

After the Gate Opens: Released Prisoners and the Reintegration Gap in Odisha

The gate opens. He walks out. He has a small bag with the personal effects that were held for him, and he has a release document that certifies he has served his sentence. He has no job arranged. He may or may not have family waiting outside. He does not have a current ration card...

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He stands at the gate of Jharpada Special Jail in Bhubaneswar, or the Circle Jail in Cuttack, or the District Jail in Koraput, and the first thing he has to do is figure out how to get to his village. The prison gave him Rs 50 for bus fare if he's lucky. The village is 300 kilometres away.

This is the reintegration problem in India. And almost nobody is working on it.

The Scale of the Problem

India's Prison Statistics report (2024) puts the national prison population at approximately 5.73 lakh persons. The national occupancy rate is 131 percent as of December 2022 — meaning jails are one-third overcrowded on average, with many facilities significantly worse. Three in four prisoners are undertrials — people who have not yet been convicted of any crime and are in jail because they could not make bail.

Odisha's prison system, administered through the Odisha Prison Headquarters and the Inspector General of Prisons, operates across a network of district jails, sub-jails, and the central prison at Jharpada. Odisha has historically had an undertrials problem similar to the national pattern — a large proportion of its prison population is awaiting trial, not serving a sentence for a conviction.

Every year, thousands of people are released from Odisha's jails. Some have served sentences of months; others have been in for years. Some are exiting as acquitted undertrials who were never convicted. Some are first-time offenders who committed minor offences. Some are persons whose offences were serious and whose reintegration requires more intensive support. Across all these categories, what they share at the moment of release is an almost complete absence of structured support from either the state or civil society.

Why Reintegration Fails: The Documented Barriers

The Cambridge University Press study on social reintegration of released prisoners in Indian states (the most rigorous empirical analysis available, conducted across Tamil Nadu and Kerala) identified several factors that determine reintegration success:

Family acceptance. Ninety percent of study respondents were visited by family members during incarceration, and those visits were a significant factor in reintegration motivation. When family relationships survive incarceration, reintegration has a foundation. When they do not — because of shame, because of family breakdown during incarceration, because of community stigma that makes the family itself a target — the released person exits into effective social homelessness.

Denial of welfare services. Respondents in Tamil Nadu and Kerala reported being denied old-age pension, social security schemes, and other welfare services post-release. This is a systemic pattern — welfare records that were active before incarceration may have been administratively delisted during a multi-year sentence; re-enrollment requires documentation of current address and identity that released prisoners often lack.

Community reintegration variability. Whether a released prisoner is accepted back into their community depends heavily on the nature of the offence (political crimes produced different community responses than property crimes or violence), on the strength of pre-incarceration community ties, and on whether any community-based organisation helped maintain the connection during the period of imprisonment.

Employment. The stigma of incarceration affects employment regardless of legal guilt or innocence. A released prisoner in Odisha's informal economy must navigate employer suspicion (police verification requirements exist in many formal and semi-formal employment contexts), skills atrophy (particularly for sentences of three or more years), and in many cases physical and mental health consequences of incarceration that reduce work capacity.

The Undertrial Problem: When Reintegration Begins Before Conviction

One of the most significant aspects of India's prison reintegration problem is that a majority of those released are not convicted persons completing sentences — they are undertrials being released on bail, acquitted, or discharged. Three in four Indian prisoners are undertrials.

For an undertrial who has been in jail for six months to three years awaiting trial and is then acquitted or bailed:

- They have lost income for the duration. Their family has managed without their earnings.
- They have not been convicted of anything but carry the practical stigma of having been in jail.
- Their legal costs (bail, lawyer fees) may have created significant household debt.
- The Section 479 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) — which provides bail relief for undertrials who have served half the maximum sentence for the alleged offence — was specifically designed to release long-detained undertrials. Implementation of this provision in Odisha, through the Undertrial Review Committees (UTRCs) mandated by the Supreme Court, has been improving but remains inconsistent.

The Supreme Court in October 2024 (*Suhas Chakma v. Union of India*) directed attention to the gap between the number of prisoners identified by UTRCs and the number actually recommended for release — finding the gap to be large and directing corrective action. In the July 2024 quarterly UTRC review nationally, 20,103 prisoners were identified for review; 14,048 were recommended for release; 7,366 were actually released. Only 52 percent of those recommended were released.

The gap is not primarily a legal gap — it is a legal aid gap. Many undertrials are not being released because there is no one to file bail applications for them, despite being legally entitled to release.

