

Let police stations serve people

Guest Column



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Historically, police stations have been outside the domain of the common citizen, even though these are the first points of contact for securing safety of life, property and rights. A global movement to bring police stations in public reach through community involvement has been underway since 2006.

The Altus Global Alliance has been conducting police station visits and has mobilised thousands of citizens from around the world to walk down to their local police station to find out how the police serve the public. This year, the exercise was joined by 21 countries — Argentina, Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, India, Kenya, Latvia, Liberia, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Russia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and the US.

Police stations are the nerve centres of policing. Yet, service delivery at the cutting edge has not been the focus of police reforms. And there exists the disconnect between the out-

side space and the police station. This is because citizens feel that in police stations they might be detained, assaulted, insulted or coerced to pay bribes. This perception, poor management practices, lack of accountability and transparency, and prejudiced response contribute to under-reporting of crime.

A police station often gives a feeling of being an alien space, unlike a school or panchayat office or a government dispensary. The indifferent environment also gives visitors a sense of loss of identity and dignity, as has been described succinctly in the Fifth Report of the National Police Commission (November 1980). The panel expressed anguish that the 1902 Fraser Commission's observation that "people" now may not dread the police, but they certainly dread getting involved with it in any capacity, continues to be valid.

The general strategy of survival, perfected by people over generations of experience, is to stay away from any entanglement with the police and

its procedures. Ram Gopal, a Dalit in rural Meerut, was anguished that his wife had been raped by an MLA. A group of researchers, including myself, reached the village where two young activists narrated to us his story. We suggested the matter should be brought to the notice of the police and also reported in the media. As we were proceeding to lodge the complaint with the police, Ram Gopal turned around to tell us straight: "I do not need your help, please leave me alone." He added in a murmur that reporting to the police would further rob his family of dignity and add to their torture. The language of power is different from the language of justice. The institutions of justice delivery understand power and material resources better than the feeble voices of the dispossessed.

Police services are also tardy and inconsistent, as seen in the recording of FIRs in cognisable offences, especially against the influential. This has particularly eroded the legitimacy of the police system.

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To reverse this, there is a need to strengthen internal accountability as also to make police directly accountable to citizens. This will lead to restoration of hierarchy, performance-based incentives and transfers, and insulation of the police from partisan interference.

Foremost, steps should be taken to provide stability of tenure of the station house officer (SHO) and senior superintendent of police (SSP). On an average, the tenure of the district police chief (SSP) is 1.08 years and police station chief (SHO) 5.5 months. The tenure of the SHO should be at least two years (as per the Punjab Police Act) and a regular performance audit of the SHO should be conducted to avoid political interference in their postings. The range DIG and the district SSP ought to take a decision on posting SHOs on the basis of the audit, and not political influence.

The second parameter is to build capacities (human resource as well as equipment) of police stations to maintain law and order and ensure community needs are met. This has to be done with an eye on specific local needs and conditions. For instance, in Amritsar, arrangements have to be made to handle a large number of pilgrims.

The third parameter is to put in place an institutional mechanism to make police stations responsive to the needs of gender, Dalits, migrants, workers and children.

The fourth is to make service delivery transparent through institutionalisation of community-police partnership (such as establishment of police station outreach centres). Punjab would be the first state in India to implement community policing at a large scale in an institutionalised manner. This has become possible because the political leadership has taken the lead. Around 400 centres would provide counselling services to resolve disputes related to domestic violence, dowry and other crimes against women. These would also have facility for lodging complaints against police personnel, along with transparent disposal of those complaints.

Run in partnership with representatives of the community, the centres would also provide copies of FIR, untraced reports, no-objection certificates for arms licences, permission for functions, tenant verification, servant registration, etc.

The idea behind all these reforms is to restore the denied "personhood" across board to citizens, and reinforce the need for what Hannah Arendt (1986) termed as "the right to have rights".

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