



PRISONS IN GUYANA: THEIR STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

(LAS PRISIONES EN GUYANA: SU ESTRUCTURA Y ORGANIZACION)

By Tara Singh
The University of Guyana.

RESUMEN

La doble función de proteger a la sociedad y de rehabilitar al delincuente por medio de la prisión, está basada en nuestra concepción, tradicionalmente heredada, de justicia, la cual no siempre llena las necesidades de una sociedad que se encuentra en estado de transición; esto es, que pasa del colonialismo a un socialismo democrático.

La necesidad de una auto-confianza en medio de un ambiente económico hostil, demanda nuevos enfoques de las políticas penales. De este modo, la prisión debe de ser considerada como uno de los principales instrumentos en el proceso de transformación de la sociedad en lugar de una carga o responsabilidad pública. De acuerdo con lo anterior, se ha dado un mayor énfasis al manejo de la capacidad productiva de los recursos de las prisiones; por ejemplo, las prisiones son ahora consideradas incluso como unidades económicamente productivas.

Con todo lo recomendable que este objetivo pueda ser, nosotros, sin embargo, no debemos de perder de vista nuestras obligaciones de ayuda para que el prisionero desarrolle una imagen positiva de sí mismo, lo cual le ayudaría considerablemente a facilitar sus problemas de ajuste en la sociedad, a partir del momento en que salga de la prisión.

El aumentar la producción económica y el mejorar la auto-estima de los prisioneros son los componentes integrales de la administración penitenciaria en países como Guyana.

ABSTRACT

The dual function of 'protecting society and rehabilitating offenders' by the prison is based upon our inherited traditional conception of justice which could not currently meet the needs of a society that is in a state of transition, i.e. from colonialism to democratic socialism.

The need for self-reliance in a hostile economic environment demands new approaches towards penal policies. Thus, the prison must be considered a major instrument in the societal transformation process rather than be conceived as a public liability/burden. In accordance with this position, greater emphasis is given towards the harnessing of the productive capacity of prison resources. i.e. prisons are now largely being viewed as economically productive units.

However commendable this objective is, we must not lose sight of our obligation to help the prisoner develop a positive self-image which could considerably ease his problems of adjustment in the wider society and consequently upon his release from prison.

Boosting economic production and enhancing prisoners' self-esteem are integral components of prison administration in countries such as Guyana.

INTRODUCTION

Law must express society's common interest and needs as they arise from the various material methods of production against the arbitrariness of the individual. Marx contended, for example, that "you cannot make old laws the foundation of a new social development any more than these old laws created the old conditions" (MARX: 1849). Partly for this reason one could argue that the PEOPLE'S NEW CONSTITUTION (1980) of Guyana has been promulgated with a view to facilitating and reflecting the perceived changing values and attitudes that tend to accompany or follow a society in a state of transition. In Guyana, cooperativism has been identified as the major instrument that would promote the transformation of institutions, attitudes and social relations.

Cooperativism in practice shall be the dynamic principle of socialist transformation and shall pervade and inform all inter-relationships in the society. Co-operativism is rooted in the historical experience of the people, is based on self-reliance, is capable of releasing the productive energies of the people, and is a unifying principle in the total development of the nation.

(ARTICLE 16 – PEOPLE'S NEW CONSTITUTION, 1980).

Not unrelated to the above assertion is the evolution of our legal system. While emphasis has been placed on the changing role of law enforcement agencies (e.g., through the Administration of Justice Act, 1978 and The Criminal Law Bill, 1980) less attention was devoted to correctional institutions and penal policy in general. Since law enforcement and penal policy are essential and inseparable components of the administration of justice, it has become imperative that appropriate weighting be given

to the latter.

What follows is a brief descriptive account of the structure and organization of the prison system in Guyana. This article does not pretend to offer any marked degree of analytic refinement at this point in time—since this aspect could only be adequately dealt with when the relevant data would have become available to the author— but rather, must be viewed as a modest attempt to identify the characteristics of the structure and organization of Guyana's major penal institution viz, the prison.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Guyana Prison service comes under severe pressure in its efforts to fulfil what is considered to be its dual function of 'protecting society and rehabilitating offenders'. This is largely due to lack of adequate financing, inadequate accommodation—both in terms of physical layout of buildings and the amount of space available—and a shortage of suitably qualified staff¹.

There are four (4) main prisons² in Guyana which service the three counties of Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo. Two (2) are in Demerara, the principal administrative county and one each in Essequibo and Berbice. The daily average population of these prisons for the following six (6) years was:

New Amsterdam Prison: This reception prison which is located in the county of Berbice caters for all types of offenders with varying periods of imprisonment. It has a female block which is staffed by female officers and houses only female offenders³.

