

## The Ujjain shocker

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Few incidents have exposed the partisan role of the police more eloquently than the attack on college teachers in Ujjain, which resulted in the death of Professor H.S. Sabharwal. Not only did the police officers present refrain from taking action when the attacks were on, they failed to take timely action after the tragedy as well. The incidents led to a national outrage over the quality of policing in our society.

A recent interaction with some police officers about these incidents evoked a familiar response. They were dismissed as aberrations. Another routine response from policemen is to explain such behaviour in terms of political pressures. After all hapless policemen are constrained to carry out the wishes of their political masters, or so the argument goes.

It is true that the kind of superintendence exercised over the police force has led to gross abuses, resulting in the failure of the police to grow as a professional organisation. But the responsibility of police personnel themselves in contributing to this state of affairs cannot be denied. Closely associated with powerful interests, the police has generally acquiesced to the attempt to reap benefits from a perverted system. As the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs mentioned in its report in April 2002: "Today we have a police which is politicised and politically polarised. For it has become a pawn in the hands of its masters. In return, policemen get political patronage, which has become essential for their survival."

Initially, in the Ujjain incident, the Madhya Pradesh chief minister made a public statement that the professor's death was accidental. Both the local political leadership and the state police remained tight-lipped over this statement, although it was clearly not the truth. Action was taken only after television channels kept repeating the images making it difficult to ignore them.

The one good outcome of the judgment in the Jessica Lal case was the emergence of public opinion as an instrument of change. It is only to be hoped that an informed public opinion on such issues goes beyond its middle-class frontiers and mounts pressure on government agencies to undo injustice.

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