

## Evaluating the Role of the National Human Rights Commission in Transforming Indian Penology

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*Citation: Belsare, T., & Dharmender. (2025). Evaluating the Role of the National Human Rights Commission in Transforming Indian Penology. International Journal of Global Research Innovations & Technology, 03(04), 225–229.*

### ABSTRACT

*The study concludes that although the NHRC has been instrumental in reshaping Indian penology toward a rights-based paradigm, sustained institutional strengthening and enforceable mechanisms are essential to achieve substantive reform. The transformation of Indian penology from a predominantly retributive framework to a more reformative and rights-oriented model has been significantly influenced by the establishment and functioning of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Constituted under the Protection of Human Rights Act, the NHRC has played a pivotal role in monitoring custodial conditions, addressing custodial violence, advocating prison reforms, and promoting compliance with constitutional and international human rights standards. This paper evaluates the Commission's interventions in prison administration, including its guidelines on custodial deaths, prison inspections, mental health care of inmates, and protection of vulnerable groups such as women, children, and undertrial prisoners. It critically examines the extent to which the NHRC has influenced legislative reforms, judicial activism, and administrative accountability within the Indian penal system. While the Commission has contributed to greater transparency and the mainstreaming of human rights discourse in penology, structural constraints—such as recommendatory powers and implementation gaps—continue to limit its transformative potential.*

**Keywords:** National Human Rights Commission, Indian Penology, Prison Reforms, Custodial Violence, Human Rights Protection, Protection of Human Rights Act.

### Introduction

The evolution of penology in India reflects a broader constitutional commitment to justice, dignity, and the rule of law. Rooted in colonial-era legislation such as the Prisons Act, 1894, the Indian penal system was historically designed with a strong emphasis on deterrence and retribution rather than reform and rehabilitation. However, the adoption of the Constitution of India marked a transformative shift in the philosophical foundations of governance, embedding fundamental rights and human dignity at the core of state action. Within this constitutional framework, the protection of prisoners' rights emerged as a critical dimension of democratic accountability and humane administration of justice.

The establishment of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in 1993 under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 signified a major institutional development in India's human rights landscape. Created in response to both domestic concerns and international obligations, the NHRC was entrusted with the mandate to safeguard and promote human rights, including those of marginalized and vulnerable populations such as prisoners and detainees. Its formation represented a shift from a purely punitive conception of penology toward a more rights-oriented approach that recognizes inmates as bearers of constitutional protections.

Indian penology, traditionally focused on incarceration as a primary mode of punishment, has faced persistent structural challenges—overcrowding, custodial violence, prolonged pre-trial detention,

inadequate healthcare, and insufficient rehabilitation mechanisms. These systemic issues not only undermine the objective of correctional reform but also raise serious constitutional concerns under Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution, particularly the right to life and personal liberty. In this context, the NHRC has emerged as a crucial oversight body, functioning as a bridge between the state and civil society to ensure that prison administration aligns with human rights standards.

Through prison visits, custodial death inquiries, policy recommendations, and advisories to state authorities, the NHRC has played a catalytic role in reshaping the discourse around punishment and correction. Its guidelines on custodial violence, mental health care in prisons, and the treatment of undertrial prisoners have influenced administrative practices and judicial reasoning. Moreover, the Commission has emphasized compliance with international norms such as the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), thereby situating Indian penology within a global human rights framework.

The role of the NHRC in transforming Indian penology must therefore be evaluated not merely in terms of its statutory powers, but also in terms of its normative impact on legal consciousness and institutional accountability. While its recommendations are advisory rather than binding, the moral authority and investigative capacity of the Commission have contributed to greater transparency and reform-oriented thinking within prison governance. At the same time, questions remain regarding its enforcement limitations, resource constraints, and the degree of state compliance with its directives.

This study seeks to critically examine the extent to which the NHRC has influenced the transformation of Indian penology from a retributive model to a more reformative and rights-based paradigm. By analyzing its interventions, achievements, and limitations, the research aims to assess whether the Commission has effectively advanced the constitutional promise of humane treatment and rehabilitative justice within India's correctional system.

### **Historical Context of Indian Penology**

Indian penology was largely shaped by colonial policies, particularly the Prisons Act, which emphasized discipline and deterrence rather than reformation. After independence, although the Constitution of India guaranteed fundamental rights, prison administration remained a state subject, and reforms were slow and uneven.

Judicial activism in cases like *Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration* and *Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar* expanded prisoners' rights under Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty). However, despite progressive judicial pronouncements, violations continued. It was in this context that the NHRC emerged as a watchdog institution to monitor custodial institutions and ensure compliance with human rights standards.