The Probation System: What Exists and Its Limitations

The Probation of Offenders Act 1958 provides for release on probation rather than imprisonment for first-time and minor offenders — allowing offenders to serve a period of supervised good behaviour in the community instead of in jail. The probation officer system, administered through the Odisha Home Department, is theoretically the primary mechanism for supporting released persons and those released under probation.

In practice, Odisha's probation officer cadre is understaffed relative to the caseload. Probation officers carry case files for hundreds of probationers simultaneously. Actual home visits — the mechanism by which a probation officer monitors reintegration and connects the released person to welfare services — are infrequent. The probation system is more a paper record than an active support mechanism in most of Odisha's districts.

The Model Prison Manual 2016 (prepared by the Ministry of Home Affairs) and the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act 2023 both have dedicated provisions on after-care and rehabilitation services — welfare programmes, vocational training, and post-release

reintegration. The Model Act has been forwarded to states for adoption; its provisions represent the policy standard for what reintegration support should look like. Actual implementation lags significantly behind the document.

Legal Aid: The Critical First Layer

Before reintegration support becomes relevant, legal aid is the critical first layer for those who are still in the justice process. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) conducts legal awareness camps in prisons and has established Prison Legal Aid Clinics (PLACs) across India, including in Odisha's major jails. The State Legal Services Authority (SLSA) of Odisha, which operates through District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs) in each district, is mandated to provide free legal aid.

The NALSA Legal Aid initiative covers:

- Free legal representation for undertrials who cannot afford lawyers
- Bail applications for eligible prisoners
- Plea bargaining facilitation
- Lok Adalat settlements

The gap between mandate and reach is substantial. In 2023, approximately 422 undertrials who were recommended for release by UTRCs did not have legal representation filed for them — they were recommended for bail but no one filed the application. This is the most concrete documentation of the legal aid gap.

For NGOs working in the prison reintegration space, partnering with the DLSA and providing paralegal volunteer support — trained para-legal volunteers who can assist undertrials with documentation, bail application paperwork, and NALSA access — is the most immediately impactful intervention.

Open Prisons: The Transition Mechanism

The Supreme Court's 2024 order in *Suhas Chakma v. Union of India* reaffirmed that open correctional institutions (OCIs) — prisons where well-behaved convicts serve their sentences in a more open setting, with opportunities for outside employment and family contact — are constitutionally mandated instruments for social reintegration. Only 3 percent of India's convicts are currently housed in open prisons; Rajasthan leads with 41 open prisons.

Odisha has limited open prison infrastructure. The expansion of open prison capacity — which the Supreme Court has specifically called for — is a policy opportunity that NGOs in the prison

reform space can advocate for and potentially support through facility management partnerships.

Open prisons are valuable specifically for the reintegration mission: a convict who spends the final two years of a longer sentence in an open prison, working during the day and returning to the facility at night, maintaining family contact through regular visits, and rebuilding work habits and social relationships, is substantially better prepared for full release than one who exits directly from a closed facility.

After-Care: The Welfare Re-Linkage Problem

The most immediate practical challenge for released prisoners is re-linkage to welfare schemes. This includes:

Ration card renewal. During multi-year incarceration, a household's ration card may have had the absent member's name removed (particularly in Odisha's e-Ration system, where beneficiary verification is done periodically). Re-enrollment requires current address documentation and block-level verification.

Voter ID and Aadhaar. Released prisoners whose Aadhaar shows a home village address may have no current residence (if they cannot return home or if their home was lost). Aadhaar update requires current address documentation — a challenge for persons with no fixed residence post-release.

MGNREGS job card. For released prisoners returning to rural areas, a job card provides immediate income eligibility through MGNREGS. Reactivation of a dormant job card is straightforward but requires appearing at the gram panchayat office with identity documentation.

Mental health. The India Justice Report 2025 identifies mental health support as one of the most critical needs in the post-release period — and one of the least addressed. Prison experience, particularly for long sentences or for persons who experienced violence or severe overcrowding during incarceration, produces trauma responses that are not self-resolving. In rural Odisha, where mental health infrastructure is negligible, released prisoners with mental health needs have no accessible support.

What NGOs Can Do

At the jail gate: receiving support. The most immediately actionable model is an NGO that operates a reception service at the jail gate — a trusted person who is present when releases

happen, who can provide transport assistance, a meal, and a conversation about what the person needs in the next 48 hours. This is the most basic intervention and is almost entirely absent in Odisha.

