

In Focus: Delhi Prison

Life Convicts What Happens After The Sentence?

Based on NCRB Prison Statistics India 2019- 2024



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Acknowledgement

iProbono India is a non-profit social justice organisation that provides pro bono legal assistance to individuals and communities, including child victims of sexual offences, children in conflict with the law, persons with disabilities, undertrial prisoners, and life convicts to enable them to effectively navigate the justice system.

As part of our ongoing work, we also engage closely with various stakeholders within the criminal justice system and undertakes research and advocacy initiatives with the objective of supporting institutional strengthening and advancing prison reforms. These discussions and deliberations of the team have played an essential part in informing our report.



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Key Findings at a Glance

Delhi's 16 jails across the Tihar, Mandoli, and Rohini complexes housed 19,512 prisoners as on 31 December 2024, of whom 2,232 were convicted persons, 11.4% of the total prison population. This report examines the convict sub-population across five indicators: demographic profile, prison occupancy, sentence duration, temporary release (parole and furlough), and premature release, against the backdrop of the most severe prison overcrowding in India.

60%

Lack secondary education (Class X), limiting employment prospects.

30%

From outside Delhi, facing barriers to legal aid and family support.

36% 

Increase in convict population since 2019. (1,637 in 2019 to 2,232 in 2024)

194.6%+

Delhi prisons are at double capacity, the highest occupancy in India.

57%

Convicted prisoners serving life or 10+ year sentences.

80% 

Drop in premature releases for life convicts (457 to 91 from 2019–2024).

93% 

Collapse in parole grants over the last four years.

Introduction

The Numbers

61.8%

Without Class X —
25% (560) fully
illiterate

59%

Rise in SC/ST/OBC
convicts since 2020

30-40

Age bracket of
majority of convicts

1 in 3

Convicts not
domiciled in Delhi

24%

Muslim share of
convicts in 2024

What the Numbers Reveal

Age distribution is concentrated in the 30–50 year age bracket — 54% of convicts in 2020, rising to 62.4% by 2024.

The Low Education Barrier to Justice

A staggering 60% of India's convicts lack even a 10th-grade education, with many completely illiterate. This strikes at the heart of their right to a fair trial and our legal services authorities bear a heavy onus to bridge this stark literacy gap. Those tasked with providing legal aid, jail visiting lawyers and legal aid counsel, must be trained to effectively serve clients who may be wholly illiterate. Only then can the promise of equal access to justice have real meaning for India's least educated prisoners.

Caste and Religion: Glaring Disparities in Delhi's Convict Population

Caste composition shows a persistent and growing concentration. SC, ST, and OBC communities collectively accounted for 56% of convicts in 2020, rising to an estimated 57% by 2024. The number of convicts from these groups increased by about 59% during this period. In comparison, the number of convicts from the general category increased by about 33%. This pattern is consistent with evidence on differential policing exposure, bail constraints, and uneven legal aid quality at lower income levels.

Muslims accounted for 21.5% of convicts in 2020, rising to 24% in 2024, against an estimated 12% share of Delhi's general population.

The glaring overrepresentation of marginalized castes and religious minorities in Delhi's convict population demands urgent scrutiny. The disparate impact of policing on lower-income communities, the unaffordability of quality legal representation, and the challenges in securing bail faced by those at the social and economic margins all contribute to this skewed picture.

30% Life Convicts in Delhi belong to Other States

Approximately 30% of convicts are not domiciled in Delhi, a proportion stable across all five years, raising direct questions about reintegration planning for a significant share of the population with no local support infrastructure.

For prisoners hailing from distant states, the lack of local ties hampers their ability to secure release on bail or parole, which often mandate local sureties. The absence of nearby family or community support also severely undermines prospects for post-release rehabilitation, employment and social reintegration.

Across indicators, the data points to a convict population shaped substantially by conditions of structural disadvantage — educational, economic, social — rather than by offence patterns alone.

At 200% Capacity: Delhi has India's Most Overcrowded Prisons

200.2%

Delhi occupancy rate
in 2023 — highest
ever recorded

194.6%

Occupancy in 2024

112.7%

National average
occupancy in 2024

34.8% 

Decrease in releases
of convicts

What the Numbers Reveal

In 2023, Delhi recorded an occupancy rate of 200.2%, which means that prisons that are already crowded at full capacity now have two prisoners to every allocated spot.

