

Militarisation of the Indian Police

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The “Data on Police Organizations in India” published annually by the Bureau of Police Research and Development tells us that the strength of the state police forces (SPFs) in the country on 1.1.1999 was 14,13,602. Out of this, the armed police component was 3,71,383 strong. In addition, the combined strength of five central para-military forces, like the Border Security Force (BSF), Central Police Reserve Force (CRPF), Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and Assam Rifles was 5,09,829. Besides, there are other armed organisations at the command of the central Ministry of Home Affairs, like the National Security Guards. Even if other organizations are not taken into account, the armed police accounts for about 46% of the total police strength in the country.

The armed or para-military police has registered phenomenal growth in the country during the last few decades, mainly due to the establishment or expansion of the para military forces at the centre. In 1961, only two of the five central para-military forces mentioned above existed – the CRPF and the Assam Rifles. The CRPF then was only 14 battalion strong; now it consists of 137 battalions and has strength of 1.56 laks. The BSF was set up in 1965 by amalgamating twenty-five-and-a-half state armed police forces; now it consists of 157 battalions, with a strength of 1.83 laks. Other para-military forces at the centre have seen similar expansion. Most of the central Ministry of Home Affairs’ budgetary expenditure on Police is accounted for by expenditure on these five armed para-military organizations. The Ministry of Home Affairs Demand For Grants for the year 1999-2000 shows that the amount voted for the Police is about Rs. 690 crores, out of which the voted estimate of expenditure on the five organizations alone is Rs. 478 crores (about 69 %).

This huge expansion has been necessitated by an increasing deployment of central para-military forces on law and order duties. The Central Government has been playing a wide and active role in maintaining law and order in different parts of the country, something that was never envisaged by the Constitution of India for them. Under the Constitution of India, Police and Public Order are State subjects. Law enforcement is a civil function and it is the responsibility of the State Governments to discharge this function effectively through their own Police Forces.

Most State Governments have failed to do so. They have neglected the development of their police forces and have instead preferred to depend heavily on the central para-military assistance to meet urgent and emergent law and order needs. This heavy dependence on the central assistance has been the result as well as the cause of comparatively poor development of the state police forces. The state governments requisition the central assistance on the ground that their own police forces lack adequate strength, arms, equipment and training to deal with tough situations effectively. The availability of central assistance in turn allows the state governments to keep on neglecting the need to strengthen and modernise their police forces.

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In some cases, the public demand deployment of central para-military forces because of lack of faith in the impartiality of the state police forces to handle critical situations, particularly those marked by communal and caste violence. Lack of fairness on the part of the state police forces in dealing with such situations has often been the result of poor quality of political control exercised over them.

Somehow or the other, the central government has allowed this dependence to continue. While the state governments have found it administratively convenient and economically beneficial to let the centre handle their serious law and order problems, the central government has probably found it politically expedient to do so, particularly in dealing with caste and communal riots.

The central para-military forces are organised more or less like the infantry battalions of the army. They are equipped, armed and trained to assault and annihilate. While their deployment in areas affected by terrorism or insurgency may be understandable, there is absolutely no reason why the Central Government should not turn down requisitions for assistance in dealing with other law and order disturbances. It is time the Central Government evolved a sound and strict policy of deployment, restricting the use of central police forces on law and order duties and utilising a part of the saved money in developing the state police forces instead.

This, in fact, is essential for other reasons too. Besides causing a huge dent on public exchequer, the heavy and growing militarisation of the Indian Police is leading to other developments. Pre-occupation with threats to law and order and security and dealing with emergency situations is indeed gradually reducing the capability of the police to do normal traditional policing effectively. The inevitable result has been an increase in crime and a feeling of insecurity afflicting the ordinary citizens in normal areas, unaffected by terrorism and insurgency.

Traditional policing needs to be strengthened and improved not only to prevent and control crime but also to deal with problems of law and order. Most major caste and communal disturbances generally originate in small minor incidents. Trouble in such cases must be nipped in the bud and that requires a skillful approach of the friendly policeman in the neighbourhood, and not one coming from a distant place, equipped with heavy arms and moving in an armoured vehicle. The former species is being seen less and less in performing its role of building community relations and defusing tensions through intervention of community leaders.

We are developing a culture of para-militarism in law enforcement, which is not a very healthy sign. We must change the basic philosophy underlying policing, which has remained largely 'colonial in mould'. We are a democratic society and can do without so many 'warrior cops'. Policing must be performed by a well organised, well controlled well led and a well trained civil police service, which is friendly, sensitive and fair, but firm.

Yes, violence in society is increasing. However, the roots of violence lie in bad politics and bad economics. Para-military law enforcement can not provide a solution, definitely not a lasting one.