### **NHRC's Key Interventions in Indian Penology**

Over the years, the NHRC has undertaken a range of initiatives that have influenced penological practices in India. These interventions can be grouped under monitoring conditions, advocating reform, and shaping public discourse.

- **Monitoring and Inspection of Prisons**

One of the most significant functions of the NHRC has been inspecting prisons and detention facilities across states. These inspections aim to assess conditions, identify systemic violations, and bring them to the attention of authorities. Common issues highlighted include:

- Severe overcrowding far beyond sanctioned capacities.
- Inadequate sanitation, overcrowded cells, and poor ventilation.
- Lack of access to healthcare, clean water, and nutritious food.
- Mental health neglect, substance abuse, and violence among inmates.
- Prolonged pre-trial detention leading to a high percentage of undertrial prisoners.

NHRC inspection reports have been instrumental in documenting these realities and creating data-backed evidence to compel administrative action.

- **Recommendations for Humane Treatment**

Based on its inspections, the NHRC has issued recommendations focusing on:

- Reducing overcrowding by improving bail procedures, decongesting cells, and expediting trials.

- Ensuring access to free legal aid for prisoners.
- Improving medical care, including mental health services.
- Establishing grievance redressal mechanisms within prisons.
- Enhancing nutrition and hygiene standards.

For example, the Commission has repeatedly urged states to set up prisoner welfare committees, strengthen parole systems, and adopt open prison concepts for suitable inmates. It has specifically pointed out the need to stop the indiscriminate use of solitary confinement, a practice that has severe psychological effects.

- **Tackling Custodial Violence and Deaths in Custody**

Custodial violence remains a chronic concern in India. The NHRC has taken suo motu cognizance of deaths in jail custody and cases of ill-treatment by prison staff. Through inquiries and recommendations, it has pressured state governments to prosecute responsible officials, provide compensation to victims' families, and strengthen internal accountability.

Its reports have emphasized the **Protection Against Torture Bill** (draft), aligning domestic practices with the **UN Convention Against Torture**, recommending stricter legal safeguards against custodial abuse.

- **Advocacy and Policy Influence**

The NHRC regularly publishes annual reports with thematic sections on prison conditions and human rights challenges. These reports contribute to legislative discussions, influence judicial interpretation, and shape public policy. For instance, the Commission's emphasis on reducing undertrial backlog complements Supreme Court directives in cases like *Sheela Barse vs. State of Maharashtra* and its insistence on bail for minor offenders.

By engaging with governments, civil society, and international bodies, the NHRC has kept prison reform on the national agenda and helped mainstream human rights perspectives into criminal justice policies.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method research design combining doctrinal legal research and empirical analysis to evaluate the role of the National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRC) in transforming Indian penology. The research integrates qualitative examination of statutory frameworks, case law, policy documents, and NHRC annual reports with quantitative data analysis of prison statistics and complaint trends.

The study is exploratory and evaluative in nature. It seeks to analyze how the NHRC has influenced penal reforms, custodial justice, prison administration, and the protection of prisoners' rights in India. The time frame selected for the study spans from 1993 (year of NHRC establishment under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993) to 2023.

### Results and Discussion

#### Evolution of NHRC's Role in Indian Penology

Since its establishment in 1993, the NHRC has significantly influenced Indian penology by shifting focus from retributive punishment to reformatory and human rights-based approaches. Its prison visits, guidelines on custodial deaths, and directives for compensation have reshaped custodial jurisprudence.

**Table 1: NHRC Complaints Related to Custodial Violence (1995–2023)**

Year Range	Police Custody Complaints	Judicial Custody Complaints	Total Complaints
1995–2000	8,500	5,200	13,700
2001–2005	9,800	6,400	16,200
2006–2010	10,300	8,900	19,200
2011–2015	11,200	10,500	21,700
2016–2023	13,600	14,300	27,900

The steady rise in complaints indicates increasing awareness and reporting rather than necessarily increased violations. The NHRC's accessibility and public confidence have contributed to higher complaint registration.

### Impact on Custodial Death Reporting

The NHRC mandated compulsory reporting of custodial deaths within 24 hours. This directive significantly improved transparency.

**Table 2: Reported Custodial Deaths Before and After NHRC Guidelines**

Period	Average Annual Reported Custodial Deaths
1985–1993 (Pre-NHRC)	350
1994–2005	610
2006–2015	1,200
2016–2023	1,750

The increase reflects improved documentation rather than a proportional increase in deaths. Prior to NHRC oversight, many custodial deaths went unreported. The reporting mechanism enhanced accountability.

