

## CHAPTER V

### SOCIOLOGY OF INMATES

Anti-social feelings culminate in anti-social acts.

For the rehabilitation programme to be successful, the Prison Authority has to know what lies below the tough surface of each inmate in order to correct what is wrong, fill in what is lacking and stir what is latent.

#### A. Inmates and Society

The fact that a criminal found guilty by a court of law is kept away from society means that he is rejected by it. This is amplified by his having to wear not only a number. Nobody trusts him and very often he is forgotten by society while safely tucked in between the walls of the prison. The writer concedes that such a feeling is necessary for the rehabilitation of the offender to make him reflect and repent for his past deeds. But such a feeling can also take an adverse turn in that since society does not want him, neither does he want society. He will therefore keep on committing anti-social acts partly to show his anger towards society, partly to return to the safety of the penal institution where he is accepted by his fellow-inmates.

Society, therefore, has to do something about this anti-social attitude. The man-in-the-street may well ask "Why should I help criminals?" The answer is, that in helping them, he helps himself. This does not mean, however, that he is condoning crime but rather that "whilst recognising the stark and frightening reality of crime, the citizen must become sufficiently enlightened to appreciate the complexity of the problems associated with anti-social behaviour. Rejection by society in itself is a cause of crime and therefore society has to change itself before it tries to change the criminals.

#### B. Inmates - Inmate Relationship

A convicted offender is compelled to live together with murderers, rapists, thieves and other criminals. Faced with such a situation, the inmate, even a hard-core one, may lose his sense of security. He may live in constant fear of being attacked or even killed by fellow-inmates. It can thus be described that "the worst thing about prison is you have to live with other prisoners".<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the above fear and dislike, inmates nevertheless live in a social world of their own. John Howard is of the opinion that "in prison the check of the public eye is removed, and the power of the law is spent. There are few fears, there are no

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<sup>2</sup> Greham M. Sykes, Crime and Society, New York, Random House, 1956, p. 109.

blushes. The lewd inflame the more modest, the audacious harden the timid. Everyone fortifies himself as he can against his own remaining stability endeavouring to practise on others the arts that are practised on himself, and to gain the applause of his worst associates by imitating their manners."<sup>3</sup>

Thus men forced to live together will stay together with the confines of their own special social code. Being rejected by society, inmates have to fight against self-rejection and in doing so seek the companionship of fellow-inmates to sustain their own pride, confidence and self-respect.

The social code of inmates comprises of many "rules" which most inmates loyally adhere to. Inmates are supposed to be loyal to each other. "Don't interfere with inmates' interests", "Never rat on a con" are maxims in the inmate social code.<sup>4</sup> Inmates are supposed to restrain from arguments with fellow-inmates. They are told, "Don't lose your head".<sup>5</sup> Further, inmates must not under any pretence whatsoever exploit fellow-inmates. Inmates must be "dignified" in their dealings with fellow-inmates. An important

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<sup>3</sup>John Howard, State of the Prison in England and Wales, Barringtons: William Byres, 1784, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Sykes and Messinger, "The Inmate Social Code" in The Sociology of Punishment and Correction, edited by Norman Johnston, Leonard Savitz, Maxim E. Wolfgang, p. 401.

<sup>5</sup>ibid.

rule is that inmates should not weaken when confronted with aggressive behaviour either from Prison Officers or fellow-inmates. They should face any undesirable situation with courage and confidence. Lastly, guards are to be treated with constant suspicion and distrust. If there is a conflict between a guard and an inmate, the former is regarded as automatically wrong.

It can be seen therefore that the Inmates Social Code aims at group cohesion, inmates are supposed to remain together and respect each other. From this, it can be deduced that deviants of the Inmate Social Code may suffer from their breach of "Inmates' Rules." Such deviants may live in constant fear of revenge from fellow-inmates either in the nature of physical attack or a report to the Prison Officer of an offence which he has or supposed to have committed.

In the Special Prison, there is ample opportunity for the inmates to mix, for example, during recreational hours and during week-ends. However the degree of socialising varies with each individual inmate. They may be some groups of inmates who are very close to every member of their group. Members of this group help each other wherever and whenever they can and are even willing to accept punishment for each other. They think in terms of "we" rather than "I". These are the "complete-clique"<sup>6</sup> inmates.