This level of severe overcrowding strains basic resources, heightens tensions among inmates, breeds disease, and severely undermines any aim of correctional rehabilitation as well as dignity of the prison inmates.

In *Suhas Chakma v. Union of India & Ors*, the Apex Court, 2026 INSC 198 while addressing overcrowding in prisons observed that incarceration does not extinguish the right to live with dignity under Article 21.

This is the highest occupancy rate recorded by any State or UT across the entire five-year window covered by NCRB data. A marginal reduction brought it to 194.6% in 2024, still nearly double the national average and more than 30 % points above the next most overcrowded jurisdictions: Meghalaya at 163.5%, Jammu and Kashmir at 148.3%, and Madhya Pradesh at 147.1%.

What makes this structurally significant is that the capacity figure has not moved. Every fluctuation in occupancy is entirely a function of the prison population, not of any expansion or contraction of infrastructure. The 2020 dip to 159.5% reflected pandemic-era reductions in admissions, not policy reform. The return to above 180% by 2021 confirmed the underlying pressure had not been addressed.

More than a decade after the Supreme Court in *In Re: Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons* (WPC 406/2013) directed States to operationalise Undertrial Review Committees to decongest prisons, Delhi's prisons remain a constitutional indictment of failed implementation. Delhi's prison population is overwhelmingly constituted by undertrial prisoners — between 88% and 91% across all five years. In 2024, of 19,512 persons held in Delhi's prisons, 17,178 had not been convicted of any offence. This UTP share consistently exceeds the national figure by 12 to 15 percentage points.

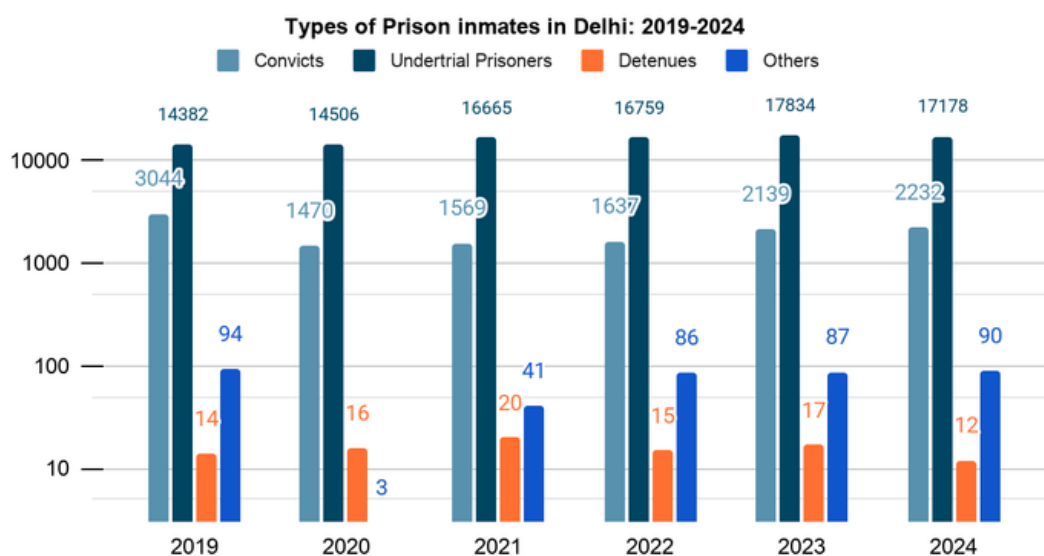


Figure 1.1 — Types of Prison Inmates in Delhi: 2019-2024

At 88% UTP share, the overwhelming majority of persons in Delhi's severely overcrowded prisons — operating at nearly double capacity — have not been found guilty of any offence.

The stark decline in total releases from 2019 to 2024, a drop of nearly 35%, is a major contributing factor to the persistent overcrowding in Delhi's prisons. The most precipitous drops were in premature releases (-80.1%) and releases on appeal (-42.3%), suggesting a tightening of early release mechanisms and a slowdown in the appellate process. Even the 38.9% decrease in completion of sentence releases points to longer prison terms being served out.

Decrease in Release of Convicts

Release Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Change (2019-24)
Completion of Sentence	1,816	728	774	889	1,366	1,109	-38.90%
Released on Bail	1,274	572	706	1,005	1,099	1,107	-13.10%
Premature Release	457	180	100	86	86	91	-80.10%
Released on Appeal	111	35	2	20	33	64	-42.30%
Pardons	0	0	0	0	0	0	—
Transferred	21	13	21	13	25	27	28.60%
Total	3,679	1,528	1,603	2,013	2,609	2,398	-34.80%

Source: NCRB PSI Table 7.2. All India 2024 total convict releases: 1,49,180.

