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The Police in India

Akshay Mangla and Vineet Kapoor

Introduction

India's police are entrusted with maintaining public order and enforcing the law. From recording citizen complaints to investigating crimes, the police are essential to internal security and the criminal justice system. A classic example of street-level bureaucracy, police work involves a multitude of complex tasks that call for fine-grained judgement. Police agencies interact frequently with citizens, and officers are required to exercise discretion when handling cases.[1] Other street-level bureaucrats—such as schoolteachers, medical workers, or welfare officers—also must exercise discretion, but the police are distinct because they hold coercive authority and the mandate to enforce rules on society. They patrol and intervene across geographies and aspects of social life where citizens may not seek their presence. And, in the course of their everyday work, police must interpret laws that are often ambiguous and whose implementation may foster social conflict. As political scientist James Q. Wilson observed, 'These activities create special problems of administration, for they require the organization to deal with conflict over the meaning and importance of the law, the definition of "public order," and the trade-off between protecting individual rights and protecting the community.'[2] How police agencies negotiate these tensions can have material consequences for security provision, social welfare, and citizen trust in the state.[3]

This chapter presents an analytical appraisal of India's state police agencies and their relevance for India's internal security. In a large, multiethnic democracy such as India, with high rates of poverty and social inequality, the police occupy an essential role in the provision of security and crime control, as well as social welfare more broadly. How well are

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the police equipped to carry out their multiple mandates? What are the organizational capabilities, constraints, and cultures that shape how the police perform their core functions? These are the major questions animating this chapter. In it, we combine a macro-institutional view of the police force in India—its organizational structure and operations—with a micro-level understanding of police work from the perspective of frontline officers. We offer insights from the extensive literature on policing, along with administrative data and reports from government and non-governmental agencies. We also draw on extensive field research carried out in the state of Madhya Pradesh, where one of the authors currently serves in the state police,[4] to supplement the analysis with empirical materials. These include an original survey of 1,961 police officers, conducted in two rounds (2018 and 2020), which sheds light on officer perceptions and behaviours, as well as qualitative field research in three districts of Madhya Pradesh, including participant observation in eight police stations and two police training academies, and interviews of 46 police officers.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, this chapter explores the organizational mandate and objectives of state police forces in India by tracing the agency's evolution from the colonial era to the post-independence period. Then, it examines the formal administrative design and procedures of the police, emphasizing the importance of organizational hierarchy. The next section discusses police administrative capacity, including human resources and physical infrastructure. Following that, it explores the informal culture and norms inside police agencies, which shape officer behaviour. Finally, the chapter analyses police performance in light of police organizational culture and resource constraints, including the policy implications of police reform proposals, before offering some concluding remarks.

Institutional Origins and Purpose of the Indian Police

The Constitution of India and various legal statutes set out the institutional objectives of the Indian police. These include law enforcement, crime control, and the maintenance of public order. However, much of

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what police agencies actually do goes beyond their traditional remit. From hearing citizen complaints, to adjudicating civil disputes, to extending humanitarian support, the Indian police have a diverse mandate and set of responsibilities.

The 1857 Mutiny and subsequent rebellions set the stage for the creation of a uniform administrative system of policing throughout India. The Government of India Act of 1858 transferred authority from the East India Company to the British colonial government. The chief objectives of the British Raj were to collect revenues and preserve public order in the service of the crown's economic exploits.[5] To meet these purposes, the colonial government introduced a system of policing, which gradually evolved as political conditions changed in the lead-up to independence.[6] The Madras Police Act of 1859 formalized the structure of a partly civil and partly military police organization, which formed the basis for police agencies across India.[7]

Shortly after the British Raj assumed control of India, reforms that had long been under discussion were inscribed in legislation, including the Code of Civil Procedure (1859), the Indian Penal Code (1860), the Code of Criminal Procedure (1861), and the Indian Evidence Act (1872). A police commission appointed in 1860 recommended sweeping institutional changes, including the elimination of military police. The resulting Police Act of 1861 established a civil police force overseen by provincial governments. At the local level, the district superintendent of police was made subservient to the district magistrate, the highest-ranking civil servant in the local bureaucracy.[8] These laws and structures formed the foundation of India's criminal justice system, and they continue to guide the police today. Colonial-era policing laws have garnered much criticism from civil society actors and political leadership. In response, legislators at the national and state levels have recently pressed for amendments that aim to better meet the contemporary demands of policing in a democracy.[9] At the time of writing, the fate of these proposed changes is uncertain.