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Clemmer, "Informal Inmate Groups" in Sociology of Punishment and Correction, edited by Johnston, Norman, Savits, Leonard and Wolfgang, p. 423.

There is also the "gang"<sup>7</sup> inmate who is friendly with members of his group, discuss his problems with them but is not willing to go the extent of sacrificing himself for the members of his group.

The "semi-solitary"<sup>8</sup> inmate is only willing to discuss current affairs and other impersonal matters but will steer clear of any personal matters. He does not want to involve himself with other inmates' problems nor does he want others to worry about his problems. He is contented with light, surface discussions about the weather, prison work, inflation and other general topics.

At the other extreme is the "complete solitary"<sup>9</sup> inmate. He seldom speaks to anyone but keeps to himself and perhaps only speak when spoken to.

Further, inmates convicted of the same type of offence tend to group together. These inmates may find it interesting to describe and compare their exploits, their trials and subsequent convictions. Race is sometimes a criterion for these groups.

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<sup>7</sup>ibid.

<sup>8</sup>ibid.

<sup>9</sup>ibid.

Groups may consist mainly of Chinese prisoners or Malay prisoners. But there are some groups in which the members consist of different races. Inmates in the same workshop may group together as they have something in common, namely, the acquiring of a particular skill. On the other hand, age is not a criterion. Most of the inmates in the Special Prison are over twenty years of age with only a few in the middle-aged group. Thus common interests bring inmates together within the walls of the prison.

The reception of new arrivals into the Special Prison by its inmates is yet another illustration of the inmate relationship towards each other.

The new inmate may be regarded with suspicion by "old residents" who need time to assess his character and abilities. He may be teased and looked down upon as he may be unsure as to what he should do during the first few days of his prison life. But on the other hand, the new arrival may be welcomed wholeheartedly by the inmates for several reasons. The new inmate "fresh" from the outside world is usually a source of information concerning the criminal world, he can furnish the other inmates with news of the latest exploits of well-known criminals. The new inmate may have a friend serving time in the same prison, the former is therefore welcomed by the inmate (his friend) and his friends.

© If the new inmate happens to be a Malay, for example, and is convicted for a heavy offence, he will be welcomed with pride by

the Malay inmates of the prison who may use this as proof of the superiority of their race.<sup>10</sup>

Thus provided the new inmates can adapt themselves to prison life and their fellow-inmates, they are readily absorbed into the social world of inmates and become adherents to the inmates' social code.

As long as all the inmates socialize within the confines of the Code, the pains of imprisonment are lessened. Their dignity is preserved, they are to endure manfully what cannot be avoided. "By creating an ideal of endurance in the face of harsh social conditions, the society of prisoners opens a path to the restoration of self-respect and a sense of independence that can exist despite prior criminality, present subjection and the free community's denial of the offender's moral worthiness."<sup>11</sup>

### C. Inmates - Officers Relationship

It is the duty of Prison Officers to safeguard the safety and security of the Special Prison and its prisoners. And it is the duty of inmates to obey the Prison Officers. Such a situation would inevitably result in social codes concerning each other.

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<sup>10</sup>Questionnaires to Prison Officers.

<sup>11</sup>Sykes and Mattinger, op. cit.

Rule 56 Prison Rules 1953 provides that

It is the duty of all prison officers to treat prisoners with kindness and humanity, to listen patiently and to report their complaints or grievances, at the same time to be firm in maintaining order and discipline and enforcing the provisions of the Ordinance, these Rules and Prison Standing Rules.

Rule 295 however seems to limit the extent of relationship between Officers and inmates.

Rule 295(1) provides that

No prison officer shall unnecessarily converse with a prisoner . . .

and

Rule 295(2) provides that

No prison officer shall allow any familiarity on the part of prisoners towards himself, or any other prison officer . . .

The Rules advocate that Prison Officers should be a receiving source of complaints of prisoners and to report them. It is not provided that if Prison Officers observe that some inmates are having some form of personal problems, they should approach the inmates concerned and offer their help and advice voluntarily.



Moreover, the phrase 'unnecessarily converse with a prisoner' seems vague to the writer. The interpretation of this phrase at the time of legislation may mean that no Prison Officer shall communicate with prisoners unless the subject matter fall within Rule 56 of the said Rules. But in the light of the rehabilitation programme being enforced in the prisons, the phrase 'unnecessarily converse' should exclude the giving of advice "when the Prison Officers deem it necessary to do so."

