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Mismanaged jails and corruption

MISMANAGEMENT of our jails sometimes attracts public attention in a dramatic manner, when reports concerning inmates' revolt against ill treatment of officials responsible for these jails are published in newspapers.

The sufferings of sick inmates also are brought to public notice through these newspaper reports. The prisoners are prompted by excruciating circumstances to protest against the brutal treatment of the administrators in such a manner as to attract quick public attention.

The major cause of mismanagement in jails is rampant corruption at all levels of prison bureaucracy. Often jail staff behave in such a criminal manner that it is difficult to distinguish between them and the convicts they are supposed to be looking after. Officials managing country's jails do not have the slightest knowledge of, or interest in, modern penology and are only familiar with obsolete, crudest methods of medieval ages to keep the prisoners under discipline.

The rules laid down in jail manual are often ignored and facilities meant for prisoners are not provided them. Officers and men of jail staff allegedly help themselves to the rations and medicines and other provisions meant for the prisoners.

Consequently, the convicts get less food and medicines than they are entitled to. All big jails in the country have large tracts of land attached to them. Vegetable and food grains are grown on these tracts, where the prisoners toil. However, a major portion of the produce is allegedly taken by the officers and wardens, while the prisoners get only what is left.

Not content with pilfering these provisions from jail stores, officials allegedly demand regular dole outs from families of the prisoners as a quid pro quo for assuring 'preferential treatment' to their unfortunate kin. If, for any reason, a convict's family fails to deliver the regular bribe the poor man is given very rough treatment, allege the relatives of the prisoners.

Something of this sort happened in Attock Jail in 1995, when a prisoner was told to move to another place in the jail where, presumably, he would be given a rough time. On his refusal to move, he was taken out and his clothes stripped off and he was tortured and humiliated before other prisoners. This is the regular pattern of punishment in jails.

Other prisoners resented it. Breaking out of their barracks, they gathered in the jail ground raising slogans against administration, which called for reinforcements and used violence against the helpless prisoners.

The death of nine inmates in the Faisalabad Central Jail during the first quarter of this year pointed to gross negligence and misuse of discretionary powers by the authorities. They had allegedly delayed, or refused, the shifting of sick prisoners to divisional headquarters hospital for treatment. Even basic medical treatment was allegedly not provided them, despite clear instructions of jail's medical officer. Ill-treatment and torture of inmates for extortion, which has become almost standard practice in Pakistani prisons, was cited as the main cause of that tragedy. Eleven other inmates of the same jail suffering from tuberculosis were denied timely medical facilities so direly needed by them.

One of the major problems in prison life is boredom. Unless convicts have meaningful work to do, they become restless and uncooperative. This is but natural. To combat this problem, in days gone by, jails were partly converted into training institutes and vocational centres to provide training to and develop skill among the convicts so that on release they would become socially productive citizens.

All the goods made in jail by the prisoners were sold to government and private agencies. The inmates were paid a small amount for their work and the rest of the earnings, were kept in their accounts until they were released.

The prisoners, who did not work in jail workshops, performed other duties. They prepared and served food, did laundry, performed clerical work, and repaired buildings. Each was assigned work for which he was best suited by experience, ability and educational background.

A few prisons provided formal education as well as job training, where the inmates were encouraged to study and prepare for examinations leading to high school certificates and university degrees. One wonders if these facilities are still available to the inmates.