

“CUSTODIAL TORTURE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY IN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE”

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ABSTRACT

Custodial torture remains one of the most serious violations of human rights in India despite constitutional guarantees and legal safeguards. It refers to the physical, psychological, or emotional abuse inflicted upon individuals by law enforcement authorities while they are in custody. Such practices undermine the rule of law, human dignity, and public confidence in the criminal justice system. The Indian Constitution guarantees protection against arbitrary arrest and inhuman treatment under Articles 20, 21, and 22. Nevertheless, incidents of custodial violence, deaths, and illegal detention continue to be reported across the country. Judicial interventions, including landmark decisions of the Supreme Court, have attempted to establish safeguards against custodial abuse. This study critically examines the concept, causes, legal framework, judicial approach, and challenges associated with custodial torture in India. It further evaluates the effectiveness of existing laws and proposes measures to ensure accountability, transparency, and protection of human rights within the criminal justice system.

Keywords: Custodial Torture, Custodial Violence, Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

Custodial torture represents a grave challenge to democratic governance and human rights protection. It occurs when law enforcement agencies employ unlawful physical or psychological methods against persons detained for investigation, interrogation, or punishment. Although the State possesses the authority to investigate crimes and maintain public order, such authority must operate within constitutional and legal limits. Torture by public officials not only violates individual dignity but also erodes the legitimacy of the justice system.

India has witnessed numerous cases of custodial violence and deaths, raising concerns regarding police accountability and institutional reforms. The Constitution of India guarantees fundamental rights that protect individuals from arbitrary detention and cruel treatment. Articles

20, 21, and 22 provide safeguards against abuse of state power. Additionally, various provisions of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (formerly CrPC), the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, and judicial guidelines seek to prevent custodial misconduct.

Despite these safeguards, implementation gaps, inadequate oversight mechanisms, and delays in prosecution often allow perpetrators to evade accountability. This study explores the phenomenon of custodial torture in India through a legal and analytical lens, examining its causes, legal framework, judicial responses, challenges, and possible reforms to strengthen human rights protection.

1: CONCEPT AND NATURE OF CUSTODIAL TORTURE

Custodial torture refers to the infliction of physical pain, mental suffering, intimidation,

coercion, or degrading treatment upon an individual who is under the custody or control of law enforcement authorities. The term encompasses acts ranging from physical assault and electric shocks to psychological abuse, threats, prolonged detention, and denial of basic necessities. Such practices are often employed to extract confessions, obtain information, punish suspects, or exert authority.

The concept of custodial torture has evolved through international human rights instruments. The United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) defines torture as any act causing severe pain or suffering intentionally inflicted by or with the consent of public officials for specific purposes such as obtaining information or punishment. Although India has signed UNCAT, it has not yet ratified the convention, leading to continued debate regarding the enactment of a comprehensive anti-torture law.

Custodial torture can be categorized into physical torture, psychological torture, sexual abuse, and custodial deaths. Physical torture includes beatings, forced positions, sleep deprivation, and other forms of bodily harm. Psychological torture involves threats, humiliation, intimidation, and mental harassment. Sexual abuse in custody disproportionately affects women and vulnerable groups. In extreme cases, torture results in custodial deaths, representing the most severe violation of human rights.

The occurrence of custodial torture is often linked to systemic factors such as inadequate police training, pressure to solve crimes quickly, lack of forensic resources, and institutional culture that tolerates excessive use of force. Public demand for swift justice may also indirectly encourage coercive interrogation methods.

From a legal perspective, custodial torture violates the principles of due process, presumption of innocence, and human dignity. It undermines the reliability of evidence obtained through coercion and damages the legitimacy of law enforcement institutions. Modern criminal

jurisprudence emphasizes that the objective of criminal investigation should be the discovery of truth through lawful means rather than extraction of confessions through force.

The impact of custodial torture extends beyond individual victims. Families suffer emotional and financial hardships, while society experiences declining trust in the justice system. Victims often endure long-term physical disabilities, psychological trauma, and social stigma. Consequently, custodial torture is increasingly recognized as not merely a criminal justice issue but also a human rights concern requiring comprehensive legal and institutional responses.

2: CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

The Indian Constitution provides significant safeguards against custodial torture through various fundamental rights provisions. Article 20 protects individuals against self-incrimination and retrospective criminal laws. Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which has been interpreted broadly to include protection from torture and inhuman treatment. Article 22 establishes procedural safeguards relating to arrest and detention.

The judiciary has consistently expanded the scope of Article 21 to protect human dignity. The Supreme Court has recognized that torture and custodial violence violate the constitutional guarantee of life and liberty. These constitutional protections form the foundation of anti-torture jurisprudence in India.

Statutory provisions also contribute to preventing custodial abuse. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 mandates procedural safeguards during arrest and detention. Medical examination of arrested persons, production before a magistrate within prescribed time limits, and maintenance of arrest records are intended to prevent misuse of police powers.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 criminalizes acts causing hurt, grievous hurt, wrongful

confinement, and death, which may apply to custodial violence cases. Additionally, the Indian Evidence Act principles discourage reliance upon involuntary confessions obtained through coercion.

The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 established the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and State Human Rights Commissions. These bodies investigate complaints relating to custodial deaths and torture, issue recommendations, and monitor human rights violations.

International legal standards also influence Indian jurisprudence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights prohibit torture and cruel treatment. Although India has not ratified UNCAT, courts frequently rely on international human rights principles while interpreting constitutional rights.

Despite these protections, enforcement remains a significant challenge. Delays in investigation, lack of independent oversight, and difficulties in proving custodial abuse often hinder accountability. Therefore, strengthening implementation mechanisms is essential to ensure effective protection against torture.

