

The murder of Stephen Lawrence

The Gujarat police can learn some lessons from this British case

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Stephen Lawrence was a bright, 18-year-old. On April 22, 1993, he was waiting at a London bus stand at 10.30 pm to go home. Suddenly, a group of about five to six youngsters descended, shouting “What, what nigger”, and stabbed him to death. The attack was completely unprovoked. Stephen was killed just because he was black. His murderers were white.

The Metropolitan Police Service, London, conducted investigations in two phases. Names of five white young delinquents came repeatedly as prime suspects, but the police failed to unearth sufficient evidence to prosecute them. What was remarkable about the case was the huge dignity and courage Stephen’s parents displayed in pursuing the case.

Their campaign for justice finally bore fruit when an inquiry commission was appointed on July 31, 1997, under the chairmanship of Sir William Macpherson, a former high court judge. The report submitted on February 1999 was a scathing indictment of the working of the police. Many deficiencies in the investigation were delineated and the conclusion reached that “the investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers”.

The Commission made 70 wide-ranging recommendations, including the establishing of a Ministerial Priority for all police services to increase trust and confidence in policing among minority communities. The Freedom of Information Act should generally apply to all areas of policing. Race Relations legislation should be extended to police and the chiefs should be made vicariously liable for acts and omissions of their officers. A comprehensive system of reporting and recording of all racist crimes should be created. Dedicated and trained family liaison officers must exist at local level in every police force. Training must be given to police in racism awareness at local levels and local minority ethnic communities should be involved in such training. The police force must reflect the ethnic mix of the local communities. Racist words and acts by the police should lead to disciplinary proceedings with serious complaints independently investigated. How did the police and the government in the UK react to the findings? The police admitted that their investigations were faulty. Sir Paul Condon, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, made a public apology to the parents. The report was submitted to the government on February 15, 1999 and it was discussed in the House of Commons on February 24, 1999.

What does all this reveal? A murder take place. A very reputed police force handles the investigation badly. The revelation gives a big jolt to the collective conscience of the community. No attempt is made to suppress facts. Public apologies for institutional failures are made by the head of the police force and also by the government. The existence of the problems is recognised. Solutions are suggested and implemented.

Given the unedifying record of the Gujarat government and police in the handling of the recent riots, isn't it time that we took a leaf out of the Stephen Lawrence Case and set our own house in order?