

Policing in Remote Working Condition-a Holistic View

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ABSTRACT

Indian police can be represented as the most visible, public facing authority of the civilian government and of the justice system. In a country with a population of nearly 1.38 billion, the actual strength of police personnel is approximately only 1.9 million as against the sanctioned strength of 2.8 million. India's most understaffed, underpaid and overburdened department of the state machinery is the police department. But this has not limited the Indian police in executing not only their core functions of maintaining order, collecting intelligence and controlling crime but also in providing basic social services to the public. These functions have been in clear focus during the current pandemic situation and the subsequent lockdown imposed in the country as an already overworked force was about to go through new levels of burdens and responsibilities. The study deals with the challenges faced by the police department during remote working condition and the steps taken to address the problems through interview with various people in the department

Keywords

police, order, pandemic, overburdened, remote working

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Introduction

Indian police can be represented as the most visible, public facing authority of the civilian government and of the justice system. In a country with a population of nearly 1.38 billion, the actual strength of police personnel is approximately only 1.9 million as against the sanctioned strength of 2.8 million. This translates to a national average of 152 police personnel per lakh population which is amongst the lowest in the world against the United Nation recommended standard of 222 police personnel per lakh population. This acute shortage of personnel coupled with various other limitations like uncertain nature of duties and their arduous nature with very high risk to life, underutilization of funds for modernization and a constant battle between political accountability vs operational freedom makes the police department as India's most understaffed, underpaid and overburdened department of the state machinery. But this has not limited the Indian police in executing not only their core functions of maintaining order, collecting intelligence and controlling crime but also in providing basic social services to the public. These functions have been in clear focus during the current pandemic situation and the subsequent lockdown imposed in the country as an already overworked force was about to go through new levels of burdens and responsibilities.

Policing Amidst The Pandemic:

The Indian police force was provided with the responsibility of upholding and enforcing the lockdown across the country as strict maintenance of public order was most essential in a society struck by a deadly virus because only then can those affected by the virus be looked after and given the best medical care. This approach created a duality in the role of the police with one as an agent of coercion and the other as an agent of social service. Their dual role also requires

duality in their personalities, which explains certain instances of police brutality. The traditional and routine police duties of law and order maintenance, crime control, and traffic management were replaced by new ones of making sure that the lockdown was effective in containing the virus spread and as time progressed, new dimensions of policing duties emerged. The initial phase of lockdown witnessed many instances of brutality on the part of police personnel as they tried to ensure that citizens comply with what was seen more as a 'law and order' problem. At the same time, one must also consider the factors of personal anxiety coupled with dealing with unforeseen circumstances in their response.

Literature Review

Boke and Nalla, 2009 in their research highlighted that the population in India as a whole and in metropolitan cities are very high due to the diverse, overcrowded, different ethnicity and multi-cultural characteristics the role of Police becomes highly significant, a nation cannot be imagined without the police force as it is inevitable and essential. The police officer plays variety of roles from soldier to lawyer. When they are fighting for resisting violation of laws they play the role of soldier: a doctor when they are treating the social diseases, they possess legal knowledge so they play the role of a lawyer and when they socialise the large section of public the role of an educator gets in. This implies that the police play a multi-dimensional role. In India, the Police have a set of hierarchical procedure for promotion, control and discipline which derives its origin from the colonial period (Kumar & Verma, 2012).

According to Johnson (2012) even in Police department, the supervisor feedback plays a key role in motivating them. Apart from that organizational support perception and the relationship between the co-police force have major influence on them. Boke and Nalla (2009) examined that

support from top authorities, the cooperation of the citizens, the challenges in the job makes the police force to get attached to the department. Bennett (1997) in his research identified that the support gained from the citizens, the incidence of crime occurrence, aids provided to the department personnel and the condition of the station have impact on the police personnel performance and satisfaction.

Methodology

As the literature in this field was minimum, an informal interview was conducted among different police personnel across India through online mode and the results are consolidated.

Problems Faced By The Police:

1) Life threat:

The police forces have been working under life-threatening conditions with many of them not having access to personal protection equipment (PPE). The risk of catching the infection, taking it home and exposing their family has tested the psychological strength of the force. Many in fact have been infected by the disease and thousands of police personnel have lost their life. These forced police personnel to do household duties like washing their cloths and cleaning their surroundings to keep their family safe causing additional burden on them.