These trends paint a grim picture of a prison system struggling to decompress itself, with ever-constricting exit routes. The drop in total releases outpaces the growth in total prison capacity over the same period, indicating that release mechanisms are losing ground even as new infrastructure comes online.

Life Convicts in Delhi Prisons

The Numbers

858

Life convicts in
2024

38.4%

Share of total
convicts

12

On death row —
o pardons since 2019

What the Numbers Reveal

Prison overcrowding is driven not just by how many people enter, but by how long they stay. Where sentences are short, populations turn over naturally.

Where life imprisonment and decade-plus terms dominate, they accumulate — each year's new admissions added to a base that barely shrinks. In the absence of expanded capacity or functioning release mechanisms, this is not a temporary pressure but a structural condition.

Delhi's life imprisonment share of 38.4% sits below the national average of 54.9%. However, what does consume the gap is punishment in the 7–13 year bracket, which is proportionally larger in Delhi than nationally. The overall picture does not change: the majority of Delhi's convicted population will be in prison for a decade or more, regardless of which sentence category they fall into. It is not a crisis of too many people arriving — it is also a crisis of too few people leaving. Admission numbers alone do not explain why Delhi's prisons remain at double capacity year after year. The deeper driver is retention. A prison system that sentences heavily and releases rarely will accumulate, regardless of whether the annual intake grows or shrinks.

Delhi Convict Population by Sentence Duration: 2019-2024

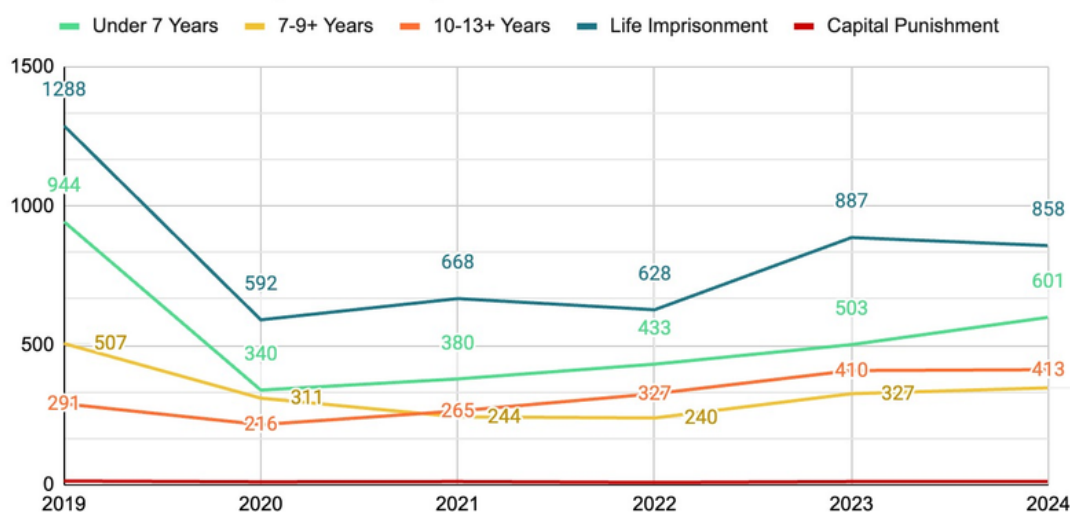


Figure 1.2 — Delhi Convict Population by Sentence Duration, 2019–2024

Temporary Releases on Parole

The Numbers

1450

Parole releases at
COVID peak in 2020

101

Parole releases in
2024

78%

Fall from pre-COVID
baseline in 2019

What the Numbers Reveal

Parole and furlough are not privileges — they are statutory entitlements, grounded in the recognition that incarceration alone does not rehabilitate. The Model Prison Manual, 2016 and Delhi Prisons Rule, 2018 treat temporary release as an integral component of the correctional process, designed to maintain family bonds, support gradual reintegration, and reduce the psychological deterioration associated with prolonged confinement. The Supreme Court in *Asfaq v. State of Rajasthan* (2017) and *Sunil Fulchand Shah v. Union of India* (2000) held that the right to parole engages the prisoner's right to dignity and family life under Article 21 of the Constitution. Against this legal architecture, the trajectory of temporary releases in Delhi represents not an administrative shortfall but a rights failure.