Georgetown Prison: This is a reception prison and is sited in the county of Demerara. It provides for all categories of male offenders with varying periods of sentences and acts as a depot from which

| YEAR | PRISON POPULATION | RATIO OF PRISON POPULATION TO TOTAL POPULATION IN SOCIETY AT RISK |
|------|-------------------|---|
| 1973 | 1,057 | 1 : 151 |
| 1974 | 1,173 | 1 : 136 |
| 1975 | 1,134 | 1 : 141 |
| 1976 | 924 | 1 : 194 |
| 1977 | 962 | 1 : 187 |
| 1978 | 1,101 | 1 : 163 |

From 1975 onwards, there was a dramatic downturn in the economy (SINGH: 1982). Note the reduced tendency to sentence people to imprisonment despite the upsurge in criminal activity. The financial cost of imprisonment to the state has become a factor in the sentencing process.

some prisoners are transferred to and from the other prisons according to their "classification".

Mazaruni Prison: Which is situated in the interior of the county of Essequibo has two sections. The main one, i.e., the MAZARUNI PRISON, accommodates adult "ordinary" offenders⁴ i.e., persons who have been in prison more than once and serving sentences from six months and over. The other section is located at Sibley Hall and is one quarter of a mile from the Mazaruni Prison. It caters for young offenders between the ages of seventeen and twenty one and who are serving sentences of six months and over and are in prison for the first time. Adult "star" offenders (i.e. those male adults who are in prison for the first time and serving sentences of six months and over) are also kept in this section.

The two sections function separately. Each has its own farm and general working and recreational facilities. Prisoners from both sections are transferred to the Georgetown Prison one month prior to their respective dates of release. Each prison is under the control of a Senior Superintendent of Prisons.

TIMEHRI YOUNG OFFENDERS CENTRE (TYOC): Prior to December 1972 all young offenders—both untried and convicted—within the Demerara and Essequibo areas were admitted to the Georgetown Prison. This practice had the effect of placing the young offender under the influence of the adult and more experienced offenders and thus, increasing their chances of becoming "institutionalized" and lured into the "inmate subculture". Such a situation was regarded as unsatisfactory for the effective rehabilitation of the young offender.

In order to eliminate/minimize this negative impact upon the young offender, it became necessary to remove him from the influence of the adult to a less contaminating environment, where "treatment" and control could be administered more effectively. At the same time, such a measure reduced the overcrowding problem of the Georgetown Prison.

TYOC is a minimum security prison. It is located at Timehri on the East Bank of the Demerara River about twenty five miles from the capital city of Georgetown. It is a reception centre that was first occupied on December 27, 1972, and it caters for all categories of young offenders i.e., persons under the age of twenty one - both untried and convicted.⁵

TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Attempts are being made to formulate a broadly based general training scheme under which the following are pursued:

- i) **Academic Programmes:** The purpose of academic classes is to equip participants with knowledge and ability so that they could become meaningfully integrated within their respective communities and the society in general. Reading and Writing are very important communication links between the prisoner and the outside community. The ability to read and to write is a pre-requisite in his quest for information and higher learning.

Training involves such subjects as English, Arithmetic, West Indian History, and Social Studies. Programmes are designed for both the illiterate and semi-literate offenders.

Persons who have been pursuing higher courses of learning prior to being incarcerated are given the opportunity to pursue their particular studies and to write examinations. In some instances resource personnel from academic institutions have cooperated by helping to prepare these persons for their examinations and also to invigorate them. In addition, there is opportunity for receiving textbooks and other necessary aids from sources outside of the institution. Much assistance and encouragement are given by the administration in this regard.

Literacy and semi-literacy classes are conducted by qualified officers, and whenever suitable qualified inmates are identified, their skills are utilized.

CRAFT COURSES

The majority of inmates tend to fall within the classification of unskilled and semi-skilled labourers. Craft training is therefore considered to be of vital importance to the administration, especially in terms of its policy towards self-reliance and self-sufficiency; for in addition to the fact that it equips trainees with basic skills in various prison projects. Courses are conducted by Prison Trade Instructors. They cover both theoretical and practical work. Courses are conducted at both internal and external levels and offer opportunities in carpentry and joinery, masonry, plumbing, steel fabrication, tailoring, printing and book-binding, welding, motor and agriculture mechanics and electrical engineering. The duration of courses at the internal level, depends on the objective of the particular course and the level of intelligence of the selected participants. The courses which are work-study in nature expose the participants to mathematics, science, drawing and the theoretical aspects of the particular trade in the classroom as well as to practical work in the trade shops. Jobs undertaken by instructors and trainees in practical work situations include construction and maintenance. The successful participants of such courses are then eligible for external courses of a similar nature.

AGRICULTURE PROGRAMMES

The Penitentiary System, in keeping with the agricultural thrust of the country as a whole, has an elaborate agriculture programme in which many inmates are involved. The purpose of this programme is two-fold:

- 1) acquisition of skills, and

- 2) achieving self-sufficiency in certain dietary items.

Trainees are exposed to basic farming methods and management practices in a variety of farming areas such as rice, ground provision, legumes, coconuts, poultry and livestock. They are taught the techniques of soil preparation, sowing of seeds, transplanting, nurturing, pest control, harvesting, storing, and marketing. In the livestock area: stock selection, breeding, pasturing, foddering, castrating, slaughtering and carcass-storing are also taught. Acquisition of skills in these areas tends to justify every effort and expenditure incurred by the administration, especially when it is taken into account that whatever is produced by these training schemes forms part of the institution's dietary intake. Surpluses which are sold through Government Marketing Agencies help to provide revenue for the central administration. At this point, perhaps, it is appropriate to note two things:

- 1) most of the agricultural tools and fencing which are used on the farms are designed and built by inmates engaged in the technical training programmes; and
- 2) a fair percentage of inmates, as a result of such training, were able upon their release to gain employment in both public and private institutions.

