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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Prisoners of Violence: A Sri Lankan Riot and India's Own Jails

THE HINDU

10 July 2026

POLITY

GS2

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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 **The Hindu**

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THE LIFT LINE

A prison is where the state holds a person in its total power, and how it treats that person is the truest measure of how it treats the idea of dignity itself.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

A riot at an overcrowded prison in Sri Lanka that killed about 28 inmates is not a foreign-news footnote. It is a case study in [penal](https://ujjyari.com/vocab/penal/) governance that maps directly onto India's own jails, where overcrowding, a large undertrial population and custodial violence remain chronic. For **GS2**, this is a governance-and-rights problem: the state's duty of care over those it detains, and the reforms meant to secure it.

GS Paper 2: governance and mechanisms for the vulnerable; welfare schemes and their performance; the machinery of the state and issues of accountability; rights issues.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: prison is a State subject under the Seventh Schedule; the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023, and the Model Prison Manual, 2016; the All India Committee on Jail Reforms (the Mulla Committee, 1980-83); and Article 21's protection of life and personal liberty as the source of prisoners' dignity. For **Mains**, argue that overcrowding is not an administrative inconvenience but the structural cause of [custodial violence](https://ujjyari.com/terms/custodial-violence/), and that reform must begin with reducing the undertrial burden.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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The riot unfolded at a Sri Lankan prison holding far more inmates than its sanctioned capacity. When congestion, poor conditions and grievance combine inside a closed institution, the result is often sudden, lethal disorder, and about 28 people lost their lives. The immediate trigger matters less than the underlying condition: a penal system carrying more bodies than it was built for.

India should read the event as a mirror rather than a distant tragedy. Indian prisons have long operated well above their sanctioned capacity, and a large majority of the prison population consists of undertrials, that is, persons awaiting trial who have not been convicted of any offence. They are, in law, presumed innocent, yet they occupy the most crowded cells for months or years. The framework meant to address this exists on paper. The Mulla Committee in the early 1980s recommended sweeping reforms, the Model Prison Manual of 2016 set humane standards, and the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act of 2023 offered states a modern template centred on correction and [rehabilitation](https://ujjayari.com/vocab/rehabilitation/) rather than mere confinement.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Overcrowding is the parent of every other failure

Congestion is not one problem among many; it is the source of most of them. When a prison holds far more people than it was designed for, sanitation collapses, medical care thins, staff-to-inmate ratios worsen, and tension has nowhere to [dissipate](https://ujjayari.com/vocab/dissipate/). Violence, whether between inmates or by custodians, becomes structurally likely. The Sri Lankan riot is what overcrowding looks like at its breaking point.

The undertrial burden

The single largest driver of Indian prison congestion is the undertrial population. People who cannot afford bail, or whose cases crawl through a delayed judiciary, remain locked up though unconvicted. This is both a rights failure and a governance failure: it punishes poverty, presumes guilt in practice while professing innocence in law, and inflates the very congestion that breeds violence.

PENAL FAILURE	HOW IT MANIFESTS	REFORM LEVER
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Overcrowding	Occupancy far above sanctioned capacity	Faster trials, bail reform, decongestion
Undertrial burden	Unconvicted majority in the most crowded cells	Legal aid, undertrial review committees
Custodial violence	Deaths and abuse in closed institutions	Oversight, CCTV, independent inspection
Weak rehabilitation	Confinement without correction	Model Prisons Act, 2023 implementation

Dignity is not suspended at the gate

Imprisonment removes a person's liberty; it does not remove their humanity. The Supreme Court has repeatedly read Article 21 to hold that a prisoner retains fundamental rights, subject only to the reasonable restrictions that incarceration necessarily imposes. Custodial violence, denial of medical care and inhuman conditions are therefore constitutional wrongs, not mere lapses in prison administration.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat the prison as a stress test of the state's commitment to rights when no one is watching and the subject has no public sympathy. The transferable rule: the legitimacy of state coercion (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/coercion/>) depends on the conditions under which it is exercised, and a system that detains the presumed-innocent poor in violent, overcrowded cells forfeits moral authority even where it retains legal power. Reform is measured not by new manuals but by falling occupancy ratios and falling custodial deaths.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Overcrowding + undertrial majority -> collapsed sanitation, medical care, staffing -> rising tension in closed institution -> custodial violence or riot -> deaths (Sri Lanka: about 28) -> Article 21 dignity violated -> fix: bail and undertrial reform + Model Prisons Act 2023 + independent oversight -> decongested, correctional prisons

WAY FORWARD

- 1 Decongest** (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/decongest/>) **through the courts.** Attack overcrowding at its source by speeding trials, expanding legal aid, and empowering undertrial review committees to release those held beyond reason.
- 2 Reform bail in practice.** Ensure that inability to pay does not decide who stays imprisoned, so that the presumption of innocence means something inside a cell.

- 3 **Build real oversight.** Institute independent prison inspection, functioning grievance systems and custodial monitoring so that violence is detected and deterred, not hidden.
- 4 **Implement the 2023 framework.** Move states from confinement to correction by operationalising the Model Prisons and Correctional Services Act, 2023, with rehabilitation, skilling and mental-health care.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about custodial deaths, prison reforms and the rights of the accused and convicted under the Constitution. This editorial connects those themes to a specific 2026 penal crisis in the neighbourhood.

Practice question: “Overcrowding and the undertrial burden are the structural causes of custodial violence in Indian prisons.” Examine, and suggest reforms grounded in Article 21. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/>)

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