Although the 1861 Police Act created a civil police force, the military police were never eliminated. Instead, the Raj drew a clear line between civil police units posted in police station houses (*thanas*) and the armed reserve police based in barracks. The latter retained its military character and were mainly summoned to quash communal disturbances or other

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threats to public order. Authority over rural policing was wrested away from landlords (*zamindars*) who traditionally policed the countryside through local headmen (*mukhias*) and watchmen (*chowkidars*) who resided in villages. Beginning with the 1870 Chowkidari Act, the duties of village police were reduced, as was the authority of village governments (*panchayats*) over policing functions. This centralization of authority in the hands of provincial governments enabled colonial authorities to maintain their top-down administrative control of the police. At the top of the hierarchy sat the Indian Imperial Police, the colonial predecessor to the Indian Police Service (IPS). To maintain British control over the force, posts within the Indian Imperial Police were closed to Indians until 1920.

India's colonial policing structure followed the Irish model, which emphasized accountability to rulers rather than local communities, the separation of the police from the civilian population, and the use of paramilitary arrangements to suppress peasant rebellions.[10] The civil police maintained separate police stations and living quarters from the public to help ensure that they would be responsive to state directives. According to criminal justice professor Arvind Verma and former IPS officer K.S. Subramanian, 'The structure stipulated clearly that there was no necessity for involvement of the community in anyway in the policing function.'[11] When criticisms of police malpractice reached the colonial leadership, Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, formed a police commission in 1902 to address the problem. The commission identified multiple defects such as substandard training, the use of oppressive tactics, and low public confidence in the police. Nonetheless, the commission endorsed the organizational principles set forth by the 1861 Police Act, which stressed centralized control and a militaristic hierarchy.[12]

The struggle for representative government, led by the Indian National Congress, drew mass support as disaffection with colonial rule grew during World War I. The police were summoned to curtail assemblies and crowds, employ force against rioters, and, together with municipal authorities, enforce licences for public meetings and processions. In addition to the civil police force, the armed reserve forces were frequently called upon to disperse crowds and maintain public order. In practical terms, this meant heavy-handed enforcement of rules to control public space, an orientation that persisted after independence. Less priority was

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afforded to investigating crimes and addressing the security needs of ordinary citizens.

Following independence, the overall organizational structure of the police remained unchanged, with its militaristic hierarchy and centralized command structure. But with the introduction of democracy in India, the mandate and operational modalities of policing underwent important changes. The police became implicated in the process of democratization and development.[13] For instance, their role in maintaining India's electoral democracy is evident. Indian police agencies help administer large-scale political events, including the world's largest elections, which are widely seen as being fair and credible in their execution. The management of collective violence is no small feat given India's diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious social fabric.[14] Equally important, though, is the routine task of managing everyday, small-scale social conflict, a critical function of the police.

Indian democracy and the constitution also set important limits on the police's use of coercion in maintaining internal security. Police authority does not go unchallenged by society.[15] Agencies face pressure to demonstrate legitimacy in the eyes of the public, adding to their multiple mandates. The police are expected to perform social service functions and discharge other essential duties, such as disaster relief, that put them in regular contact with the general public. These facts, inextricably linked to internal security provision within a diverse social and political ecosystem, makes policing complex and greatly complicates the study of police organization and performance in India.

Formal Administrative Design of the Police

India's police are subject to the country's federal structure and the separation of powers between the central and state governments. According to the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India, policing and public order fall within the mandate of state governments. State police forces report to their Home Departments, which oversee crime control, prosecution, prison administration, and other internal security functions. The duty to manage internal security is shared with the central government's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The MHA maintains a separate set of

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police forces and specialized branches, including investigative agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation and intelligence entities such as the Intelligence Bureau.[16] The central government also has authority over police training and technical assistance for crime investigation, and it leads coordination among states during intelligence operations. Various central bodies, created under the MHA, work alongside state governments, such as the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD), an apex body on policy and planning that supports police training and modernization. The MHA also oversees the recruitment, training, and employment conditions of officers in the IPS.

India's state police forces have a common administrative structure, with well-defined hierarchies, rules, and procedures that emphasize organizational coherence and chain of command.[17] Figure 11.1 illustrates the different organizational ranks in state police forces as well as the percentage distribution of police personnel within each category. At the top is an elite corps of gazetted IPS officers, who are nationally recruited on the basis of a highly competititve examination to serve in senior executive and managerial posts. The director general of police, the highest-ranking officer, oversees police activities throughout a state. The director general is supported by special directors general of police and additional directors general of police, followed by inspectors general, deputy

