

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a hand holding a fountain pen, writing on a document. The document has some faint, illegible text on it. The pen is a classic fountain pen with a nib. The hand is positioned over the document, and the pen is in contact with the paper, suggesting the act of writing. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the hand and the pen.

Policing an Anomic Society

It is widely felt that the way our police are organised presently is eminently unsuited for the requirements of a liberal democratic country, strengthened by an active civil society and a very vibrant media. As of now, our police seem to be functioning in a highly authoritarian way informed by a feudal mindset and almost without any sense of service towards the people. At least, this is the popular perception of police and this is definitely something very uncharacteristic of a democracy.

There have been many incidents in recent times which have brought the role of our police into question, pointing fingers at the way they function. The police have found itself in the dock for the manner in which they have responded to many crisis-like situations or to the multifarious law and order problems. Police have been on the mat for the reported/alleged brutality attributed to them and have been accordingly been the butt of revulsion and criticism from the media and the civil society.

The police organisation has recently undergone a makeover across the country in keeping with the direction of the Supreme Court, based on the recommendations of Soli Sorabjee Committee, Justice Malimath Committee and the National Human Rights Commission. Now, police appointment and tenure are subject to a more sedate and sensible Establishment Board rather than to the whims and fancies of the political class. There has also been the constitution of a State Security Commission and a Police Complaints Board in many states to ward off undue interference in the functioning of the police and to entertain public complaints against the police. But their functioning over the past few months does not inspire much confidence in the reforms envisaged and effected with so much of tom-tomming.

After all, how do you explain the fact that even today a common man finds it difficult to lodge an FIR, something which should be normal and routine? But the fact remains that the acceptance of an FIR is often subject to many considerations and is accepted only after a few palms are greased or when the same becomes absolutely unavoidable. And even after one succeeds in lodging an FIR, one has to again cool one's heel for aeons before some action is taken and, in fact, more often than not, no action is taken for a long time unless and until the

same relates to cognisable/heinous crimes. For inquiry to commence, continue and culminate in mundane matters, often one has to go from pillar to post to in search of justice. The all-India rate of conviction of the crimes recorded and prosecuted still hover around a pathetic six to eight per cent.

It is this pathology of the system which has led to recrudescence of popular violence vis-à-vis petty crimes and criminals as seen recently in different parts of the country. A society desperate for security and protection for its life and property today finds itself helpless enough to dabble in uncivilised ways of dispensing quick justice. The very fact that certain members of our civil society feel encouraged today to take law into their hands also point to their belief of escaping the mythical long arm of the law. Public beating and shaving of two jawans in Jammu and Kashmir for alleged rape attempt, the beating and dragging of a chain-snatcher by the police on the roads of Bhagalpur, lynching of eleven petty thieves to death in Vaishali, beating up a local goon for alleged eve-teasing and harassment by local women in Pune, numerous other instances of locals lynching a rogue or a thief, instance of beating up the boss for alleged sexual harassment, beating up professors in Patna and Bombay for alleged eve-teasing, instances of beating up policemen for alleged failure or connivance – many such instances point to the increasing penchant of people to take law in their hands and all this definitely has something to do with the way our police functions.

Even though as an economy we may be growing at a break-neck speed of over 7 per cent, but the truth remains that the distribution of resources and assets is still quite skewed in our society, thereby making it a highly inegalitarian society, further rattled by sundry divisions and deprivations including problems like casteism, communalism, terrorism, Naxalism, proliferation of small arms, regionalism and what not. All these problems coupled with a revolution of rising expectations triggered by the media-induced demonstration effect have led to growing demands on the state and with the state failing to meet those demands, the same results in the growing law and order problems, for which our law enforcement agencies are not adequately equipped.

Earlier the standard way of police managing a law and order crisis was to tackle the problem with the employment of violence and force, but now with human rights bodies, NGOs and Fourth Estate breathing down their throat, employment of force has ceased to be an option. At least, the same has to be used very sparingly. In fact, in these testing times, a high-handed police force has often been found at the wrong end of the stick as found in many instances where people have not hesitated to drag the police to court for the alleged human rights violations. Not only that, the better equipped and organised criminal gangs have often proved to be having an upper hand over the police, at least as far as the latter is supposed to play by the rules and the former is not.

It is against this background that we need to revamp and restructure our police force to better equip and train it to face up to the newer socio-economic realities. We need to not only improve the policing infrastructure and improve the extant manpower deficiencies by way of more recruitment, but we also need to better sensitise them to bring the organisational ethos in sync with time. If we really want to make it big in the Comity of Nations, we definitely

need to bridge the existing governance deficit for which better law and order situation is a desideratum. It is here that we need to intervene emergently to facelift our police and policing to better respond to the complex realities of an increasingly changing India.

Salient Points

- Even today a common man finds it difficult to lodge an FIR.
- For inquiry to commence, continue and culminate in mundane matters, one has to go from pillar to post in search of justice.
- All-India rate of conviction of the crimes recorded and prosecuted still hover around a pathetic six to eight per cent.
- Recently, as per Supreme Court directions, constitution of a State Security Commission and a Police Complaints Board has been done by many states.
- Instances of beating up policemen for alleged failure point to the increasing penchant of people to take law in their hands.
- Distribution of resources and assets is still skewed in our society, thereby making it a highly inegalitarian society, further rattled by sundry divisions and deprivations including problems like casteism, communalism, etc.
- We need to improve the policing infrastructure, manpower deficiencies and better sensitise the police too.
- Now with human rights bodies, NGOs and Fourth Estate breathing down their throat, employment of force by police to manage law and order situations has ceased to be an option.
- To make it big in the Comity of Nations, we definitely need to bridge the existing governance deficit for which better law and order situation is a desideratum.

Glossary

Dock: a platform for loading and unloading trucks

Sedate: calm

Recrudescence: revival or reappearance in active existence

Dabble: to play and splash in or as if in water

Desideratum: something wanted or needed