It is submitted that the kind of relationship between Prison Officers and inmates depends on the attitudes of the latter towards the former. Table 5.1 illustrates the attitudes and the relationship arising from the attitude.

TABLE 5.1

ATTITUDES OF PRISON OFFICERS TOWARDS INMATES  
AND THE RELATIONSHIP

ATTITUDE	RELATIONSHIP
(a) Majority of Inmates are victims of social circumstances.	(a)(i) These Prison Officers are more concerned with the inmates as individual persons with problems and will therefore advise and guide them. These Officers realise, that they, as part of society, are partly responsible for the present state of the inmates and therefore are obliged to assist them in their rehabilitation.  (ii) Being educators, Prison Officers are prepared to educate social sense into the inmates.
(b) It is the right for offenders to be imprisoned because they have broken the law.	(b) These Prison Officers are more concerned with establishing order and security of the prison and do not feel so readily the complex problems of the inmates.

Source: Taken from Questionnaires to Prison Officers and  
Deductions of Writer.

Likewise, the inmates have developed certain kinds of attitude towards the Prison Officer. Some inmates are of the opinion that Prison Officers should be avoided, spoke to when spoken to and not to be conflicted against.<sup>12</sup> These inmates would therefore not ask advice from the Officers and would as far as possible avoid having any communication with them.

On the other hand, there are some inmates who seek advice from the Officers, who find in the latter a source of help which they need to voice their complaints and request their needs. Inmates may have family problems, their wives may be seeking divorce or separation, their children or aged parents neglected or their relatives may be treating their families badly. The inmates may also request the Officers to look out for any suitable job vacancies in the labour market so that they can be employed immediately after discharge. Further, the inmates may need to be told as to problems faced after discharge so that they will be better prepared to face society again.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the writer would like to relate an incident which to her mind reflects a healthy relationship between "the guard"

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with inmates of Special Prison.

<sup>13</sup> Questionnaires to Prison Officers - Were you ever asked for advice by the prisoners? What is the nature of the advice?

and "the guarded". in the Special Prison. The long-termed prisons due for discharge in two years' time have purchased suitcases through the Prison Authority. These inmates gave such a "warm welcome" to the suitcases that even the Prison Officers were touched. The inmates asked unceasingly about the price, brand and condition of the suitcases which the Officers answered with zest in a teasing tone. This two-way communication was without fear or restraint.

The writer emphasises the importance of a genuine-officer-inmate relationship. If the Officers' motive is to make "steal pigeons" of some inmates, mutual trust and respect will disappear and every single unit will unite to form a solid barrier against any rehabilitative effort of the Prison Authority. The current phrase in the Inmate Social Code will be "No Official is to be trusted or assisted."

#### D. Inmates - Family Relationship

Prisons are deprived of their role as son/husband/father while serving time in prison. They may become dejected and only respond half-heartedly to the rehabilitation programme. There is a need therefore to fill this want and the Prisons Ordinance 1952 has provided means by which such can be achieved.

On admission, a prisoner is entitled to write a reception letter and to receive a visit of thirty minutes duration.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Rule 39(1) Prison(Amendment) Rules 1953.

It is submitted that it is important that convicted offenders have an opportunity to notify their whereabouts to their families.

Further, the visit provides opportunity for the offenders to give instructions for the future administration of his family. It is also crucial for the inmates, at this point, to know that their families are still behind them when everyone else is against them.

Families and friends of the inmates are allowed to write to the inmates and vice versa. The former can visit the latter too. Tables 5.2 and 5.3 on the following pages provide the regulations concerning such visits.

TABLE 5.2

REGULATIONS CONCERNING VISITS AND LETTERS

STAGE	LETTER	VISIT
1	1 letter every week	1 visit of 30 minutes duration every 4 weeks or to write and receive one letter in lieu.
2	1 letter every week	1 visit of 30 minutes duration every 4 weeks or to write and receive a letter in lieu.
3	1 letter every week	1 visit of 30 minutes duration every 3 weeks or to write and receive one letter in lieu.
4	1 letter every week	1 visit of 30 minutes duration every 2 weeks or to write and receive one letter in lieu.
Special Stage	1 letter every week	1 visit of 30 minutes duration every week or to write and receive a letter in lieu.