Parole Releases in Delhi, 2019–2024

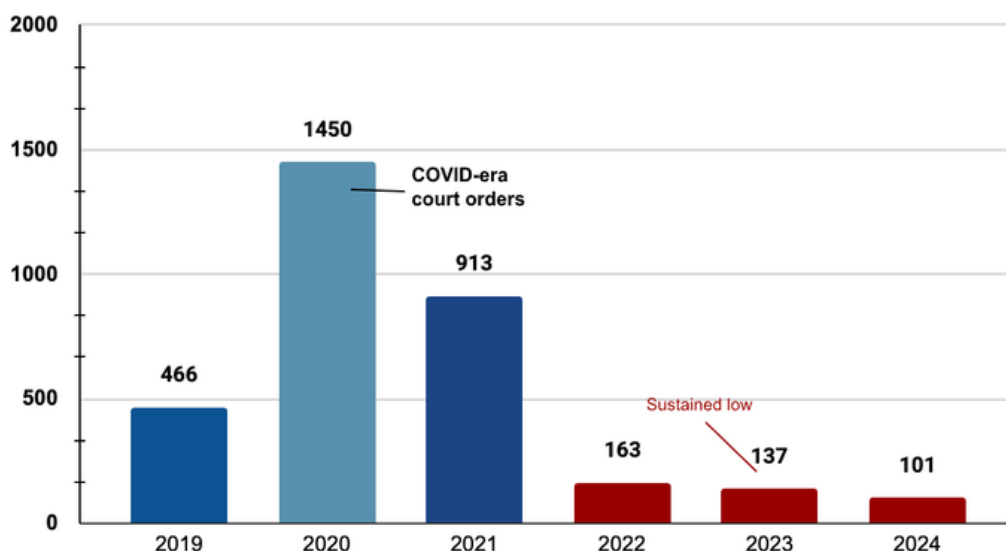


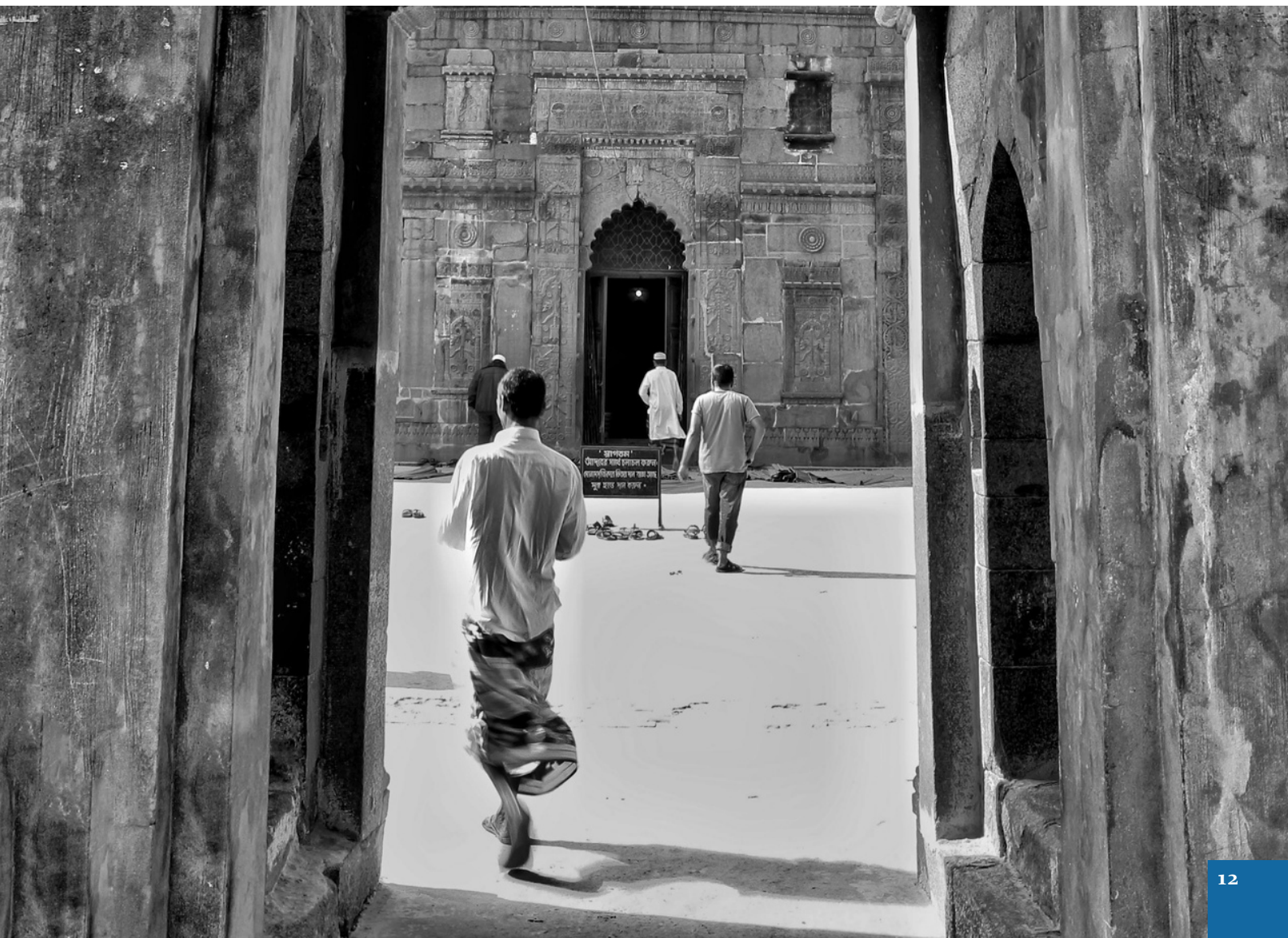
Figure 1.3 — Parole Releases in Delhi, 2019–2024

