

Police-Community Interaction

- an idea for the times?

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CHRI's recent consultation with strategic groups in the Indian states of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh illustrated two important aspects about the community in relation to the police organisation. First, there is lack of communication and accessibility between police and citizens and secondly, the police are misunderstood. While the ruler and ruled relationship of the past is slowly improving through various spirited community policing experiments in the country, there still remains a need for legislation entrenching community police partnerships.

Community policing has emerged as a promising alternative to the traditionally repressive mode of law enforcement, which renders the police ineffective and alienated from the public. This new concept gives a significant role to the community in identifying their own policing needs and in guiding police performance.

The basic idea underlying community policing is to involve the citizen in police work so that gradually policemen become an integral part of the community. This idea is not a recent phenomenon but dates back to the origins of policing. However, the police organization in India, formally established after the Indian mutiny in 1857, to curb dissent and serve the interests of the British, still forms the basis of the current police administration. The structure of the 1861 Police Act left little scope for citizen-police interaction and in fact charged locals for any additional reinforcements in times of civil and political disturbance. This legacy engendered a pro-ruler/anti-people attitude among the police force, which in turn

caused deep resentment of the local population with the police, an attitude that persists to date.

Facts and Figures!

- ◆ In 1999, over 74322 complaints were received by the public against police personnel in the country.¹
- ◆ In 1999-2000 the National Human Rights Commission received reports of 177 deaths in police custody, 1157 'illegal detention and arrests', 1647 'false implications' and 5783 'other police excesses'.²

Even though over the last two decades there has been an increasing acceptance of the idea amongst the police personnel that they cannot control crime or maintain law and order without the community's support, there has not been enough formal recognition within the law. No matter how elaborate police resources and strategies are, citizen involvement in police tasks is imperative for achieving law and order objectives.

The basic premise of community policing lies in allowing the community to collaborate with the force to perform various duties. These could include maintenance of peace and security, safety of citizens, law enforcement, crime control and orderly flow of traffic. The assumption flows that if these functions are taken care of, it will leave ample time for the police to execute their remaining duties such as investigation of cases.

¹ Crime in India, 1999

² NHRC Annual Report 2000

International experiments have also proven the viability of the community policing idea. In the UK, the New Police Act instituted in 1860 decentralised and gave a fresh image and responsibility to the beat constable making the bobby a household person in hamlets, in the back alleys and the big cities. More recently, the Police Act and the recent UK Police Reforms Bill, 2002, further entrenches the idea by requiring community consultation and providing scope for induction of Community Support Officers and Community Accreditation Schemes. In addition, the Reform Bill allows the Chief of Police in the UK to liaise with the business community of an area to supervise their employees in carrying out certain community safety functions.

The *Koban* System of Japan is perhaps the best instance of the Neighbourhood Watch System, also popular in the USA, where the police instruct citizens in home security measures and enlist their assistance in watching their neighbours' homes. The scheme takes its name from the *Kobans* or one-room boxes situated in residential areas where the policemen live within the community. This gives them tremendous access to information about the community and enables them to receive complaints, deal with parking offences, give advice regarding citizen grievances and so on. Mobile boxes also make the police more accessible in different parts of the country.

Other experiments have originated from within the community. In Kenya, the Central Business District Association of Nairobi (NCBDA), concerned about vigilante groups and spiralling crime, collaborated with the police by paying for ten police assistance booths. Though others followed this lead with booths coming up all over central Nairobi, this initiative lacked sustainability since it was not formalised in law but taken up on an experimental basis.

A similar initiative in Karachi has its origin in the Police Reforms Ordinance 2001, which formalises the Citizen

and Police Liaison Committees (CPLC). The citizen's board, which includes judges, advocates, and people from business and finance, works in close association with law enforcement to institute a crime database, bridge the gap between the police and the public and ensure all cases are duly registered.

Wherever community policing has been enshrined in law, the concept has flourished beyond an experiment or a mere initiative. In South Africa, the Constitution makes it the "political responsibility" of each province to promote "good relations between the police and the community".³ The Constitution also requires the government to appoint a commission of inquiry in case of a breakdown in relations between the two. The Police Act on the other hand prescribes standards in instituting community police forums and boards to liaison with the community.

Back in India, the scenario has been limited to some spirited initiatives by a few dynamic police officers. However, these experiments die a quick death when the initiators are transferred to different posts and replaced with incumbents who believe in more traditional policing. The government has also taken steps to promote the concept within the police system, such as the 1999 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project in which nine police stations in three states were listed as Model Police Stations. The idea behind this project was to bring an attitudinal change in the police personnel and catalyse other police stations in the same area.

However, these small steps are not enough. The problem does not lie in the nature of such experiments or the prudent judgement by the initiator. Even when sufficient resources are spent, success does not guarantee sustainability and until a people friendly legislation is set in place community-police relationships will continue to be an exercise in futility. ■

³ The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, Article 207 (5)