



Convicts' Education In The Jails Of Tamil Nadu

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Shortly after T.B. Macauley arrived in India as a Member of the Council of India, he suggested in 1835 for first suggested the need to improve and reform prisons in India.¹ But he didn't think it was necessary to provide for the education of prisoners. "There is no man whom it would cost more to instruct than a criminal prisoner. None would sooner forget instruction."² While acknowledging Macaulay as a great historian and statesman, one cannot subscribe to his view that education would be a waste of prisoners. Education helps to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, use and abuse, freedom and slavery, God and his angels and satan and his minions. To deny the acquisition of an asset like education to convicts is to deny them a basic human right.

But the situation was fortunately remedied in a couple of decades. The Indian Jails Committee of 1864 recognised education as an important aid to prison discipline, and recommended elementary education in reading, writing, arithmetic, and keeping village accounts.³ It even suggested that educated convicts might be employed as instructors. It is heartening to note that schools started functioning in this presidency in the Penitentiary at Madras, Central Jails at Coimbatore, Rajamundry, Salem, Trichinopoly, and even the District Jails at Bellary, Chingleput, Cuddalore, Cuddapah, Madura, Paumben, Russelcondah and Trichinopoly. 3273 convicts were taught by 191 teachers in 1869.⁴

But the Committee of 1889 found education in Jails imparted in a spirit of indifference: it described the half-hearted attempts to educate the prisoners as a "sham" and a "deception."⁵ The Government of Madras, to make education meaningful and effective, ordered that education should be confined to juvenile delinquents.⁶

Really sincere and serious attempts to educate and enlighten prisoners were made after the publication of the famous Report of the Indian Jails Committee, 1919-20. It is worthy of note that in 1932 only 18.54% of prisoners were literate on admission, and 75.14% of prisoners were literate on discharge. This remarkable improvement was made possible only because of prison schools. Earlier, "the thrust was always in favour of work, more work, more and more work, work suited to age, work suited to health and strength, work suited to their environment once they are back at home"⁷

"Prison schools functioned against heavy odds. Students kept coming in and going out throughout the year; their arrivals and departures depended on their admission to prisons and not according to any academic calendar; they had to learn amid a series of prison tasks; trained teachers were scarce; all those who attended the schools were past school going age; and the tension and trauma of prison life added to their woes. However, a large number of the prisoners overcame the obstacles and equipped themselves with some kind of education. No wonder that S. Nagappan, a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly, remarked that "jails are the best place where adult education could be spread".⁸ Those who desired education beyond elementary level were provided with all possible assistance so that they could continue their studies upto any level. Government records are full of details of convicts appearing for Matriculation, B.A. and B.Com., and even M.A. and M.Com. Examinations. Many

wanted to appear for simple examinations leading to oriental titles like Vidwan. In 1957 as many as 40 candidates appeared for the E.S.I.C. examination, and 22 of them passed; in the same year seven prisoners took the Matriculation examination and two of them came out successful.⁹

In 1959 four inmates took Hindi examinations – two for Prathmic, one each for Rashtrabhasha and Pravesika, and all of them qualified for the title.¹⁰ Departments of Distance Education of Tamil Nadu Universities have taken higher education to prison cells. The Manonmaniam Sundaranar University offers graduate and post. The graduate programme is exclusively for prisoners in Central Prison. This effort is the first of its kind in India.¹¹

The Indra Gandhi National Open University also offers certificate courses on Food and Nutrition and also on Computers. The Government pays the fees for exemption from the production of attendance certificates and allows the candidates to write their examinations in their respective centres in civilian clothes.¹² A few prisoners who could compose poems were permitted to publish their poems during the Second World Tamil Conference. Jails contain even libraries. But it is a matter of regret that the jail libraries are not given adequate encouragement. There were 18,130 books at the beginning of 1950;¹³ the number instead of growing decreased to 9,394 in 1976.¹⁴ “The figures only reveal that the jail libraries decayed over the years, and could not have caused any jubilation among the inmates”¹⁵

However, the situation was remedied when the Local Library Authority opened Delivery Stations in prisons. In the Central Prisons at Madras, Trichy, Madurai, Coimbatore, Salem and Cuddalore, the District jail at Pudukottai, and the State Prison for Women at Vellore,¹⁶ the Library Authorities despatched a set of about 100 to 200 books to each delivery station and replaced the same by fresh sets of books. Prisoners even enjoyed the benefit of reading daily newspapers in Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada.¹⁷ The Tamil newspapers were Dinamani or Dinamani or Sudhesamithran; the Telugu newspapers were Andhra Patra or Andhra Prabha; the Malayalam newspaper was Mathru Bhunia; the Kannada newspaper was Navabharatha. Since 1971. The Government started subscribing to the highly popular Tamil daily Dhinathanthi at the rate of one copy for every 100 prisoners.¹⁸ The comment of C. Venkatesan in this context, is quite interesting: “This is a rare facility which even college libraries cannot boast of.”

It is a matter of surprise that the prison department started publishing 1924 an in-house magazine called the Howard Journal.¹⁹ Unfortunately the journal ceased Publication in 1943 due to shortage of newsprint. In its heyday, the journal contained national and international news, short stories, poems, titbits, and even advertisements of jail-made goods. From what has been said above it is clear that education in jails went from strength to strength, and proved to be a blessing to hundreds of prisoners. But for the provision of education within the four walls of the jails many of the prisoners would have remained illiterates fit of nothing. Jails also did well in offering to the prisoners training in trades. Convicts employed in industries received training from paid instructors. “The best available instruction in up-to-date matters of labour is given to convicts to enable them to command a living wage on release from prisons.”²⁰ If education is understood to be life equipment, prisons play their part well.

End notes

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3. Report of the Indian Jail Committee assembled in Calcutta, in March – April 1864, Calcutta: Bengal Printing Company, 1864.
4. Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency, 1869-70, p. 41.
5. Report of the Committee appointed under the orders of the Governor General, 1889, p. 144.
6. Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency 1890-1891, p. 40.
7. C. Venkatesan “History of Prison Administration In Tamil Nadu,” Project Report submitted to ICHR, New Delhi, 2006, p. 200.
8. Ibid., p. 204.
9. Madras in 1957.
10. Madras in 1959.
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14. C. Venkatesan, “Highlights of Correctional Administration in Tamil Nadu”. Endowment Lecture.
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16. G.O. No. 3916, Home, 4 November 1965, (Madras),
G.O. No. 880, Home, 18 March 1966 (Trichy),
G.O. No. 1825, Home, 3 June 1966, (Madhurai),
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G.O. No. 1136, Home, 17 April, 1967, (Cuddalore),
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19. G.O. No. 1619, Law (General), 17 May 1974.
20. Report on the Administration of Jails in the Madras Presidency, 1975, P.9.