Document restoration camps. A structured camp at a location accessible to released prisoners — in coordination with the DLSA, the CSC operator, and the block-level revenue office — to restore ration cards, update Aadhaar, enroll in E-Shram, and reconnect to MGNREGS. One well-facilitated camp in a district can serve the documentation needs of dozens of released prisoners who would otherwise spend months navigating these processes alone.

Probation officer augmentation. Partnering with the Probation Department to provide additional caseworker capacity — NGO community workers who conduct home visits alongside or in addition to probation officer visits, ensuring that released persons are actually connected to support rather than just tracked on a register.

Family counselling. For released prisoners whose family relationships are strained, structured family counselling — provided by trained social workers, not clinical therapists — can make the difference between return to family support and entry into homelessness. This is most relevant for persons convicted of violence-related offences where family trust has been damaged.

Vocational skill activation. The Model Prison Manual and Model Act both emphasise vocational training during incarceration. In practice, vocational training in Odisha jails is limited. For released prisoners who did receive some training, NGOs can facilitate skill certification through PMKVY Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pathways, creating a documented credential from otherwise informal prison-based skill development.

For CSR Managers: The Least Funded Space in Social Justice

Prison reintegration is the least funded area in the social justice CSR portfolio. The reasons are predictable: the beneficiary population is not sympathetic to general audiences, impact metrics are difficult (recidivism rates are the obvious metric but require multi-year tracking), and the work does not produce uplifting photography.

The case for investment rests on first principles:

Recidivism reduction is a public benefit. A released prisoner who successfully reintegrates — who has a stable livelihood, family support, welfare entitlements, and access to mental health support — is substantially less likely to reoffend. Lower recidivism means lower prison population, lower justice system costs, and safer communities.

The undertrial problem is a rights problem. Three-quarters of India's prisoners have not

been convicted of anything. Many have been in jail for years because they were poor and couldn't afford bail. This is a systematic injustice that CSR programmes focused on legal aid and bail support can directly address — and that produces the clearest possible metric: number of undertrials released.

Families of prisoners are themselves vulnerable. The children of incarcerated parents — particularly those in long sentences — face educational disruption, income loss, and social stigma that are independent of anything the child has done. A CSR programme that supports children of prisoners through scholarship and school-retention support, or that supports prisoner families through Mission Shakti SHG membership, is reaching some of the most vulnerable households in Odisha.

Schemes at a Glance

Scheme	Relevance	Nodal Department
NALSA Legal Services	Free legal aid, bail applications, DLSA legal clinics	Justice / NALSA
Section 479 BNSS	Bail relief for long-detained undertrials	Judiciary / Home
Undertrial Review Committees (UTRCs)	Case review and release recommendation	Judiciary / NALSA
Probation of Offenders Act 1958	Supervised community release for eligible offenders	Home / Probation Dept
Open Prisons / OCIs	Transition mechanism for eligible convicts	Home / Prison Dept
MGNREGS	Employment on return for rural released prisoners	Panchayati Raj
E-Shram	Unorganised worker ID, PMSBY accident insurance	Ministry of Labour
PMJAY (Ayushman Bharat)	Health coverage for eligible households	Health & Family Welfare
PMKVY RPL	Skill recognition for vocational skills gained in prison	MSDE / NSDC
Post-Matric Scholarship	For children of prisoners pursuing higher education	Social Justice / Education

The Gate as a Beginning

The prison gate is not an ending. It is the beginning of the hardest part of the journey — the part for which the justice system provides almost no support and civil society provides very little.

In states with better-developed social welfare ecosystems — Kerala's prison reforms are the most cited Indian example, with welfare officers, vocational training, family contact facilities, and NGO support networks — the post-release period is treated as a critical intervention window. In Odisha, with its constrained welfare infrastructure and weak civil society presence in the prison reintegration space, the window is almost entirely unaddressed.

The work is difficult. The beneficiary population is among the most stigmatised in Indian society.

The metrics are long-cycle. And it is genuinely important — because a justice system that releases people into nothing and then counts on nothing having changed is a justice system that is producing its own future prisoners.

Sources: Supreme Court of India — *Suhas Chakma v. Union of India (2024)*; IndiaSPend — Prison reintegration analysis (December 2024); Cambridge University Press — “Social Reintegration of Released Prisoners: An Empirical Analysis from Two Indian States”; PIB — Prison Reforms in India; Prison Statistics India (PSI) 2024 data; Model Prison Manual 2016 and Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act 2023 (MHA); NALSA quarterly newsletters 2024; India Justice Report 2025.

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