

Shaping a Professional force

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Whether it is the inability to control the rising number of rapes in Delhi, allegations of using excess force in the Orissa police firing or rounding up of young couples from a Meerut park in an act of 'moral policing', the truth is, today the police are facing a crisis of credibility. Successes at the stock exchange or economic 'miracles' of a real estate boom do not translate into greater protection of rights for ordinary people. At the All India Congress Committee's plenary in Hyderabad, the Prime Minister optimistically proclaimed that "with hard work, determination, selflessness and commitment, we are on the verge of creating a new India." Transposing this vision to policing in constitutional terms would mean that the poor no longer fear registering a case at the police station and the dissatisfied do not fear exercising their right to legitimate dissent.

Publicly, the national government has expressed its commitment to police reforms. In his address to the chief ministers' conference in April last year, the Prime Minister underscored the point that "a well-trained, sensitive, citizen-friendly but firm police force is a necessary element of good governance." In September, at the district police chiefs' conference he urged the home minister to consider establishing an independent police performance board to enable the government to monitor and assess police performance in an objective manner. This is significant because just like any other public agency - and perhaps even more so because it is vested with coercive powers - the police must be able to account for the services it is expected to provide and for which large amounts of public money are allocated. Evaluation of police performance gauges whether resources and powers are properly utilised by the police to fulfil legal requirements, achieve pre-set objectives and also to suggest measures to improve future performance.

Across the country, police performance is gauged through crime statistics. This is a faulty method, particularly because it encourages non-registration of crime. Increase or decrease in crime is dependent on a number of factors, some of which may be outside the control of the police. However, no matter what crime statistics reveal, it is important to evaluate both police response and reaction to crime to get a fair picture of performance. Scientific monitoring of performance on a recurring basis, against set standards are missing elements from Indian policing. It is no coincidence, that policing across the country has failed to move with the times whether it is the methods employed to investigate crimes, law and order arrangements or general police administration. The rising public dissatisfaction with the quality of policing and their dismal performance on crime control and human rights highlight the necessity of institutional evaluation of performance.

The National Police Commission (1979-81) had called for the establishment of a body called the State Security Commission to oversee police working in each state. Its functions would include evaluating and keeping in review the performance of the police and submitting an annual report. The National Police Commission also called for the creation of a special directorate of police inspection in each state to assist in evaluating performance. The need for police performance evaluation has been emphasised by successive committees and commissions on police reforms most notably the Ribeiro Committee (1998) and Padmanbhaiah Committee (2000). Except for a nascent initiative in Kerala where the state government set up a time bound Police Performance & Accountability Commission, comprising of a former Supreme Court Judge, a former head of the state police and a senior bureaucrat, there has been no progress towards institutional evaluation of police performance.

International experiences have much to offer in terms of improving the quality of policing in India. Northern Ireland has a Policing Board, which sets objectives and targets for police performance following a consultation with the police chief and uses these to monitor progress. The Board comprises 19 members. Ten are legislators and the rest are selected through an open merit based recruitments process in which applications are invited from the public. The Board, an independent body, set up under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 publishes an annual report of performance against these objectives. In addition, it monitors trends and patterns in crime and devises ways for the public to cooperate with the police to prevent crime. In England and Wales, the performance of the police is measured and compared by a Police Standards Unit. Some of the indicators that are used are: satisfaction of victims with police handling of their cases; people's perception about their local police doing a good job; satisfaction of victims of racist incidents with the service provided by the police; representation of women and minorities in the force; delivery of internal efficiency targets; time lost due to sickness of police officers; and incidence of crime among other things.

It is high time that governments – both at the centre and in the states – pay heed to the recommendations of various committees and commissions on police reforms, particularly on the need to scientifically monitor and evaluate police performance. The importance of setting up an independent body to do the same cannot be overemphasised. At present, there is considerable talk and movement towards replacing the colonial Police Act of 1861. A committee comprising of jurists, police officers and administrators has been formulated by the union government to draft a new police Act. In all logical probability, arrangements to institutionally monitor and evaluate police performance will find a place in the draft. In the meantime, it is imperative that state governments turn their attention to establishing independent police performance boards to shore up their police forces.