A system that reduces parole grants by 93% while overcrowding intensifies is not exercising discretion — it is defaulting on a statutory and constitutional obligation.

The 2020 spike to 1,450 parole releases was not a policy reform — it was a crisis response following the Supreme Court's intervention directing High-Powered Committees to decongest prisons during the pandemic. This measure was understood to be temporary, and the surrender of most released prisoners was anticipated by year-end. By 2022, parole releases had collapsed to 163, an 88.7% fall, continuing to 137 in 2023 and 101 in 2024. At 101 releases in 2024, Delhi accounts for just 0.5% of the 20,627 national parole releases, despite housing one of the most overcrowded prison systems in the country. Madhya Pradesh alone granted 5,402 parole releases in the same year.

The comparison is instructive. Delhi and Madhya Pradesh operate under the same national legal framework for parole. The fifty-fold difference in release volumes is not explained by eligibility criteria or offence profiles.

It points to something more practical: how applications are processed, whether the default institutional response is to grant or to refuse. In Delhi, the numbers suggest the answer has consistently been the latter. The Delhi High Court in *Rakesh Kumar v. State* (2019) directed that parole applications be decided within a fixed timeframe and that rejection orders be reasoned. The data suggests this direction has not produced a systemic change in practice.



Premature Release

The Numbers

457

Premature releases in 2019

86

Premature releases each in 2022 and 2023 — lowest on record

80%

Fall from 2019 to 2024

2.8%

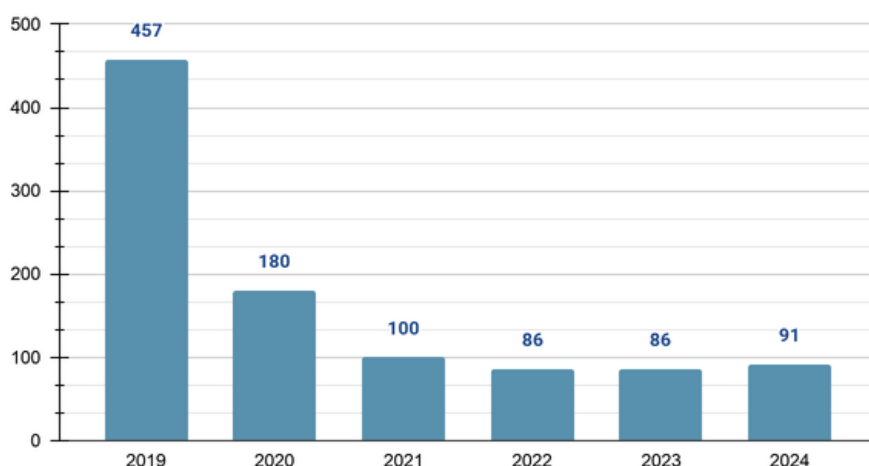
Delhi's share of national premature releases in 2024

Premature release, encompassing sentence remissions and policy-driven early exits under Sections 473 and 474 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (formerly Sections 433 and 433A CrPC), is the mechanism by which the State formally acknowledges that continued incarceration has ceased to serve a penological purpose. For life convicts in particular, it is the primary legal pathway to liberty outside of appellate acquittal. In Delhi, this mechanism has functionally collapsed.

