

BEYOND WALLS: THE E-PRISON REVOLUTION IN THE INDIAN CRIMINAL JUDICIAL SYSTEM

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Introduction

“E-Prison” describes incorporating digital technologies in prison management to increase efficiency, security, and transparency. It encompasses biometric identification, AI-based surveillance, digital case management, virtual court hearings, and online visitation systems. By updating conventional prison systems, E-Prisons seek to simplify prison governance while improving compliance with human rights and legal standards.¹

The management of Indian prisons traces its beginnings to the colonial period, with the Prisons Act of 1894 as the initial foundation legal framework. In the period under British rule, prisons existed for punishment and deterrence more than rehabilitation. The atmosphere was challenging, and little attention was given to inmate welfare and reformative justice. After independence, attempts were made to correct prison conditions, which led to the Model Prison Manual (2016), which proposed guidelines for inmate rights, reform, and prison security. Issues like overcrowding, corruption, lengthy trials, and poor inmate conditions persist in the system.²

Identifying these concerns, the Indian Government initiated the “E-Prisons Project” under the Ministry of Home Affairs, which focuses on computerizing prison administration. Through AI-based monitoring, online legal aid, and electronic grievance redressal, E-Prisons has the potential to increase transparency, curb corruption, and promote the welfare of inmates. Additionally, the project supports India's endeavor toward Digital India and judicial reforms to make prison administration accountable, efficient, and humane.³

By incorporating technology in prison administration, India can tackle systemic problems while maintaining the values of justice, security, and rehabilitation.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THE EVOLUTION OF E-PRISONS IN INDIA

Colonial laws and contemporary reforms guide India's prison system to ensure security, rehabilitation, and prisoners' rights. The Prisons Act of 1894 was the primary legislation introduced for administrative purposes and not reform. Legal developments like the Model Prison Manual, 2016 gradually brought in guidelines for welfare, rehabilitation, and better prison conditions for inmates. Further, the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and Bhartiya Nyaya Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, contain detailed imprisonment, bail, and parole procedures. Article 21 (Right to Life) and Article 39A (Right to Legal Aid) of the Indian Constitution also provide that prisoners are treated respectfully and have access to legal recourse.⁴

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) launched India's E-Prison Project on March 26, 2018, ordering States and Union Territories to computerize prisoner records, court cases, and administrative steps. To aid its

¹ National Informatics Centre, *ePrisons*, <https://www.nic.in/project/eprisons/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

² Prisons in India: An Overview of Reforms and Current Situation, <https://home.rajasthan.gov.in/content/dam/pdf/StaffCorner/Training-Material/Useful-Presentations-And-Videos/Overview%20of%20prisons%20in%20India.pdf> (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

³ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Implementation of E-Prisons Project in Prisons of All States & UTs* (Mar. 26, 2018), https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-09/Advisory05_04092024.pdf (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

⁴ Prison Reform in India, *PW Only IAS*, <https://pwonlyias.com/current-affairs/prison-reform-in-india/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

implementation, between 2017 and 2020, a ₹100 crore budget was distributed at ₹33 crore in both 2017-18 and 2018-19 and ₹34 crore in 2019-20.⁵

The E-Prison Project has attracted substantial judicial acceptance as an effort to bring change within India's criminal justice system. The intervention of the Supreme Court in prison reforms started in 2021, when it took suo motu cognizance in *In Re Policy Strategy for Grant of Bail*, considering the pendency of bail and congestion of prisons. Knowing that releasing inmates is inefficient, the Court ordered the country-wide integration of the E-Prison system with judicial databases on November 29, 2022, to ensure immediate updates regarding prisoners' case statuses and avoid illegal detentions.⁶ Additionally, on April 29, 2023, the Chief Justice of India launched the Bail Orders Sharing Module, enabling courts to send digitally signed bail orders directly to prisons, reducing administrative delays substantially.⁷

By February 15, 2025, the Supreme Court instructed state governments to enact vital reforms such as improved tracking for cases without official records, merging jail IDs and case numbers into a centralized database, and forming standardization for use in communication between courts and prisons. The judicial infrastructure backing the E-Prison Project aligns with several landmark judgments that uphold prisoner rights and justice efficiency.⁸

The Indian Supreme Court, in recognition of judicial supervision, suo motu cognizance was taken of jail overcrowding and delay in release on bail in 2021 and emphasized the use of technology in prison management. The Court began monitoring undertrial prisoners and convicts and directed authorities to use the E-Prison portal for effective case management. Further advancements were made when the Supreme Court directed the integration of the judicial databases with the E-Prison system to give real-time updates on prisoner information.

