

When Justice is Corrupt

I am a 47-year-old writer. In 1995 I was incarcerated in a Texas state prison for 10 years, con-victed of a crime I did not commit, crime that had never even occurred. I am college educated and have studied to become a paralegal. My wrongful conviction has changed the focus of my life, and I write many, many articles regarding the corruption of America's "justice" system.

I write articles for colleges, universities, and anybody who'll listen. I have written for two doctoral candidate students' theses, and have assisted an associate professor in Canada in developing his study on American prisons.

And I have paid dearly for it. The Texas prison system does not take kindly to people like me. Persecution comes to those who tell what really happens in here. In 2003, I was kept in solitary confinement where I was left to scoop drinking water from the toilet because it was over 100 degrees outside and that's all the water I had for several days.

Prisons invoke images of biases, politics or nightmares in most of us. A selected few have the truth at hand, but choose to manipulate, sensationalise or suppress it, so that all that's seen by the public is a stereotype designed to instill hatred and fear. A massive prison complex can reap unbelievable monetary gains through public deception and a thinly disguised system of modern-day slavery.

Our politicians and state officials are constantly spewing statistics and examples of failed attempts at rehabilitation, as evidenced by high recidivism rates. Individual accounts are given that suggest poverty, poor family structures or other social ills are the reasons for high recidivism. These are reasons that the public feel they have no control over, and they, therefore, opt to protect themselves through tougher laws and stiffer sentencing.

Readers' Forum

In many instances, individual case studies suggested that recidivism had little or nothing to do with poverty, addiction, or a prisoner's family history. The prison experience itself was ruining individual lives beyond repair. To a large degree, rehabilitation is not at all a concern for today's prison administrator. And while a plethora of services, programmes and opportunities exist on paper, apparently to placate a superficially inquisitive, tax-paying public, most programmes offer little by way of assistance and are out of reach of many prisoners. Moreover, it appears that many such programmes have little appeal among today's inmates.

Indeed, studies prove that today's prisoner, inside the prison and even after being released, suffers from a psycho-social illness akin to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, usually resulting from an emotional or cultural blow that shocks the conscience.



Americans looking for proof need only call their local legislators and ask for an opportunity to tour one of the prisons their tax dollars provides for. Excuses, barriers and unreasonable stipulations will be tossed in front of them; they will be offered pamphlets, statistics and phone numbers — everything, that is, except an opportunity to visit.

There are indeed some frightening people behind bars. But there is also evidence that there are many innocent people in them who are incarcerated. Unspeakable horrors take place behind bars; the very administrators we pay handsomely to protect us may actually be placing the society in danger by releasing upon the unsuspecting public emotionally damaged human beings whose later mis-conduct is the direct result of prison mistreatment.

All across America, our fathers, brothers/sisters, and mothers are being released back into an unsuspecting society that believes reports by the media and parole boards about rehabilitation of prisoners. Nothing could be farther from the truth. People are coming out of prisons with ugly prejudices, hatred and an anger in their hearts they simply did not have before their incarceration; dark shadows of an ill-fought exercise in survival, a war fought behind high walls and razor wire not designed to keep them in, but to keep you — the general public — out. Prisons are not about rehabilitation. They are about oppressive control and psychological manipulations. Prisons can actually exacerbate criminal behaviour.

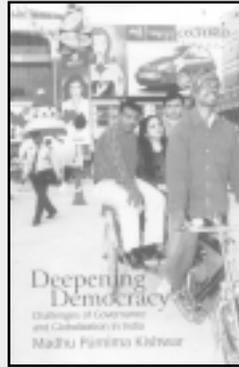
How does this happen? Quite frankly, it happens because the public has adopted an out-of-sight-out-of-



mind attitude towards state prisoners. There is little demand for accountability at any level. Ask any State and it will quickly produce a plethora of programmes, services and systems of judicial protections designed, ostensibly, to protect the rights of the accused while also minimising the costs and taxes that the public has to pay. And while these programmes and services look good on paper, they simply don't exist in a real prison environment. At best, only a small percentage of such programmes or services are available to an even smaller percentage of those who are eligible, or have any motivation to succeed. For a majority of the prisoners, each day is a struggle just to survive, to preserve some sense of human dignity, and to battle personal feelings of loneliness, fear, hatred, humiliation and anxiety.

Oh yes, it's nothing short of war. And the odds are very much against you. For years, I fought my oppressors by day and my own feelings of helplessness at night. I had no family to fall back on. No money. No friends to help me. More than once, I saw people similarly situated tie their sheets into knots and end their misery. I raised walls, fences, swords and shields to protect myself from death. Am I alive? No, I have been reduced to a person without a soul. Therefore, I can neither say that I have won, nor that I am winning.

Rafael Vasquez, Texas, USA



Deepening Democracy Challenges of Governance and Globalization in India (Oxford University Press)

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