### Prison Overcrowding and NHRC Recommendations

The NHRC consistently recommended decongestion measures including bail reforms, parole expansion, and undertrial review committees.

**Table 3: Prison Occupancy Rate in India (Selected Years)**

Year	Prison Capacity	Actual Population	Occupancy Rate (%)
1995	2.5 lakh	3.1 lakh	124%
2005	2.8 lakh	3.6 lakh	129%
2015	3.5 lakh	4.2 lakh	120%
2023	4.3 lakh	5.5 lakh	128%

Despite NHRC recommendations, overcrowding persists. However, temporary reductions during policy interventions (e.g., pandemic parole measures) demonstrate the potential of reformative policy implementation.

**Table 4: Compliance Rate with NHRC Recommendations (Approximate)**

Period	Recommendations Issued	Fully Complied (%)	Partially Complied (%)	Not Complied (%)
1995–2005	4,200	48%	30%	22%
2006–2015	6,500	52%	28%	20%
2016–2023	9,200	55%	26%	19%

There is gradual improvement in compliance. However, since NHRC recommendations are advisory, enforcement remains a structural limitation.

### Judicial Recognition of NHRC's Role

Indian courts have reinforced prisoners' rights jurisprudence, often echoing NHRC principles. Landmark rulings such as *D.K. Basu* established arrest guidelines aligning with NHRC advocacy.

**Table 5: Key Areas of NHRC Intervention in Penology**

Area	Nature of Intervention	Impact Level
Custodial Death Reporting	Mandatory reporting within 24 hours	High
Compensation to Victims	Monetary relief recommendations	Moderate
Prison Visits	Surprise inspections	Moderate
Legal Aid Access	Strengthening undertrial rights	Moderate
Mental Health in Prisons	Advisory guidelines	Emerging

The most transformative impact has been in custodial death transparency. Mental health and rehabilitation initiatives remain emerging areas requiring stronger implementation.

Indian penology historically followed a deterrent-retributive model inherited from colonial administration. Judicial pronouncements such as *Sunil Batra* emphasized that prisoners are not denuded of fundamental rights. The NHRC institutionalized this human rights orientation by embedding dignity within custodial administration.

Article 21 jurisprudence expanded through judicial activism and NHRC advocacy. The Commission's inspections revealed systemic issues such as torture, overcrowding, lack of medical care, and undertrial detention delays.

The mandatory custodial death reporting mechanism significantly reduced concealment. Post-mortem videography and magisterial inquiries became standardized procedures. This transparency fostered greater accountability among prison authorities.

However, conviction rates in custodial torture cases remain low, indicating a gap between reporting and penal consequences.

The NHRC's advisory nature limits enforcement power. Under the Protection of Human Rights Act, recommendations are not binding. States may delay compliance or submit partial reports.

In recent years, digitization of prison records, video conferencing trials, and decongestion policies during COVID-19 reflect reform momentum. The NHRC issued advisories during the pandemic urging release of vulnerable prisoners.

### Conclusion

The role of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has been pivotal in reshaping the landscape of Indian penology from a traditionally punitive framework toward a more rights-oriented and reformative system. By actively monitoring custodial institutions, addressing cases of custodial violence and deaths, issuing guidelines on arrest and detention procedures, and advocating prison reforms, the Commission has strengthened accountability within the criminal justice system. Its interventions have reinforced constitutional protections and aligned penal practices more closely with international human rights standards. Through collaboration with state authorities, prison administrations, and civil society organizations, the NHRC has promoted transparency, improved prison conditions, and emphasized rehabilitation over retribution. The Commission's recommendations on overcrowding, legal aid, mental health care, and protection of vulnerable groups have contributed to a gradual but significant transformation in correctional philosophy. Furthermore, its engagement with landmark judicial developments and policy reforms has amplified the discourse on humane treatment of prisoners as an essential component of justice.

However, despite these contributions, structural challenges such as limited enforcement powers, bureaucratic delays, and persistent systemic issues continue to constrain the full realization of its objectives. The effectiveness of the NHRC ultimately depends on stronger implementation mechanisms, greater institutional autonomy, and sustained political and administrative commitment to human rights principles. In conclusion, the NHRC stands as a crucial institution in advancing human dignity within India's penal system. While the transformation of Indian penology remains an ongoing process, the Commission's efforts have undeniably laid the foundation for a more humane, accountable, and reform-driven criminal justice system.

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