In 2019, Delhi granted 457 premature releases: 13% of the national figure. By 2022, that number had fallen to 86, where it flatlined through 2023, rising marginally to 91 in 2024. The 80% reduction between 2019 and 2024 is not explained by any reduction in the eligible population. To the contrary, the convict population, and particularly the long-sentence cohort who are the primary candidates for premature release, grew by 36% over the same period.

Section 433A CrPC (now Section 474 BNSS) requires the concurrence of the Central Government before any life convict can be released prematurely after serving 14 years.

Premature Releases from Delhi Prisons, 2019–2024



**Figure 1.4 —
Premature releases
from Delhi Prisons
2019–2024**

In Delhi, vide a 2004 order, the Sentence Review Board (SRB) was constituted to make recommendations on such a release. Over time, several inconsistencies have been highlighted in its functioning. It has been alleged that several recommendations are made against release without relying on relevant parameters under the Delhi Prisons Rule of reformation and convict's socioeconomic status and instead placing over-reliance on heinousness of the crime which is against the idea of such releases.

The trajectory of the Delhi High Court's engagement with the Sentence Review Board over the past several years reveals not a series of isolated judicial corrections, but the slow, painful exposure of an institution that has been operating on an archaic theory of punishment: one that keeps the original offence frozen at the centre of every deliberation, unmoved by years of incarceration, demonstrable reform, or the passage of a human life.

Court after court, year after year, the same pathology presents itself: minutes indistinguishable across meetings separated by years, copy-pasted reasoning that treats the gravity of the offence as both the beginning and the end of the inquiry, probation reports ignored, psychological transformation unacknowledged, and human beings reduced to case numbers processed in bulk.

The Court has responded with escalating interventions:

Direct releases where remand would be futile

Vijay Kumar Shukla (2024), Zafar-ul-Islam (2025), Rajab Ali @ Babloo (2026)

Structured checklists for individualised consideration

Vijay Kumar Shukla (2024)

Psychological evaluation to measure reformation

Santosh Kumar Singh (2025)

Increase meeting frequency and per-case time allocation

Court on its Own Motion (2026)

In *Court on its Own Motion v. State Govt. of NCT of Delhi & Ors.*, a Division Bench of the Delhi HC has been examining systemic deficiencies in the SRB's functioning. Vide order dated 24.04.2026, the Court issued binding directions requiring the SRB to:

1. increase the frequency of its meetings in proportion to the growing caseload;
2. proactively and independently assess the volume of cases likely to be processed, and not merely reactively respond to court-directed referrals;
3. meet at least once every two months as an irreducible minimum benchmark; and
4. ensure that adequate time is devoted to each individual prayer for premature release, so that every case receives meaningful and substantive consideration rather than assembly-line disposal.

“(...) The way the SRB Meetings are being held, reflect a total disregard not only to the factors relevant for consideration of the remission, but also an indifference to the inmate who for the Authority, is nothing but one name in the multitude of cases considered in a Meeting by SRB. The man, the life and his existence as a human being, remains totally invisible, in this undemocratic functioning of Govt machinery.”

Rajab Ali @ Babloo v. State (NCT of Delhi).

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2. Delhi Prisons Rules, 2018 (enacted in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 71 of the Delhi Prisons Act, 2000 (Act No. 2 of 2002))

Case Law

1. Suhas Chakma v. Union of India & Ors 2026 INSC 198
2. W.P. (C) No. 406/2013 In Re: Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons
3. W.P. (CRL) No. 1336/2025 Rajab Ali @ Babloo v. State (NCT of Delhi).
4. W.P. (CRL) No. 4074/2025 Court on its Own Motion v. State Govt. of NCT of Delhi & Ors.
5. Suo Motu Writ Petition (C) No. 1/2020 In Re Contagion of COVID Virus In Prisons

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iProbono India is a social justice organisation that combines the legal expertise of its carefully curated community of panel and network lawyers, ground-level insights of its grassroots partners, and the ethos of social action litigation to advance justice and equality in India. In the last ten years of iProbono's functioning, we have primarily focused on child rights, housing rights, and strengthening civil society. Our modes of intervention comprise legal representation, advocacy, training and capacity-building efforts.

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