

Living Hells

'It's a Kafkaesque world'. So said Dr Binayak Sen, the ace civil rights movement activist, after his release from a Chattisgarh jail. For all practical purposes Indian jails are living hells. Ironically they call them correctional centres a la America. These are in reality de-humanising centres.

But the granting of Dr Sen's bail by the country's apex court after more than two years may be seen as a small step for the Indian judicial system, but a big leap for other prisoners languishing in different jails for years now—not just arrested on false charges but denied the basic right to bail. In truth thousands are counting days in jail in many states after being detained under draconian and black laws like the Chattisgarh Special Public Security Act.

That the underprivileged are being discriminated against even in jail is a fact of life. Dr Sen was shocked to see how prisoners, mainly undertrial prisoners, were being forced to bribe medical and jail assistants to have simple treatment. A prisoner may feel fortunate if a jail doctor deigns to feel the pulse. The situation in Indian jails is simply horrifying.

Then most jails are overcrowded and prisoners live in most unhygienic conditions, perpetually suffering from this ailment or that. Also, there are no political prisoners in any of Indian jails, albeit most of them are political activists in their own area of social activity. All are treated as criminals. The way undertrial prisoners are being kept behind bars for years without trial even under flimsy charges which are after allailable offence according to law of the land mocks at what they call the biggest democracy of the world.

Political parties, ruling or opposition, do not take any interest in de-humanising prison conditions. And most jails maintain the British legacy of poor maintenance and rely on the convicts, mostly lifers, for day to day management of the prison system. There is rampant corruption. Jail is more like a market for the vested interests and even ordinary guards allegedly shop there free of cost. It's a good area of looting with scant vigilance from any quarters. As a result prisoners, undertrial or otherwise, never get their normal quota of food. Nor can they think of medical diet without bribing.

Human Rights Bodies including official national human rights commission focus on illegal detention and police atrocities while doing little to reform jails without which prisoners have no escape from the medieval world.

No doubt the Supreme Court's verdict of May 25 to release Dr Sen has come like fresh drops of rain in what seemed like a wasteland of injustice. Across the country there lies a climate of oppression created by the Indian state's conspiratorial 'war on terror'. A war in which there are no rules, no norms of decency and no inalienable rights of citizens. Unless the authorities completely withdraw the false charges under which Dr Sen was framed, Binayak Sen's trauma of unjust imprisonment will be far from over. □□□