

Sectarian virus in the police force

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The Union Home Minister, Mr. Indrajit Gupta, seems to have a penchant for expressing some bitter truths frankly. A couple of months ago, he expressed his helplessness in breaking the politics-crime nexus which, according to him, had struck deep roots in the country. More recently, while addressing the contingent of IPS probationers at the National Police Academy, Hyderabad, he expressed distress at the fact that the UP police had been affected by the forces of casteism and communalism.

An observation of this type should have raised many eyebrows. It was made by no less a person than the Union Home Minister whose Ministry deals with police problems. Besides, the statement goes against the very fundamentals of the police philosophy, which require the force to function impartially as an agent of law, unaffected by caste or communal considerations. The statement, however, did not create even a ripple of excitement in political, academic, or in police circles. This happened probably because nobody found anything new or surprising in what Mr. Gupta said.

Members of the minority communities or those belonging to lower castes have often perceived the police as a biased and partisan agency. A number of judicial enquiry commissions set up to enquire into communal and caste riots have commented adversely on the police for showing discrimination in the handling of such disturbances. The National Police Commission in its sixth report referred to the stringent criticism received by it from many responsible quarters that the police often did not act impartially and objectively.

To some extent, the increasing perception of the police force as communal or casteist is a reflection of the sharpening of the divide amongst the communities on communal or caste lines. Earlier, it was hoped that the virus of communalism and casteism dividing the Indian society would meet its eventual end once the liberal institutions and value systems took roots. This has not happened. Religion and caste have, in fact, emerged as stronger dividing forces. The religious and caste affiliations and feelings existing in our traditional society have been manipulated and exploited by politicians to create, retain and expand their vote banks. This has resulted in further strengthening the communal and casteist feelings amongst vast sections of the community. Policing such an environment becomes a difficult task as it requires the police to remain unaffected by the forces which are influencing the attitudes, values and behaviour of large sections of population with whom they interact closely in their day-to-day work. A sizeable chunk of constabulary comes from the traditionally conservative families and bring with them a set of 'muffasil' values and attitudes at the time of joining the police force.

Shedding off some of the accumulated prejudices becomes a difficult task when the same set of prejudices is entrenching its stranglehold on other segments of population. The problem of police being affected by communalism or casteism is linked not only to the problem of increasing hold of communal forces over others in society, but also to that of gradual and continuous erosion of the authority of police as an agency of law which has occurred in this country over a period of time. The philosophy of police neutrality is embedded in the concept of the rule of law. That concept has not merely been devalued but, in fact, subverted to serve the interests of powerful people and sections of society.

This has been done by manipulating the police and not letting it function as an agency of law. One of the methods used for this purpose is to post such officers in important or sensitive districts as are always willing to toe the line. Appointments and postings of officers in States like UP are governed not by their secular credentials or professionalism but by their caste or religious affiliations and by their pliability to accept and implement all types of orders- right or wrong.

The police being the, most visible arm of the State, loss of confidence on the part of members of any community in its ability, resulting from its partisan behaviour, leads to the erosion of faith in the credentials of the States. The problem to which the Union Home Minister referred has thus serious implications not merely for the police department but for the entire society. The problem is too important to be neglected and deserves to be tackled in right earnest.

One of the remedial measures suggested by some is to increase the representation from minority communities and Scheduled Castes in the police. At present, the police forces in all States and Union territories have a total strength of 13,51,047, out of which as many as 1,66,779 (12.3 per cent) belong to Scheduled Castes and 78,799 (5.8 per cent) are Muslims. It is felt by some that this representation is rather low and needs to be increased. While people from all communities should be recruited to give a composite character to the police force, this should not be done by diluting the standards of recruitment. It is unfortunate that deliberate attempts were made recently in some States, like UP during Mr. Mulayam Singh's Chief Ministership, to raise new police forces under special legislative enactments, which permitted dilution of standards so that people belonging to a certain community could be recruited in large numbers. This is the surest way to spread communal or caste virus. If the spread of the virus of communalism in the police forces has to be checked the standards of recruitment must be high vigorously enforced.

A lasting solution of the problem, however, would require establishment of arrangements through which the police administration can be insulated against undesirable and illegitimate interferences. As long as appointments, postings, transfers and promotions are guided by communal and caste considerations, it will not be possible to stop the spread of communal virus in the force. A clean force would require a clean administration.