The scope for the implementation of this agricultural programme varies. Trainees are directly under the supervision of Farm Supervisors. The varied nature of the programme includes practical experience in the cultivation of approximately one hundred acres of rice, the yield of which is in excess of the institution's need. Also, practical experience is gained in dairy cattle and pig farming of which there were 185 cows and 400 pigs (in 1980).

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

In many institutions physical education plays a very important part in their daily operations. Physical education is geared to cushion the mental and physical deterioration attendant on life while in prison, to stimulate the inmate's mind and to increase his self-esteem as a citizen. It also tends to act as an unifying factor among inmates.

Physical education within the institutional system is pursued not only internally but also externally. With this in mind, the administration uses officers who are knowledgeable in this area in addition to the services of coaches from other institutions in the wider society, such as the Amateur Athletic Association. This programme is geared

to prepare inmates not only for their physical and mental well-being but also to enable them to compete with other inmates at both the inter-prison and the national and international levels. Inmates are particularly keen on boxing and football and have formed themselves into clubs; fielding teams at almost every national competition. Some of them represent Guyana at international competitions.

CULTURAL PROGRAMME

The main thrust of the cultural programme has been in the field of drama. The Prison's Drama Club has earned for itself a remarkable list of national awards at drama festivals. Many of the plays performed were scripted by the inmates themselves. Prisoners also have their own steelbands which perform regularly at concerts and on festive occasions.

CONCLUSION

Despite these activities that are geared towards the successful rehabilitation/adjustment of prisoners within the wider society, rates of recidivism remain at a relatively high level i.e. roughly 70.0 per cent. The inevitable question that follows is: "For how long will the prison be a REVOLVING DOOR"? When our research project on penal policy ends, some light would be shed on this problem.

NOTES

1. "Report on the Operation of the Guyana Prison Service", presented by the staff of the Training Unit, Guyana Prison Service, to the FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CRIME AND THE PENAL SYSTEM IN GUYANA, University of Guyana, 1974.
2. At present, a policy is being pursued to have 'prison camps' established in agricultural areas. It is felt that by taking prisoners to the land would not only relieve overcrowding but also provide them with an opportunity to participate in agricultural tasks within the context of the government's drive towards agricultural expansion and diversification. To date, three such camps have been sited on the East Coast of Demerara. Escapes from custody are rare.
3. Female inmates account for less than 1.0% of the entire country's prison population.
4. These are generally referred to as recidivists or habitual offenders.
5. This move reflects one of the very few innovations of the penal system since Independence in 1966.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BRANA-SHUTTE, G. "A Profile on Juvenile Delinquency in Paramaribo", Paper presented at Caricrma conference in Jamaica, 24 - 28th March, 1980.
- CLINARD, M.B., ABBOTT, D.J. *Crime in Developing Societies: A Comparative Perspective*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1973.
- CORNES, P.F. "Some Problems of Prison Administration and Prison Reform: Paper delivered at First National Conference on Crime and the Penal System, 28.8.74-1.9.74, University of Guyana, E.C.D.
- JONES, H. "Crime and the Penal System", London University Tutorial Press, 1965.
- JONES, H., PARRIS, M., SINGH, T. *Crime in Guyana*, University of Wales, up MS, 1975.
- MURRAY, C.N. "Possible Methods of Treating Offenders" in *Guyana Journal of Sociology*, Vol 3, 1977.
- PARRIS, M., DODD, D.J. "Representation in Criminal Cases in the Courts of Guyana: The need for Legal Aid", in *Guyana Law Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2.
- PARRIS, M. "Juvenile Delinquency in Guyana: Trends Prison Service" Paper presented at the First National Conference on Crime and the Penal System in Guyana, 28.8.74-1.9.74, University of Guyana.
- PRATT, E. "Report on the Operation of the Guyana Prison Service" Paper presented at the First National Conference on Crime and the Penal System in Guyana, 28.8.74-1.9.74, University of Guyana.
- REID, P.A. "Opening Address" to First National Conference on Crime and the Penal System in Guyana, 28.8.74-1.9.74, University of Guyana.
- SINGH, T. "Race, Crime and Culture: A Study of Indians in Guyana", PhD thesis, University of Wales, 1978.
- SINGH, T. *Aspects of Indian Family Pathology: Suicide and Homicide*, up MS, University of Guyana, 1982.
- SINGH, T., PARRIS, M. *Alcoholism and Drug Abuse in Guyana*, up MS for UNESCO, U.G. 1981.
- SINGH, T., PARRIS, M. *Deviant Response to an Economy in Crisis: The Emergence of a Parallel Economy*, up MS, University of Guyana, 1982.
- TAYLOR, et al. *Critical Criminology*, London, Routledge and Kegan, Paul, 1974.