2) Lack of Guidelines or Standard Operating Procedures (SOP):

Police have seldom been imparted with elaborate training methods and practices to address delicate and unpredictable problems that erupt instantly and on a large scale. Essential training requirements in matters pertaining to disaster management to address natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, fire, industrial disasters, etc have also been rudimentary. The police neither had any standard operating procedure (SOP) nor any guidelines during the first phase of lockdown. They were instructed to follow a decentralized approach based on local requirements. The National Policy on Disaster Management mentions police as the first and key responders to a disaster but a pandemic was not a notified disaster before the outbreak of covid-19. This coupled with lack of awareness about the disease and their specific responsibilities caused confusion among the personnel leading to stray incidents of police high handedness and violence.

3) Obstacles in enforcing lockdown:

The National lockdown of announced in March 2020 was of unprecedented scale and one of the most stringent actions taken in modern times. The pandemic and the lockdown that followed affected all aspects of life. These challenging times were new even to the police department and its personnel had to face many obstacles in enforcing the lockdown in the form of maintaining curfews, ensuring availability of essential commodities, stipulating the time for opening and closing of shops, vehicle check and seizure etc.

4) Manpower Shortage:

The Indian police department was already working under conditions of acute manpower shortages and with the pandemic opening its tentacles, the disease started to spread amongst the police personnel leading to many losing their lives and even more of them being quarantined. This led to an even more depletion in manpower forcing the department to draw personnel from its non-combat units and other sources. Manpower shortage became acute as the tasks expanded over the course of the lockdown.

5) Problem of immigrants and migrant labourers:

As the lockdown progressed, the number of people arriving into the country and also from different states and then quarantined, rose to staggering heights, creating a nightmare for the administration. The police had to identify migrant labourers and escort them to railway stations in cities and also to the quarantine centres in their native states. The magnitude of the task can be better understood by the numbers. In Bihar, for example, there more than 12,000 quarantine centres in which over 6 lakh people took shelter as against a registered count of 22 lakh people. They also had the task of tracing the contacts of all positive cases and ensuring that they observe strict quarantine guidelines.

6) Public Apathy:

The police had to face attacks from angry people for lockdown enforcement, acting against lockdown violations and taking suspected patients to testing centres. As the police department and its personnel were severely stretched, there was often no clarity on various matters like movement passes, which led to confusion and misunderstanding with people. The psychological fear on people caused by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown coupled with fear of loss of income created a mutinous atmosphere that the police had to face and handle.

7) Loss of Credibility:

The police department and its personnel has been a constant victim of the traditional negative perceptions about them fabricated so carelessly by the film industry, activists and writers. Adding to that, stray incidents of police violence and brutality have led to loss of credibility for the entire department and its personnel who had worked tirelessly for the wellbeing of the society at large. Horrific and unjustifiable acts of police violence like the alleged custodial torture and death of father son duo in sathankulam village in thoothukudi district of Tamilnadu is a case in point.

8) Psychological Impact:

Policing has always been a multifarious job with high demanding tasks and duties. But the duties of the police imposed post lockdown are unpredictable, most demanding and often in the realm of the unknown. There is hardly any field of human activity wherein the policemen and women

are not called upon and expected to intervene, whether it is managing the colossal migrant labour population, or aggressive mobs pelting stones and threatening men and women in uniform and other health workers. All these factors along with the constant fear of uncertainty in the air they breathe, hands they shake potentially becoming a lethal source of infection has caused insidious psychological impact on the police force.

9) Uptick in Domestic Violence:

The period of lockdown saw a worrying surge in domestic violence cases even though there was an overall drop in crime rates. There are two major factors for this surge. Firstly, most men are forced to be at home, either without work or in fear of losing their jobs which in turn causes anxiety and depression among them. Data world over demonstrates that there is a direct relationship between domestic violence unemployment. These fear and insecurity of men cause tension at home and unfortunately, women become the victims of this tension. Secondly, the non availability of alcohol during the lockdown period caused frustration among those men who are habituated to drinking daily. The hands of health workers are full in dealing with the pandemic leaving the victims of domestic violence with little help. This demonstrates the fact that epidemics leave women and girls more vulnerable to violence.

10) Rise in cybercrime:

Another new trend observed after the outbreak of pandemic is the trend of rising cybercrimes. New portals have been launched to get people to donate money for the cause of combating COVID-19. Misusing this opportunity many well constructed but fake and fraudulent sites have been designed to cheat large number of people.

