

Just Caged

Time is not with rights activists. Despite their relentless efforts the myth of so-called largest democracy is crumbling as prison population is on the rise across the country. Even the National Human Rights Commission doesn't know how many political prisoners are languishing in over-crowded hell-holes at the moment. So many of the old forms of illegal discrimination and prejudice that were supposedly left behind with the departure of the British are suddenly legal again. Then officially there are no political prisoners in Indian jails as it is the case in America and elsewhere.

Everybody knows the horror of Russian gulag. But nothing is said about American gulag. Or for that matter how ever increasing prison population is being systematically utilised as a source of cheap labour behind the bamboo curtain of China. Granting political status to political opponents is out of question. Liu Jiaobo, Nobel Peace Laureate, is a criminal, not a political prisoner, as per the official Chinese press release. Binayak Sen is not alone who is being treated apolitically for political reasons. This is a universal scenario.

With market in motion, prison sector will soon open opportunities for big investments and public-private partnership as prisoners are multiplying even in states where naxalism is not the dominating political orientation. And India under neo-liberal dispensation is slowly but steadily catching up with America which is at worst a big prison house for the coloured and Latino people.

In 1980 a half million people were in jail in the United States of America. By 2006 the number of prisoners had swollen to 2.3 million, an increase of over 450 percent. And this has hit Black people particularly hard. While African-Americans are 13 percent of the US population, they are over 50 percent of the prison population and are incarcerated at a rate eight times higher than that of whites. 'Today there are more African-Americans in prison or jail, or probation or parole, than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began'. The comparative study for Indian dalits, tribals and underclass is not available but the scenario cannot be anything but worse.

The prison situation in India's neighbour Pakistan, is bone-chilling. Simply put with security police and religious moral police doing the rampage the entire country looks more like a big 'open-air' jail. Nobody knows how many terror suspects have disappeared, almost a Latin American syndrome. To demand political status for prisoners who have committed no crimes other than voicing their dissent against the authorities, is unthinkable even for Pakistan human rights movement which is however too feeble to be heard beyond the border.

When progressives around the world hailed the Iranian Revolution as a return of democratic space which the notorious Shah regime destroyed they never thought euphoria for democrats and liberals would be so short-lived. The Islamic Republic like its predecessor—the Shah Regime—doesn't tolerate any opposition, not to speak of communist opposition, though Iranian communists under the banner of Tudeh Party, once played a significant role in international communist movement. The Ahmadinejad administration has recently sentenced two prominent film-makers—Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rasulo— to six years in jail each on vague charges of working against the ruling system. Panahi has won awards at the Chicago, Cannes and Berlin Film festivals. Strangely enough, he has also been banned from shooting films or scripting for 20 years and barred for leaving the country for the same period. Whether Ahmadinejad will survive that long is another matter as people's defiance against authoritarianism is spreading like wild fire from Tunisia to Egypt.

Indian jails are virtually over-flowing as more and more subalterns refuse to take their fate as granted. But action by the law-enforcing agencies sometimes borders on absurdity as anyone who looks 'Maoist' is a reasonable target for imprisonment. As things are no political party is going to demand political status for prisoners who are in prison, just for raising voice for justice for all. Nor will human rights groups be able to make any sustained campaign for the release of so many political prisoners. Surprisingly, rights watchers who monitor human rights abuses across the country never raise the issue of jail reforms without which dehumanisation will continue. After all the prospects of the authorities releasing political prisoners anytime soon seem remote. Unless rights bodies virorously pursue the demand of political status for political prisoners, police and law enforcement will enjoy enormous impunity and discretion about whom on the streets to view as a terror suspect, who to go after, who to stop and frisk and who to let walk by. □□□