THE NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF E-PRISONS

Indian prisons are highly overcrowded, with occupancy levels frequently over 100%, resulting in unsatisfactory living conditions, poor healthcare, and rising violence among inmates. Security issues, such as prison riots, breakouts, and corruption, also burden the system, while administrative inefficiencies cause trial processes to be delayed and records to be mismanaged. Furthermore, human rights issues, including custodial violence and restricted access to legal assistance, hamper the rehabilitation of prisoners.⁹

The E-Prison system provides a technological answer to these chronic problems. Digital inmate biometrics and records guarantee identification and effective case management, easing administration. AI surveillance and monitoring boost security by automatically identifying suspect behaviour in real time to forestall violence

⁵ Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, *Advisory on E-Prisons Project* (Sept. 4, 2024), https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-09/Advisory05_04092024.pdf (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

⁶ *In Re Policy Strategy for Grant of Bail* (SMW (Cr.) No. 4/2021).

⁷ Bhumika Indulia, *CJI Inaugurates Digital Courts for Contested Traffic Challans and Bail Orders Sharing Module on E-Prison Platform*, SCC ONLINE (Apr. 29, 2023), <https://www.sconline.com/blog/post/2023/04/29/cji-inaugurates-digital-courts-for-contested-traffic-challans-and-bail-orders-sharing-module-on-e-prison-platform/>, (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

⁸ *Supra*.

⁹ *Packed Beyond Capacity, Prisons in India Have Got More Crowded in 5 Years*, *Bus. Standard* (Dec. 8, 2023), https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/packed-beyond-capacity-prisons-in-india-have-got-more-crowded-in-5-years-123120801245_1.html (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

and escapes. Virtual court hearings and legal aid online simplify judicial procedures, reducing delays and guaranteeing inmates access to timely legal counsel.¹⁰

To meet human rights requirements, digital grievance redressal mechanisms allow prisoners to report abuse, holding authorities accountable safely. Online visitation systems also enable families to remain in touch with prisoners, ensuring mental health and rehabilitation. By integrating these technologies, E-Prisons can make India's prison system more secure, efficient, and humane, improving governance and prisoner reintegration into society.

The E-Prison Project significantly improves prison administration effectiveness by computerizing inmate records, case updates, and biometric monitoring. The system reduces administrative mistakes, avoids data inconsistencies, and facilitates prisoner transfers and case monitoring. Access to case information in real-time ensures prompt implementation of court orders, eliminating unnecessary delays in releasing inmates.

Digitization also has a significant function in increasing prisoners' access to justice. Legal counsel can quickly access case information, helping expedite bail processing and litigation. Automating bail orders and court notices helps prevent prisoners from being illegally detained through procedural halt.¹¹

For smooth implementation, employees in prisons must undergo constant training. Systematic capacity development programs can enhance the skills of staff to manage digital systems effectively and, thus, provide a smooth implementation of the E-Prison platform.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING E-PRISONS

The E-Prison Project can be extended nationally, incorporating AI-based analytics, computerized parole management, and online rehabilitation programs. Policy changes must cater to data privacy, cybersecurity, and inter-agency coordination to make it successful. Judicial-prison database integration must be strengthened, and digital documentation must be standardized across states to increase efficiency. Regular training for prison officials enhanced budgetary support, and coordination with legal aid groups can also ensure optimal implementation. Future advances should be geared towards rehabilitation, mental health assistance, and new sentencing models so that technology not only improves security but also facilitates the reintegration of inmates and accessibility to justice.

CONCLUSION

The E-Prison Project is a significant move towards modernizing India's prison network, increasing efficiency and transparency, and safeguarding prisoners' rights. Through digital records, real-time monitoring, and automated judicial processes, it tackles some of the most critical problems, including delays in administrative processes, prison overcrowding, and access to justice. Nonetheless, data security, training of officials, and ethical issues must be addressed through policy changes and judicial regulation. With ongoing technological progress and national consolidation, E-Prisons can streamline prison administration, maintain human rights, and provide a more equitable, rehabilitative correction system consistent with India's overall criminal justice reforms.

¹⁰ Electronic Tracking of Undertrials: Bail, Benefits, and Challenges, *Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-law/electronic-tracking-undertrials-bail-benefits-challenges-9700257/> (last visited Feb. 20, 2025).

¹¹ E-Prisons Project, *CrackitToday*, <https://crackittoday.com/current-affairs/e-prisons-project/> (last visited Feb. 21, 2025).