Steps Taken To Address The Challenges:

1) New working hours:

The police department has drafted new flexible working hours for the lockdown period. Instead of the usual day-long slogging at police stations or on roads for most of the officers and men, the new schedule allows officers and men to work only eight hours, that too in two shifts. The personnel belonging to early morning shift work between 6 am to 10 am and the second shift begins from 10 am and ends at 2 pm. Personnel belonging to the early morning shift report for duty again at 2 pm to work till 6 pm and the personnel belonging to second shift report for work at 6 pm to work till 10 pm.

2) Job Rotation:

The police department has ensured that its personnel are given rest for a week on rotational basis as part of keeping them in quarantine as a precautionary measure to protect them as well as their family members. These changes in the department's working pattern are possible since the police do not have court duties, investigation or petition hearing due to lockdown scenario in the country.

3) Deputation:

The shortages in manpower have been tackled to a certain extent by identifying sensitive areas that require additional force to enforce lockdown and other low risk areas where some skeletal staffs are sufficient. The officers of various low key departments have been deputed to law and order department to enforce lockdown and ensure public order.

4) Awareness Programmes:

The police force took upon itself the responsibility of creating awareness among people to remain indoors, maintain social distancing etc. Police stations and checkpoints became sites for public health campaigns. Posters, banners, and street plays have been used to communicate the importance of social distancing and hand-washing. They also skillfully used social media to disseminate all relevant information to a majority of the population, both in urban and rural areas.

5) Social Service:

The police personnel went beyond their traditional call of duty by supplying vegetables and groceries to people in containment zones and arranging food and transport for migrant labourers on the move. They have also protected healthcare workers, catered to patients, elderly, migratory students, hospital paramedical staff and all government officers on duty. They also organized health checkup for its personnel and also in containment zones with the help of healthcare workers risking their own safety for the overall benefit of the society.

Findings

1) Attention to Disaster Management:

The first and the foremost lesson taught by pandemic is that the Indian police department needs to appreciate and better understand its role as the first responder during emergencies and consciously adopt disaster management strategies including disaster risk reduction activities as one of its primary functions. Developing a bottom up approach by developing ground level capacity of the police and its associate organizations like fire safety authorities are crucial to their functioning as the first responder.

2) Development of Soft skills:

The traditional police training focuses disproportionately on public order with a heavy emphasis on hard skills like weapon use, crime control, combat skills and crowd-control drills. But policing during the pandemic has underscored the need for various soft skills like dealing with people through effective communication and coordination. Police training should also include a component on medical emergencies and there is a need to prepare Standard Operating Procedures that will educate all policepersons in the country for any future public health crises.

3) Importance to Community Policing:

The pandemic forced the return of migrants on a large scale to rural areas of the country stretching the already thin police force to its maximum limit. This precarious situation saw people take the role of policing upon themselves and they did well as they saw themselves as part of the solution. This model of community policing should be promoted for normal times so as to utilize these practices for mitigating communal tensions, in dealing with left-wing extremism and urban policing. It's time to integrate community policing into the police's organizational ethos and training academies should devote more time to this subject.

4) Need for clear and effective communication:

There is an urgent need for clear and effective communication with the citizens, as a way to promote trust and counter fear and the spread of fake news. Various examples from across the country during the lockdown period highlighted that in places where the police had a good relationship with the community, many instances of solidarity and trust was visible. This was down to clear and effective communication between police and the public. There is also a need for clear communication and compassionate equations between senior police officers and their subordinates which goes a long way in motivating policemen effectively.

5) Importance of Technology:

The pandemic and the subsequent increase in cybercrimes have highlighted the importance of technology in protecting the people from anti social elements in the society. It has also highlighted its importance in improving the efficiency, transparency and accountability levels of police personnel.

Conclusion:

Among all the corona warriors, the most visible, yet most underappreciated, are the humble policemen. Despite limited resources and a risk to life, India's police agencies have risen to the challenge posed by the pandemic and without them, achieving the primary objective of the lockdown i.e. restricting the outbreak would have been impossible. Policemen need to be commended for their hard work and restraint, instead of being chastised due to indiscretion of a few as they have taken enormous risks during the lockdown to ensure strict observance of guidelines, including physical distancing, which in India is among the most difficult rules to enforce. The policewomen have been second to none for enduring the long and difficult hours of duty, and facing stressful and unprecedented pressures and demands. Finally the police leadership must be congratulated for leading from the front and exposing themselves to all the hazards as frontline warriors to ensure the wellbeing of the public.

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