Source: Rule 89(2) Prison (Amendment) Rules 1953.

TABLE 5.3

REGULATIONS CONCERNING VISITS AND LETTERS FOR BANISHMENT PRISONERS

STAGE	LETTER	VISIT
1	1 letter every month	1 visit of 15 minutes duration every month.
2	1 letter in every 3 weeks	1 visit of 20 minutes duration in every 3 weeks.
3	1 letter in every 2 weeks	1 visit of 20 minutes duration in every fortnight.

Source: Rule 176(1) Prison Rules 1953.

From the two Tables it can be seen that the regulations regarding letters and visits to banishment prisoners are more restrictive than that of other prisoners. It is submitted that such an inconsistency should be removed. Banishment prisoners often suffer the long anguish of waiting in prison and should not be deprived of such an opportunity to play their role in their respective families. Further, it is surprising to note that while letters and visits to prisoners other than banishment prisoners are

in Part 10, Prison Rules 1955, such communications to banishment prisoners are classified under privileges in R. 176(B) of the said Rules. In view of the restrictive life led by inmates, such communications, it is submitted, should be a right and not merely a privilege in all cases.

The visits are held in the sight and hearing of the Prison Officers. In the Special Prison there are no windows or bars to separate the inmates and his visitor, they speak to each other across a table. This avoids an awkward atmosphere which is necessary for the initial thawing of ice and to get the conversation started.

Rule 99 provides that

99. Every letter to and from a prisoner shall be read by the Officer-in-Charge or by a responsible officer deputed by him for the purpose and it shall be within the discretion of the Officer-in-Charge of a prison to stop any letter on the grounds that the contents are objectionable or that it is of inordinate length.

While conceding to the first objection, the writer disagrees with the second. An inmate or his family should be entitled to write at any length as long as the contents are not objectionable. Some say for things in many words. Through communication by letters inmates can advise and be advised.



There are some inmates, however, who seldom or never have any visitors due to the distance and travelling expenses. Their requests for transfer have been refused because of the specialisation of the prisons. Rule 110 Prison Rules 1953 however provide the solution and should be followed in special cases.

Rule 110 of the said Rules provides that

110. Where a prisoner serving a long sentence has served for a period of three years and, owing to the distance from his home, has not received any visits from relatives or friends during such imprisonment, the Commissioner may, in his discretion, order the transfer of such long sentence prisoner to the prison nearest his home and permit such prisoner to be visited by friends or relatives, not exceeding three in number at any one time, for such period as the Commissioner may prescribe.

Provided that in all such cases the work, conduct and progress of the prisoner merit such privilege.

Inmates are concerned for their families and are constantly seeking help for them.

TABLE 5.4

ILLUSTRATION OF INMATES' FEELINGS TOWARDS THEIR FAMILIES

DATE OF REQUEST	REQUEST BY INMATES
	<p>(a) <u>Tracing of Families</u></p> <p>1969 (i) Request to trace whereabouts of wife and child.</p> <p>1969 (ii) Request to trace whereabouts of family since nothing has been heard from them for a long time.</p> <p>1970 (iii) Request to trace aged mother.</p>
	<p>(b) <u>Financial Aid</u></p> <p>1968 (i) Request for Social Welfare Aid for family to be increased from \$15 to \$20 a month.</p> <p>1968 (ii) Request for aid to blind mother. Her begging has not been successful and the Welfare Department has only paid her \$10-\$15 every three months or so. She has to support inmate's son also.</p>
	<p>(c) <u>Others</u></p> <p>1968 (i) Restricted Resident prayed that he be allowed to spend a few days with his family before leaving for the restricted district.</p>

Source: Visiting Justices Report Book of Special Prison, Seranban.

The above illustrations show that the inmates still play a role in family affairs. Such a concern is part of the rehabilitative process and, therefore, steps should be taken to fulfill those requests. The Social Welfare Department should investigate the circumstances and provide effective aid to deserving cases. Families should be visited monthly and their progress or deterioration noted.

It is also important that the inmates realize that they are the cause of their families plight so that they will reform themselves to ensure that the same does not happen again. Otherwise they may console themselves by thinking that their families are better off financially when they are in prison.