streamlining judicial procedures and improving the quality of legal aid through better training and accountability of empanelled lawyers. The participants also emphasised the need for greater use of plea bargaining and alternative sentencing mechanisms such as community service, as introduced under the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, to reduce the burden on courts and prisons. The need for an advisory by the NHRC focused on implementation of community service as a sentence was also underscored during the deliberations. Expanding open jail systems, enhancing rehabilitation and de-addiction programs for offenders, and fostering coordinated efforts among the judiciary, police, and legislature were advocated as sustainable measures to ensure timely justice and uphold the human rights of undertrial prisoners.

Valedictory Session

In his concluding remarks at the National Conference on Human Rights of Prison Inmates, **Shri Bharat Lal**, highlighted key challenges and possible solutions concerning the state of prisons in India. He said women inmates and their children is an area which requires more attention. Conditions in women's prisons are marked by poor hygiene and inadequate living provisions. Children of incarcerated women often grow up within the prison environment itself, facing a lack of appropriate care. Facilities related to food, sanitation, toilets, and medical care are insufficient, highlighting the need for urgent improvement.



He further mentioned that, to improve the conditions and rights of prisoners, several steps were proposed during the discussions at the conference. These include appointing social workers and counsellors to provide much-needed psychological support and guidance. He stated that NHRC is already engaged in training prison staff, but continued efforts are essential. Shri Bharat Lal reiterated that bail should become the default option rather than the exception, and community service should be promoted as an alternative to incarceration. Awareness sessions must be conducted to educate inmates on their legal rights, health, and government schemes.

He also reiterated the need for enhancement in the quality of legal aid services and post-release support—including shelter, counselling, and emergency assistance—must be strengthened to aid reintegration into society. In conclusion, Shri Bharat Lal emphasised that the NHRC's role is to protect the most neglected segments of society, including prison inmates. He expressed optimism that the collective decisions made during the conference would pave the way for reforms. He also thanked all participants for their contributions to the discussion.

In the valedictory address, **Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian** mentioned that the purpose of the conference was to bring in a blend of perspectives from representatives of the ministries, judges and experts working in the field and at the policy level. He stated that many concrete actionable recommendations emanated from the deliberations in the conference. He emphasised that the role of NHRC is not just to cater to people who reach out to the Commission, but also to those who are unable to reach it. He concluded by expressing his gratitude to the diverse stakeholders present at the conference for their meaningful and valuable contributions to the conference.

The session concluded with a formal vote of thanks delivered by **Shri Samir Kumar**, Joint Secretary, NHRC, reaffirming the Commission's unwavering dedication to protecting and promoting the dignity, and rights of prison inmates in India.

Outcome of the Conference

Session I: Enhancing the Quality of Life of Inmates: Ensuring Dignity, Well-being, and Human Rights Behind Bars

- i.) The special campaign launched by MHA, urging states and union territories to identify eligible undertrial prisoners under Section 479 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and facilitate their bail applications, needs to be implemented by all states.
- ii.) States and union territories should consider fully adopting the Model Prison Manual (2016) and enacting the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act (2023) for effective prison management and human rights protection.
- iii.) Societal and caste-based practices persisting in prisons must be eliminated.
- iv.) National Advisory and Review Committee (NARC) needs to actively monitor whether initiatives like Sukanya Shanti are being properly implemented.
- v.) Need to examine gender diversity within prison staff.
- vi.) Need to reactivate the Board of Visitors (BOV) system in prisons.
- vii.) Need to increase budget allocation for correctional homes
- viii.) Involvement of District Magistrates (DMs) in prison-related work needs to be increased.
- ix.) Training modules for prison staff need to include reformatory and humane aspects.
- x.) Need to document the nature of mental health conditions faced by inmates to ensure better care.
- xi.) Need to equip prisons with comprehensive mental health care institutions, so that systemic contributors to mental health issues can be tackled, not limiting the treatment to just pharmacological interventions.
- xii.) NHRC should consider re-examining the 'Advisory to Mitigate Deliberate Self-Harm and Suicide Attempts by Prisoners' issued by the Commission according to the present challenges faced by inmates with mental health issues.
- xiii.) Need for standardised guidelines for prison mental healthcare.
- xiv.) Training for prisoners in peer counselling should be introduced.
- xv.) To improve the working conditions of the prison health staff, it is recommended to include them in the health department instead of the prison department.
- xvi.) As the prevalence of mental health issues is high among correctional officers and prison staff, there is a need to focus on their mental health as well.

- xvii.) Need to incorporate recreational and educational activities for prison inmates, such as the prison radio, writing and art activities to promote a meaningful engagement and dignified existence for inmates.