3: JUDICIAL APPROACH TOWARDS CUSTODIAL TORTURE

The Indian judiciary has played a crucial role in developing safeguards against custodial torture and protecting fundamental rights. Through various landmark judgments, courts have emphasized that state authorities cannot violate human dignity under the guise of investigation or law enforcement.

In *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal*, the Supreme Court established comprehensive guidelines governing arrest and detention procedures. These guidelines require identification of arresting officers, preparation of arrest memos, notification of relatives, medical examinations, and maintenance of custody records. The judgment remains a cornerstone of custodial rights jurisprudence.

In *Joginder Kumar v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, the Court held that arrest should not be made routinely and that authorities must justify the necessity of detention. This decision emphasized that personal liberty cannot be sacrificed without reasonable grounds.

The Supreme Court in *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa* recognized compensation as a constitutional remedy for custodial deaths and human rights violations. The Court held that public law remedies are available when state actions violate fundamental rights.

Similarly, in *Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra*, the Court focused on the protection of women prisoners and stressed the importance of legal assistance and humane treatment during detention.

Judicial activism has significantly contributed to the recognition of custodial torture as a constitutional issue. Courts have repeatedly condemned police brutality and emphasized accountability. Public interest litigation has enabled human rights organizations and activists to raise concerns regarding systemic abuse.

However, judicial interventions alone cannot eliminate custodial torture. Courts often face limitations in monitoring implementation and ensuring compliance with guidelines. Delays in prosecution and difficulties in securing evidence continue to obstruct justice. Nonetheless, judicial decisions have established a strong legal foundation for protecting detainees and promoting police accountability in India.

4: CAUSES AND CHALLENGES OF CUSTODIAL TORTURE IN INDIA

Custodial torture persists due to a combination of institutional, legal, and socio-cultural factors. One of the primary causes is the pressure on law enforcement agencies to solve criminal cases quickly. Investigators may resort to coercive methods when faced with resource constraints and public expectations for immediate results.

Inadequate training represents another significant factor. Many police personnel receive

limited instruction regarding human rights standards, scientific investigation techniques, and non-coercive interrogation methods. As a result, traditional practices emphasizing force and intimidation continue in some institutions.

Lack of accountability mechanisms also contributes to the problem. Victims often face difficulties in filing complaints against police officers due to fear of retaliation, lack of evidence, and institutional barriers. Investigations conducted by the same agencies accused of misconduct may undermine impartiality.

Socio-economic vulnerabilities further increase the risk of custodial abuse. Individuals from marginalized communities, including economically weaker sections, minorities, migrants, and disadvantaged groups, are often more susceptible to violations. Limited access to legal representation compounds their vulnerability.

Another challenge is the absence of a specific anti-torture legislation. Although existing laws address assault and abuse, the lack of a dedicated statute creates gaps in prosecution and enforcement. India's non-ratification of UNCAT has also attracted criticism from human rights organizations.

The psychological impact of torture on victims remains a major concern. Survivors frequently experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social exclusion. Families suffer emotional trauma and financial hardships.

Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including police modernization, independent oversight bodies, better training, technological monitoring, and stronger legal protections for detainees.

5: REFORMS AND MEASURES TO PREVENT CUSTODIAL TORTURE

Preventing custodial torture requires a multidimensional approach involving legal reforms, institutional accountability, and cultural transformation within law enforcement

agencies. Strengthening procedural safeguards is the first step toward protecting detainees' rights.

India should consider enacting a comprehensive anti-torture legislation consistent with international standards. Such legislation should clearly define torture, establish penalties, provide victim compensation, and create mechanisms for independent investigation.

Police reforms are equally important. Training programs should emphasize human rights principles, ethical policing, forensic investigation techniques, and scientific methods of evidence collection. Reducing dependence on confession-based investigations can significantly minimize coercive practices.

Technology can play a vital role in enhancing transparency. Installation of CCTV cameras in police stations, digital custody records, body-worn cameras, and electronic monitoring systems can deter abuse and provide reliable evidence in case of allegations.

Independent oversight mechanisms should be strengthened. Human rights commissions, judicial magistrates, and civilian review boards must be empowered to conduct regular inspections and investigate complaints. Witness and victim protection measures should also be introduced to encourage reporting.

Legal aid services must be expanded to ensure that detainees receive timely access to lawyers. Awareness campaigns can educate citizens about their rights during arrest and detention. Special attention should be given to vulnerable groups such as women, children, and marginalized communities.

Finally, fostering a culture of accountability and respect for human dignity is essential. Law enforcement agencies must recognize that effective policing and human rights protection are complementary objectives rather than conflicting interests. Sustainable reform requires commitment from the legislature, judiciary, executive authorities, and civil society.

CONCLUSION

Custodial torture remains a serious challenge to the protection of human rights and the rule of law in India. Despite constitutional guarantees, statutory safeguards, and judicial interventions, incidents of custodial violence continue to occur, reflecting persistent gaps in implementation and accountability. The practice violates fundamental rights, undermines public confidence in law enforcement institutions, and compromises the integrity of the criminal justice system.

The Indian judiciary has played a significant role in safeguarding detainees through landmark decisions and procedural guidelines. However, judicial efforts alone are insufficient to eliminate custodial abuse. Effective prevention requires comprehensive legal reforms, independent oversight mechanisms, improved police training, and greater reliance on scientific investigation techniques.

The adoption of technological safeguards, strengthening of human rights institutions, and enactment of a dedicated anti-torture law can significantly enhance accountability. Furthermore, promoting awareness of legal rights and ensuring access to legal aid are essential for protecting vulnerable individuals in custody.

Ultimately, a democratic society governed by the rule of law cannot tolerate torture in any form. Ensuring dignity, fairness, and accountability within the criminal justice system is crucial for achieving justice and upholding the constitutional values upon which India is founded.

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