

Tihar prison in India

More dovecote than jail

Prison rarely deters either rich or poor lawbreakers

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AWAY from the crowds and chaos of the roads in Tihar, a district in west Delhi, the ordered calm of prison comes as a relief. Pigeons hop in and out through the bars of the main gate on their way to the dovecote. A dog snoozes in the shade. A pair of painters prop tall ladders against the pink outer walls and then stroll away.

South Asia's largest prison, Tihar jail, houses some 12,000 inmates, among them terrorists, murderers, petty thieves and a smattering of disgraced politicians. Various leaders from the national ruling coalition, led by the Congress party, have recently moved inside, awaiting trial for a series of high-profile graft cases. This week saw the turn of a prominent opposition figure. Bangaru Laxman, once a leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was convicted on April 27th of taking a bribe. He had been secretly filmed in 2001 accepting 100,000 rupees (then \$2,136) from a journalist posing as an arms dealer. He will spend four years in Tihar, unless he wins his appeal.

The slow turning of the wheels of justice is one reason prison seems weak at deterring prominent wrongdoers. Another is that the most privileged inmates seem not to find it terribly uncomfortable inside. A tour of Jail Two, the most spruced-up part that is shown to visitors, houses prisoners passing their days snipping at bonsai trees, overseeing a herb garden and goose pond, and painting murals of idyllic rural scenes and Mahatma Gandhi. The model prison also boasts a thriving bakery, carpentry workshop (a rocking chair will cost you 7,300 rupees), and textile mill. There is a library, music academy and meditation hall.

That the powerful end up behind bars at all, however, is a sign of change. This was first signalled last year when Andimuthu Raja, a former minister accused of overseeing a murky sale of 2G telecom licences, was locked up while awaiting trial. Others followed, including Suresh Kalmadi, charged with graft over the 2010 Commonwealth games.

By global standards India locks few people up, whether rich or poor. Some 370,000 inmates (two-thirds awaiting trial) are spread across nearly 1,400 jails. That represents barely 30 in prison per 100,000 people, a far lower incarceration rate than in China (170), let alone America (730).

Most Indian prisons are far less salubrious than Tihar, with inmates typically enduring overcrowding, poor hygiene and high rates of tuberculosis and HIV. Worse, corruption, intimidation and violence are endemic, activist groups say. Among the pre-trial majority, many of those behind bars are stuck there because they cannot afford the lawyers' fees or bribes for officials that might otherwise get them bail. "Too many are jailed without investigation. The poor have no chance, if they cannot pay for advocates," a senior official complains, as a minion ties his shoelace.

Even in Tihar, an officer grumbles that "prison doesn't work." He frets that inmates lack "fear" and pass their time sharing tips on how to commit crimes. Some inmates, even murderers, can claim seven weeks' parole with their families each year, as long as they are able to post bail. "Prison should be cruel," he insists, brushing aside suggestions that rehabilitation might be better.

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