

People's Policing

Monika Saroha

Since the last two weeks, police forces across the country have been sensitising people about the threats to their security, seeking public inputs about criminal activities in their area, holding daily meetings with residents' welfare associations. Sounds like a dream come true! No it is not, it is just that time of the year when the country is turned into a fortress and security arrangements are 'beefed up' to prevent any national shame on the Republic Day. Senior police officers swear by the efficiency of these strategies and say that citizen cooperation helps them prevent untoward incidents around this day.

Why is it that this police practice of eliciting public assistance is restricted in application and is used only near 'Days of National Importance'? Isn't every day as important for the police when it comes to crime control and prevention? Statistics show that as many women are raped, as many senior citizens are killed and as many house burglaries take place in August and January as in any other month of any given year.

A police officer comes in contact with people, whom he/she is duty bound to continuously protect and serve only when responding to complaints of serious crimes and that too, if the victim is (un) fortunate. After all, the last thing anyone in trouble today wants is to get the police involved! Why so much of dissatisfaction and mistrust surrounds all policing activities?

The answer to these can be found in antiquated law governing the Indian Police: *The Police Act of 1861*. The Police Act of 1861 represents a colonial model where the objectives of policing were to serve the interests of ruling establishment. As a result India inherited a regimented and extremely repressive police organisation. This is the reason why the Police Act of 1861 does not talk of winning trust and cooperation of people the police serve. This stands in sharp contrast to the principle enshrined in all modern police forces, which is to prevent crime by working with the people. The only provisions in the 1861 Act that allow public participation in policing provide for the appointment of some residents as special police officers in times of serious law and order problem. This too on the pain of punishment for unjustified refusal. Years of independence have not convinced the successive government to amend the law to suit the needs of a democratic society. Democratic nations need democratic policing which entails an approach founded on principles of equity and equality, accountability, transparency, and participation. Regular police-community consultation (community policing) is a practice that embodies these principles of democratic policing. Community policing broadly signifies collaboration between the police and the community that

identifies and solves community problems. Several factors determine success: traditionally-centralised police organisations are required to shift decision-making and responsibility downward and recognise that it is street-level officers who have to make the new community policing approach work. Police and public have to interact as equals and with a sense of shared values. In societies where power relationships are extremely uneven, community policing has to consider diversity and not be hijacked by dominant groups, or there is a danger that already marginalized groups will be further victimised by the alliance between police and local privilege.

Community policing envisages public participation into all police processes right from preparation of policing schemes, police budgets to providing all crime related information (preventive as well as investigative in nature). Community consultations provide the police increased access to information through community cooperation and vigilance. As a result crimes are better prevented and more easily solved. It helps the police to explore and implement effective ways to address broad crime patterns beyond a narrow focus on individual crime incidents. Community policing recognizes that the police cannot impose order on the community from the outside.

However in the world's largest democracy citizens are still denied any participation in the '*technical, specialised and secretive*' arena of policing. Instead, our police believe in the aggressive and violent enforcement of law and order as a quick-fix solution to the problem of rising crime, without tackling the root causes for the increase in crime.

It is high time that the policy makers in India wake up to the fact that police is a civilian service that aims to serve the community by their consent. It is created by society, paid for by society and is required to deliver the mandate given to it by society through laws. (Therefore it cannot work in isolation from the community it is expected to serve.) The Police Act Drafting Committee set up by the Ministry Of Home Affairs, must amend the Police Act of 1861 to provide for compulsory community participation in policing. It is vital that police be required by the new law to understand and respond to community needs. Many police Legislations across the globe provide for such participation. Take for instance the laws governing the police force in England and Wales. The Police Act of 1996 require the police force to make arrangements to find out the views of the local people about matters concerning the police and also to involve them in cooperating with the police to prevent crime. Similarly the South African Police Service Act of 1995 prescribes the establishment of Community Police Forums at the police station level to act as the liaison between the police and the community. Moreover the provincial governments in South Africa are charged with the constitutional responsibility "to promote good relations between the police and the community."

However desirable the need for community participation in policing be, there will be those in the political and bureaucratic circles and even police officers who will oppose the idea. After all community consultations challenge the most important feature of the police in India - the high degree of centralization of functions and powers. Some police officers may see it as an erosion of their powers and their ability to act with relative autonomy and anonymity. All such oppositions must be met strongly and rationally. It has to be accepted that India needs and well deserves democratic policing and working with and for communities are essential elements of democratic policing.