

Moral of the Story: Reform or Perish

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The news about the arrest of some senior Indian Police Service officers of the Maharashtra cadre for their involvement in the Telgi scam, though tragic and depressing, does not come as a major surprise. This only confirms what has been distinctly noticeable over the last few years: the trend towards increasing criminalisation of the police force in this country.

The Padmanabhaiah Committee on Police Reforms in its report (August 2000) admitted that the criminalisation of the police force was increasing and considered the existence of linkages between the policemen and the organised criminal gangs as the most pernicious threat to national security. Some evidence of this is seen in the Telgi case.

This case also provides ample evidence of what Director, Central Bureau of Investigation had reported to the Vohra Committee on Corruption a few years ago: “ All over India, crime syndicates have become a law unto themselves..The nexus between the criminal gangs, police, bureaucracy and politicians has come out clearly in various parts of the country.”

The Vohra Committee report mentioned that the nexus was “ virtually running a parallel government, pushing the state apparatus into irrelevance”. Telgi definitely succeeded in doing this by making the currency and postal departments of the government irrelevant to some extent.

Till a few years ago, deviance was associated with only the lower ranks in the police. The general perception in the police as well as the public was that the senior ranks were by far above reproach. This is no longer true.

To take examples from a small state like Haryana, the record of past few years shows an officer of the rank of Director General of Police getting caught red handed while accepting a bribe and another being accused of involvement in a custody death. A third one was accused of molesting a teen-aged girl who later committed suicide. An officer of the rank of Inspector General was arrested on a charge of getting a woman journalist murdered and another one was arrested for running a smuggling operation. Two officers of the rank of SP were sentenced to imprisonment for committing perjury by filing false affidavits. There is no use in multiplying such instances, which have come to notice in other states too.

The process of criminalisation of politics that has occurred in this country so rapidly and on such a large scale has already shaken public faith in politics and politicians. The loss of public faith gets accentuated when the process of criminalisation engulfs the law enforcement officers too.

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A police officer committing a crime not only dishonours himself and his department but causes loss of public faith in the system of law and justice which he represents. It is this loss of public faith in the system of law and justice that shakes the foundations of a democratic system.

The police are a hierarchical organization where messages emanating from top travel very fast to the bottom. The seniors are supposed not only to control but also to inspire. The effectiveness of the leadership gets undermined when its weaknesses get exposed. This, in fact, makes the entire force vulnerable to wrong illegitimate influences and the functionaries at different levels start looking elsewhere for protection and rewards.

Besides breeding indiscipline in the force, it promotes a climate in which impunity flourishes. A small time travel agent like Telgi could not have become such a big time crook and extended his illegal activities to about ten states in less than ten years unless he enjoyed patronage of people in positions of power and this patronage could not have come to him unless those who extended it were sure of keeping the system subverted.

It is this politicised culture of patronage and impunity that ensures that the corrupt officers, particularly those of senior ranks, do not come to grief.

One important lesson to be drawn from the Telgi case is to recognize that police reforms are too important to neglect and too urgent to delay. The idea of police reforms has to be pursued in two directions simultaneously. Steps have to be taken for both internal reforms and external oversight. The internal reforms package should include measures that lead to improvement in recruitment, training and leadership standards, besides raising the status of policeman and improving his working and living conditions.

The external oversight should come in the form of statutory institutional arrangements that help in insulating the police from outside illegitimate pressures and influences and in ensuring effective monitoring of police performance, with a view to identifying their inadequacies and shortcomings and suggesting corrective measures from time to time.

He arrangements must provide for an independent mechanism that holds the police officers accountable for what they do and sometimes for what they do not do. What is required is to develop a culture of openness and accountability that is intolerant of wrong doers and supports good officers, of which there is no shortage even now.