

Men and women wait before the Central Jail's iron gate for hours to see their loved ones.

Kalni, a young man said, "My brother had a shop of flax (flexi load) in Kamrangir Char where we live. One day some hoodlums of the area put heroine under his seat in the shop when he had stepped out for a few minutes. Police came and arrested him. The case has been trumped up against him by his enemies. He has been living in the Dhaka Central Jail for the last one and half month. My younger brother and younger sister and I have come to see our brother," said Kalni.

Fifty-five- year-old Anwaruzzaman's son had been arrested for a different reason altogether. "My son used to work in a show-room of BATA and was living as a co-tenant with a man from our home district Satkhira. Actually, this very man first promised my son a job in Dhaka and accordingly employed him in the show room where he himself was also a worker. But, this man later [illegible] 80,000 Takas from my son. Meantime, my son started an affair with the man's wife and they eloped. The man later charged my son with abduction. Thank God that the girl had no child from her ex-husband and is now is living with us. After my son gets free, we will arrange their marriage," the father says.

Hundreds of men and women wait before the Central Jail's iron gate for hours to see their loved ones for a few moments. Some of them might be hardened criminals while some of them are innocent, suffering inhumanely under a defective criminal justice system, a system that tends to arrest a poor thief for petty theft and frees bank loan defaulters on bail. Besides, what is more important is that even a 'criminal' has his or her own family-- spouses, parents, children and siblings, whom we often look upon as someone linked to an offender and is sometimes ill-treated. The long row of the families before the prison gate reminds us that every human being should be treated with kindness and forgiveness.

"The problems are manifold in nature," admitted a prison official preferring anonymity. Lawyers often harass the poor and illiterate people from villages on the pretext of providing legal assistance and rob them of their last penny to arrange a simple bail for their loved ones. Again there are a number of loopholes in our prison system. In my own career in the prison, I have even seen murderers get freed by giving bribe to the police and the court while lots of poor men and women have been kept behind the bars for small crimes. Their major crime is simple-- they lack money," he said.

According to Habildar Badshah, who guards the prison gate, "Dhaka Central Jail right now has 720 prison guards. But, not all of them are at work; some of them are on leave or deputation. There is one Chief Prison Guard, one Subedar and 12 prison guards just to man the prison gate. The rest of the force is mainly deployed within the prison."

"Following the Prison Code, we used to allow the family members of the inmates to see their dear ones at an interval of fifteen days," he said. "Later the rule has been made more convenient and humane for the families of the inmates and now they can see and talk with their families every week."

Eminent French Philosopher Michael Foucault, in his book 'Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison' outlines the evolution of prison in medieval France-cum-Europe, providing a comparative analysis of the prison systems in the USA, UK and France and has sharply criticised the criminal justice system and the modern criminal judiciary with his assertion that human beings cannot be judged by other humans, and if they are judged, serious errors and wrongs are bound to take place. He has also said that the prison inmates should be guaranteed the minimum humane environment within the prison. In poor and developing countries like Bangladesh the situation of the inmates in prison and their families outside the jail are grimmer than those in the wealthy west. The government, media, civil society, NGOs and other development agencies should come forward to reform the prison and to give a better life for the prisoners and their families.