

Face-lifting Our Police and Policing

Today, we have increasingly more instances of policemen being killed in a mine blast or in a shoot-out or by getting trapped in the midst of an irate mob than ever before. Today, we have an under-equipped, under-trained, under-motivated and under-resourced police force set against a highly demanding society, increasingly complex law and order situations where the difference between criminals and civilians often blur and against a very motivated and organised cartel of criminals. The politician-criminal nexus has made the situation worse with policemen often finding themselves caught in a cleft stick. More often than not, the policeman finds it convenient to join the nexus and, thus, is created what has come to be known as a police-criminal-politician nexus, something which has been playing havoc with our body politic.

It is because of this that today it is unanimously agreed by all and one that our police organisation is in urgent need of a look-up, in keeping with the requirements of time, to be better able to face up to the newer challenges to the system. It needs to be modernised, reoriented, retrained and better equipped to tackle the complex law and order situations. Today, crime and criminals have to be tackled not only within the confinement of one's district, but goes beyond and the same today straddles many districts, many states and also, many countries, often with implications for inter-national relations.

Increasing expectations of the hoi polloi regarding prompt and effective police response to any situation of violence or distress and the necessity to secure scientific evidence that shall stand scrutiny in the legal system warrant the police to optimally harness science and state-of-the-art technology for criminal investigation. Hence, there is an imperative need to respond to contemporary challenges and demands by way of better training and spruced-up infrastructure. The qualitative improvement in the professional competence of police requires corresponding attitudinal change informed by the positive values of public service. The content of police training needs to change from a focus merely on law and order to greater sensitivity, appreciation and understanding of the human psyche and behaviour, coupled with better empathetic communication skills and development of pro-active citizen-oriented activities.

The already complex law and order situation is further worsened by a lopsided distribution of the police force. The ratio of police personnel to the total area served is also very poor and varies across the states. The all-India average stands at 42 per 100 sq. km. Take the example of Chhattisgarh where this figure is just 17 per 100 sq. km. For an area of 39,114 sq. km, the five Police Districts of Bastar division have a total sanctioned strength of 2,197 policemen (5.62 policemen per 100 sq. km). Actual availability is just 1,389, nearly 37 per cent short of the sanctioned numbers, yielding a ratio of just 3.55 policemen per 100 sq. km.

With one policeman for 728 people, the police in India are stretched more than their counterparts in other countries. As per a report, there are nearly 6.5 lakh villages being policed by only 13,000 police stations. There are districts that run into hundreds of square kilometres, in one instance covered by merely six police stations. The government status paper on internal security situation recommends urgent steps to be taken to improve the existing national average of police population ratio of 1:728. Not only this, the teeth to tail ratio, i.e., officer-rank ratio is also very poor and needs urgent attention if we really mean business about policing this humongous country.

Be it the spate of Naxal attacks, terrorist violence or instances of police brutality across the country, the police seemingly appears to have been caught on the wrong foot. Reforms or no reforms, police is actually functioning in the same way as in the pre-reforms period. The positive pay-offs from the police reforms shall take quite some time, if at all, to translate into real positives. But the issue at hand is to provide functional autonomy to the police, unencumbered by interference from any corner.

For police reforms or for any reforms to be effective, there is first a need to effect change in the psyche of the police personnel and that is always a reflection of the civil society. The civil society led by the urban middle class in this country is still quite confused about the value system that guides it. There are a lot of contradictions in the way we respond to different incidents and situations. While many still commend and recommend the success of police action in Punjab in dealing with the terrorists there or with the Naxals in West Bengal, there are many who have been rapping police on its knuckles for the alleged encounter deaths in Punjab, Gujarat or elsewhere.

The police alertness in bringing the culprits to book in such celebrated cases as the hit and run BMW cases, Priyadarshini Mattoo case, R.K. Sharma, Bitty Mohanty, Jessica Lal, Sanjay Dutt and Salman Khan cases have also been because of the constant media glare and civil society activism. The civil society and media have been having a salutary influence on police performance lately, a positive sign indeed. But notwithstanding these stray positive signs, the fact remains that our police and policing need to improve urgently otherwise they shall soon be out of sync with the present realities, incapable of facing the same with confidence. So, we really need to decide as to what we really want. Whether we want our police to continue functioning the way they have been or we mean business here.

If so, there are a whole lot of things which need to be done than merely effecting some cosmetic changes here and there. We need to do something about correcting not only the police population ratio but also the teeth to tail ratio, i.e., officer to constable ratio. The basic

infrastructure, the weaponry, sophisticated gadgetry and equipment, better training and better motivation are the least required for policing an increasingly anomic society peopled by an impatient public wanting an instant justice. The government needs to think innovatively and creatively to generate resources for putting in place all these required for better policing including thinking of paid policing and taking user charges for certain services related to policing. One just hopes that something shall urgently be done about it all so that we can not only secure the basic liberty and life of our people, but can also recognise the true service and sacrifice made by our uniformed countrymen in policing this country.

Salient Points

- We have an under-equipped police force against increasingly complex law and order situations.
- Police–criminal–politician nexus is playing havoc.
- Police need to be modernised, reoriented, retrained.
- Police training should shift from merely law and order to greater sensitivity, empathetic communication skills and pro-active citizen care.
- Both the ratio of police personnel to the total area served and teeth to tail ratio, i.e., officer-rank ratio are very poor.
- The civil society and media is having a salutary influence on police performance.
- Innovation needed to generate resources like paid policing and taking user charges for certain police services.

Glossary

Irate: angry

Cleft: a split

Straddle: to stand wide apart, as the legs

Anomic: a state of individuals or society characterised by breakdown or absence of social norms