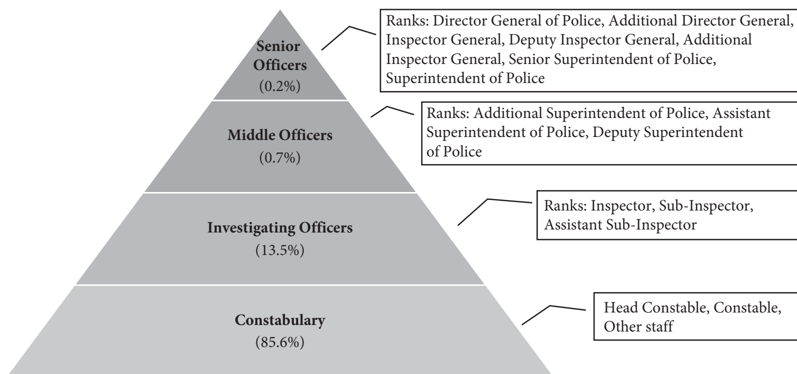

Figure 11.1 Police Officer Ranks and Percentage Distribution of Personnel in India

Source: Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD), Government of India (2018). Data indicate the percentage of actual police personnel strength within each rank.

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inspectors general, and, lastly, superintendents of police, who oversee police districts. Functional responsibilities are allocated to different police branches, such as administration, training, crime, narcotics, traffic, cybercrime, intelligence, and crimes against women. Police branches are led by special directors general and additional directors general, while inspectors general and deputy inspectors general head sub-departments and oversee day-to-day branch operations.

Police authorities are organized into geographic jurisdictions within each state, including zones, ranges, and districts. Police zones are large jurisdictions overseen by an inspector general. Zones comprise multiple police ranges, which are overseen by deputy inspectors general. In turn, ranges are made up of multiple districts. Policing at the district level is managed by superintendents of police. For example, the state of Madhya Pradesh is divided into 11 zones, 15 ranges, and 52 districts. Each district has a team of gazetted officers from the State Police Services, including additional superintendents of police and deputy superintendents of police. Officers occupying these middle ranks assist the superintendent's office, overseeing assigned subdivisions of their districts and supporting the operations of functional branches at the local level. Likewise, each police station is assigned a geographic catchment area, over which it holds jurisdiction. The police station may be supported by multiple substations or outposts (*chowkis*), from which police staff conduct beats, monitor crime, and perform other field duties.

The subordinate ranks of the police consist of non-gazetted officers, recruited at either the state or district level. These ranks include inspector, sub-inspector, assistant sub-inspector, head constable, and constable. Officers at this level normally hold field postings at police stations, though they can also be assigned to support the district superintendent of police. There are important differences in the mandate, functions, and authorities vested in different subordinate officer ranks. The police station chief, known as the station house officer, is an inspector or sub-inspector who is responsible for managing the station's catchment area. Likewise, the authority to investigate crimes and file charge-sheets (*challan*) against accused parties is held by inspectors and sub-inspectors, which make up 14 per cent of the force. Constables and head constables are authorized to collect information from the public, conduct surveillance, guard vital installations, and perform other law-and-order duties, but they do

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not have the power to investigate crimes (except for certain minor offenses).[18] The constabulary constitutes the vast majority (87 per cent) of police personnel.

In addition to the officer ranks, technical and other support staff are assigned to police stations, districts, and branch offices. Each district also has its own police line, a reserve that includes a store of resources (such as uniforms, vehicles, communication equipment, and ammunitions) as well as personnel. Police lines are headed by a reserve inspector, who oversees the supply of equipment and extra personnel and assists the district superintendent with resources as needed.

Officers in the State Police Service occupy the middle-management tier of the police hierarchy. These officers spend most of their careers in the field supervising subdivisions, or clusters of stations known as circles. They are a chief conduit of information and managerial oversight between senior ranks and police stations. At the top of the hierarchy, IPS officers occupy the senior ranks. Altogether, the middle and senior ranks account for less than 1 per cent of the force's personnel. India has around 4,000 IPS officers in all, more than 10 per cent of whom are normally on deputation with the central government at a given time.

Administrative hierarchy and authority divisions are designed to facilitate a uniformity of purpose and adherence to chain of command within the police. The top-down command structure—from police headquarters on down to the district and station level—enables large-scale coordination. The capacity to coordinate is critical for maintaining law and order in Indian states, many of which are as populous as a large country. Further, it enables the police to manage mass events, such as religious festivals, pilgrimages, public demonstrations, and protests, which happen regularly in India. But the top-down command structure presents disadvantages as well. It places outsized authority in the hands of a small set of IPS officers. Subordinates have little opportunity to participate in organizational decisions. Bottom-up communication and information-sharing across hierarchical ranks and divisions can also be negatively impacted.

