

## The Fate of New Police Initiatives

*Accountability to the citizen must be paramount in community-policing initiatives.*

As part of its community-policing initiatives, the Maharashtra police has decided to institutionalise the “best policing practices” that were or are being followed in districts across the state. These include the “police didi” programme in Mumbai, the “bharosa (trust) cell” by the Pune and Nagpur police and so on. On the face of it, this move seems a welcome one. But what is telling and needs attention is a senior police officer’s observation that these and other initiatives are discontinued after the officers who started them get transferred to other jurisdictions. Obviously, this means that the thinking and good intentions behind the initiative do not get fully ingrained in the institutional culture. More importantly, such programmes deal with the central issues that for long have plagued and continue to plague Indian policing. The overall image of the police and the force’s efficacy—though different in different states—needs long-term bolstering through major reforms.

The shortcomings and downright violations of human rights committed by the police are the staple of media reporting almost daily and need not be listed here. The point is the examination of what ails the system and what needs to be done in this regard. It has been repeatedly pointed out that India’s ratio of police persons per 1,000 people is 1.2, which is grossly below the United Nation’s recommendation. There are huge vacancies in almost every state, especially in the non-Indian Police Service posts. Problems of overwork, lack of leave, poor dietary habits due to long hours of duty, lack of decent housing and so on are just some of the issues they face. According to media reports, the introduction of eight-hour shifts in Kerala and Mumbai has been welcomed by the police therein. The less said about the colonial hangover in terms of the hierarchical set-up of the police and training, the better.

Then there are the more endemic issues like the lack of caste and religious diversity in the force, and the attitude towards women constables and assistant inspectors. It is also well known that the overall dismal conviction rates for most major crimes stem from poor investigation, and forensic skills and means. In fact, interestingly, most political parties have listed police reforms in their manifestos for the ongoing elections. The heartening part is that 10 states in the country have implemented a host of police

reforms, including filling vacancies and introducing state-of-the-art technology in dealing with crime. The celebrated Prakash Singh case in the Supreme Court and the latter’s directives, five reports of the National Police Commission and many commissions and committees headed by eminent jurists and policemen over the years have been commented upon ad nauseam.

But, while these and many other issues need to be addressed urgently, the most important are the accountability of the police to the larger community and their attitudes towards tribal, marginalised, Dalit and women complainants. One aspect that is constantly mentioned and criticised is the “political interference” in police functioning and the political executive’s hold over the force. While this is true and the various recommendations by retired senior police officers and others on this issue must be examined, it is not the main issue. As many activist-lawyers have pointed out, it is not a rare practice for the political class to appoint police chiefs who are amenable to pressure and dictats that suit the former.

So, this is the attitude of the police—from the lowest to the highest rungs of hierarchy—towards the weaker and ignored sections. Will having bharosa cells and police didis going around schools and colleges help in dealing with this core aspect? What will help in making the police force conscious of its accountability to the ordinary citizen and accept it in its day-to-day activities? For too long the khaki *vardi* (uniform) has been seen as providing impunity and preventing citizens from questioning the police. Again, the police didi fits into the patriarchal notion of the woman as caring, protective (which is good) but also meek and not forceful enough. The attitude of the citizen and male police officials is hardly praiseworthy when it comes to policewomen who are not from the IPS cadre. Their training, postings, etc, need to receive urgent attention.

Policing is, or rather should be, aimed at providing a safe environment to the community. As noted by experts, it is the only non-combatant organisation that can use force against citizens and curtail their liberty. Such power must be tempered by its own moral and social consciousness. The initiative announced by the Maharashtra police must take these factors into account when it institutionalises the best community practices.