

'Prison administration needs to be reformed'

The Hindu Bureau

MADURAI

Prison administration needs to be reformed for creating a better environment and culture to ensure prisoners enjoy their right to dignified life under Article 21 of the Constitution, observed the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court while passing a series of directions.

A Division Bench of Justices R. Mahadevan and J. Sathya Narayana Prasad passed the directions on a petition filed in 2017 by Madurai-based Human Rights organisation People's Watch, represented by its Executive Director Henri Tiphagne.

The petitioner's said the appointment of non-officials to the Board of Visitors to Prisons, in accordance with Rule 507 of the Tamil Nadu Prison Rules, 1983, was essential for addressing the grievances of prisoners and helping the administration. However, the posts of non-official visitors were kept vacant in many prisons, he said.

The judges directed the authorities to constitute a committee to ensure periodic and prompt appointment of non-official visitors to all prisons/jails in the State and board of visitors in all prisons who could review and advise prison authorities on various aspects.

The judges directed the authorities to amend the Prison Act, 1894, and the Tamil Nadu Prison Rules, 1983, in accordance with the Model Prison Manual, 2016 and the United Nations Standard Minimum

Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules).

The court directed the authorities to take appropriate measures to reduce overcrowding and prepare a 'Prisoners' Rights Handbook' with information on prisoners' rights, applicable laws and regulations, mechanism for raising grievances/complaints with the board of visitors and other authorities, expected behaviour from prisoners and disciplinary action for violations, and provide each prisoner with a copy. The Inspector General of Prisons should prepare the annual report with the remarks and the suggestions of the visitors and boards across the State, and the action taken by the Prison Department.

Further, the court directed the authorities to make all facilities like medical equipment, drinking water and hygienic food available to the prisoners. Regular training and refresher courses should be conducted in collaboration with the Academy of Prisons and Correctional Administration for officials and prison staff.

The government should organise a yearly conference under the aegis of the State Human Rights Commission with the Boards of Visitors, prison administration and correctional services authorities to consider the status of prison administration, deliberate on the boards' report and recommend changes in the prison administration, the judges said, and disposed of the petition.