Session II: Female Inmates and Their Children – Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Gender-Sensitive Prison Reforms

- i.) Inclusion of children of inmates under the Juvenile Justice System as Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP) is recommended.
- ii.) Data pertaining to children of prison inmates living outside prisons should be collated and included in the NCRB Prison Statistics Report to ensure access to welfare schemes.
- iii.) Need to provide adequate sanitation and menstrual hygiene support to female inmates.
- iv.) Medical care catering to the specific requirements of female inmates needs to be introduced in prisons.
- v.) Need for recognition of reproductive rights of female inmates.
- vi.) Comprehensive emotional support should be provided to female inmates.
- vii.) Provide rehabilitation opportunities post-release to restore dignity and social integration.
- viii.) Interim bail for pregnant/lactating women is proposed to be introduced.
- ix.) Include women prisoners as a target group under Article 15(3) of the Constitution for the benefit of special treatments.
- x.) Dedicated enclosures for women inmates need to be introduced in all jails, instead of having limited 'All Women Prisons' to increase access to family visits.
- xi.) Qualified/skilled/interested inmates are recommended to be utilised as resources by the prison administration, keeping in view their skills.
- xii.) An advisory focused on addressing challenges of female inmates and their children (both inside and outside prisons) needs to be issued by NHRC.
- xiii.) Initiatives like Maharashtra's 'Gala Bhet' (full day meeting of children with their parents in prison) and Uttar Pradesh's initiative to facilitate child-parent interaction without glass barriers need to be replicated across prisons in the country.
- xiv.) Monthly parent-child meetings inside prisons should be implemented across all prisons.
- xv.) Need to establish ICDS Anganwadi centres within prisons.
- xvi.) Vacancies in all spheres of the Criminal Justice System need to be filled on an immediate basis.
- xvii.) Appointment of trained social workers and counsellors in prisons is recommended. Collaboration with NGOs for skill development and rehabilitation needs to be increased.
- xviii.) Prison staff training and awareness sessions on legal rights, health, and mental health should be conducted.

- xix.) A mechanism for the holistic rehabilitation of women inmates and their children should be formulated.

Session III: Undertrial Inmates: Tackling Judicial Delays, Strengthening Legal Aid, and Promoting Alternatives to Incarceration

- i.) Need to strengthen and improve the police escort facilities to ensure there are no delays in trials.
- ii.) States need to sanction the appointment of psychiatrists and psychologists in accordance with the provisions of the Model Prison Manual.
- iii.) Provisions pertaining to timelines in the process of justice need to be followed to cut down on delays.
- iv.) Permanent empanelment of advocates in legal aid services at the national, state and district level needs to be implemented across states to improve the quality of legal aid services.
- v.) Rehabilitation for inmates incarcerated due to drug use and abuse needs to be introduced instead of incarceration.
- vi.) Usage of alternative sentencing, like community service for petty offences, needs to be implemented.
- vii.) Need for an advisory by the NHRC focused on the implementation of community service as a sentence.

National Conference on Human Rights of Prison Inmates held on 16th October 2025 at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi

List of Speakers/ Resource Persons, National Human Rights Commission

- i.) Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian, Hon'ble Chairperson, NHRC
- ii.) Smt Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, Hon'ble Member, NHRC
- iii.) Shri Bharat Lal, Secretary General, NHRC
- iv.) Shri Anand Swaroop, Director General (Investigation)
- v.) Shri Joginder Singh, Registrar (Law), NHRC
- vi.) Shri Samir Kumar, Joint Secretary, NHRC
- vii.) Dr. Rajul Raikwar, Consultant (Research), NHRC
- viii.) Ms. Jessica Swamy, Junior Research Consultant, NHRC
- ix.) Officials and staff of NHRC

Session Chairs

- i.) **Session - I:** Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian, Hon'ble Chairperson, NHRC
- ii.) **Session - II:** Smt. Meeran Chadha Borwankar, Former DG, BPRD
- iii.) **Session - III:** Shri Justice Rajiv Shakdher, Former Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh High Court

Panellists

- i.) Shri Neeraj Verma, Secretary (Justice), Ministry of Law and Justice
- ii.) Ms. Tripti Gurha, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development and Chairperson, NCPCR
- iii.) Shri Rakesh Kumar Pandey, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs
- iv.) Dr. K P Singh, (IPS) Former DG and Distinguished Professor, Rajiv Gandhi National Law University
- v.) Shri Manoj Yadava, Former DG, NHRC
- vi.) Professor Vijay Raghavan, NHRC Core Group Member, and Project Director, Prayas (TISS Field Action Project)
- vii.) Shri Valay Singh, Co-founder and Lead, India Justice Report
- viii.) Ms. Maitreyi Misra, Director of Mitigation and Mental Health and Criminal Justice, Square Circle Clinic
- ix.) Dr. Rajesh Kumar, National Executive Director, Society for the Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM)
- x.) Ms. Monika Dhawan, Director, India Vision Foundation
- xi.) Prof (Dr.) Vartika Nanda, Indian Prison Reformer, Media Educator and Media Commentator

समानी प्रपा सह वोन्नभागः।
समाने योक्ते सह वो युनज्मि।
अराः नाभिमिवाभितः॥

- अथर्ववेद-संज्ञान सूक्तम्

All have equal rights to articles of food and water.
The yoke of the chariot of life is placed equally on
the shoulders. All should live together in harmony,
supporting one another like the spokes of a chariot
wheel connecting its rim and hub.

- Atharvaveda-Sangyan Suktam