

What R.K. Sharma tells us

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The news of the alleged involvement of R.K. Sharma, a senior IPS officer of Haryana cadre, in the murder of Shivani Bhatnagar makes tragic reading. It is symptomatic of an unfortunate trend: the increasing criminalisation of the police force. Their delinquency is now no longer confined to mere violations of the disciplinary code, but extends to major offences. Equally disturbing is the involvement of senior officers in such crimes.

Look at the evidence: On January 1, 1998, the UP government identified 850 policemen having an alleged nexus with criminals. The list included two officers of the rank of additional director general of police, one of whom later became director general of police. In Calcutta, a police commissioner had maintained close links with the underworld. In Haryana, an officer of the rank of director general of police was caught accepting a bribe and another was involved in getting a person in custody killed. A third one was accused of molesting a teenaged girl, who subsequently committed suicide.

That's not all. An officer of IGP rank was found to be involved in running a smuggling operation before he was caught by the Customs more than a year ago. Two officers of the rank of SP of the Haryana cadre were sentenced to imprisonment for filing false affidavits before the Supreme Court. In Karnataka, senior IPS officers were faced with murder charges. In Assam, two senior officers were involved in cases of rape. A couple of years ago, an officer of the rank of DIG in Rajasthan was allegedly involved in raping his orderly's wife. He has been absconding for the last many years. In Delhi, a senior IPS officer of the UT cadre of the rank of DGP had grabbed land illegally. Some time ago, in Bihar, an IPS officer of the rank of SP was reportedly making a fast buck dealing in stolen cars. The list is endless.

Police officials resent being singled out for blame, given the fact that standards of public morality had plummeted in every department of the government and administration. But this argument overlooks the tremendous powers wielded by the police. When a policeman commits a crime, he does not merely violate a law; he violates a fiduciary relationship, one based on public trust. Of course, the rising incidence of crimes committed by police personnel is closely linked with the growing criminalisation of politics. As the nexus between the criminal and politician gets stronger, it is able to subvert the loyalty of government functionaries, including the police, at various levels. Criminalisation of politics has led to gradually undermining the authority of the police leadership and, consequently, the discipline of the force. Being an hierarchical organisation, if the leadership is undermined- either because of illegitimate interference from outside or because of its own weaknesses- the entire force becomes vulnerable, with the functionaries at different levels looking elsewhere for protection.

Another reason for the increasing incidence of criminality among policemen is the decline in the quality of persons being recruited. There has been a huge and rapid expansion of the force during the last few years and a noticeable decline in recruitment standards, with corruption, caste and communal considerations vitiating the selection process. Besides preventing the entry of the wrong type of people into the force, there must be regular

screening to weed out undesirable elements at periodic intervals. This is necessary because the 'biggest victim of the crooked cop is the honest cop.'

There is another factor to be considered as well. The strong camaraderie in the force subverts attempts by 'outsiders' to punish them. It is particularly difficult to take action against officers involved in wrongdoing. Not only does the department feel shy of taking action against senior officers, the fact that the wrongdoer has access to important bureaucrats and politicians makes bringing them to book all the more difficult.

Training is often cited as a panacea for all the ills. While it may not succeed in curbing the criminal tendencies of the wrongdoers, it can help in creating a culture where such elements are identified and removed. What is required is to establish a culture within the police force that promotes openness and ensures that criminal tendencies are regarded not just as unacceptable, but fully deserving of swift punishment.