State police forces in India are also subject to a dual command structure, in which the state government and civilian bureaucracy both hold authority over the police. The office of the director general of police reports to the MHA, which is overseen by the home secretary, a civil servant belonging to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Similarly, at the district level, the superintendent of police operates under the district

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magistrate (also an IAS officer). This system of dual control, stipulated in Sections 3 and 4 of the 1861 Police Act, provides for a clear separation of powers. While the superintendent directs the police, the district magistrate oversees judicial processes, which include issuing licences and arrest warrants. An exception to dual control is the commissionerate system used by some states, such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, a governance structure established for policing larger cities (those with populations above 1 million) and densely populated districts. The commissionerate system creates a uniform command structure under a commissioner of police, who holds complete executive authority.

There is a long-standing debate over the efficacy of dual control. Some view it as a hangover from colonial governance that enables bureaucratic interference while weakening the autonomous command structure of the police.[19] On the other hand, dual control may facilitate shared responsibility between the police and civilian bureaucracy, as well as inter-agency coordination. In the case of law-and-order management, for example, dual control encourages the superintendent and district magistrate to better coordinate their efforts.

Broadly speaking, police recruitment in India has four entry points: IPS officer, deputy superintendent of police, sub-inspector, and constable.[20] As one goes down the hierarchy, the rigour and professional oversight of selection declines. IPS recruitment takes place nationally under the aegis of the Union Public Service Commission. As with other all-India services, IPS candidates are required to have graduated from university and must pass an exceptionally rigorous, merit-based selection process involving national civil service examinations and interviews. Entry at the IPS level is extremely selective, with 150-200 candidates succeeding annually in recent years out of a pool of approximately one million applicants. The remaining three entry points into the police are overseen by state governments and the requirements vary somewhat depending on the state. Deputy superintendents are recruited into State Police Services, which have stringent requirements and meritocratic processes. Candidates must have graduated from university and are required to complete written examinations before being interviewed by the State Public Service Commission. Sub-inspector recruitment also occurs at the state level and is overseen by the state examination board. Eligibility requirements vary, but most states require candidates to hold a university degree and pass through a meritocratic assessment based on physical and

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written tests and interviews. Recruitment processes for constables are more uneven across states. Constables are typically selected at the district level through a selection board headed by the district superintendent. Most states require candidates to be at least 18 years old and to have completed grade 12, though some states only require completion of grade 10. Candidates must meet minimum physical requirements (such as height) and undergo physical and written examinations. The recruitment of constables is often alleged to be subject to manipulation and bribery.[21] Most states have adopted regulations to improve the integrity and transparency of recruitment processes, though implementation is uneven. Despite these issues, the recruitment of constables and other ranks is highly selective, with hundreds of thousands of applicants vying for a few hundred vacancies every year. Alongside the pecuniary benefits of government employment, the high demand for these posts also reflects the social status and recognition conferred on police officers.

Promotions within the police are nominally based on a combination of seniority and service performance. In reality, however, opportunities for promotion are scarce in the lower levels of the hierarchy, and upward mobility is limited. Constables normally expect to receive one promotion (to head constable) in their career, which takes 10 to 15 years. Few become investigating officers. IPS officers have considerably more opportunities for promotion, given the multiple ranks and charges available to them. Most IPS officers serve as district superintendents for five years before moving to higher-level post, often away from direct contact with the field.

Administrative Capacity: Police Infrastructure and Human Resources

Police work is personnel intensive, requiring officers to maintain a public presence and interact frequently with citizens. Yet India's state police forces suffer from significant shortfalls in staff. According to official sources, India has a police-to-population ratio (PPR) of 1.58 police officers per thousand people—on the low end even for a developing country.[22] That official PPR figure includes the State Armed Reserve Forces, a reserve contingent that is not posted in police stations, and as

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such, does not perform regular policing duties. Removing them from the tally, India's effective PPR is even lower—1.2 officers per thousand people. But this number too is somewhat misleading, because it includes the District Armed Reserve, a contingent that is typically summoned by the district superintendent to help maintain law and order, guard high-profile people, or take on other assignments that require a large force presence.

Against a low national average, there is some regional variation in the PPR across India. The more populous, northern states—including Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—have significantly lower PPRs in comparison to the rest of India. States with hilly terrain tend to have higher PPRs, particularly Jammu and Kashmir and the north-eastern states. Many of these territories are beset by insurgencies, separatist movements, and porous international borders, and—as a result—armed reserve units account for more than half of their police forces.

Figures 11.2 and 11.3 show, respectively, how the PPR in India has changed over time and its variation across states.

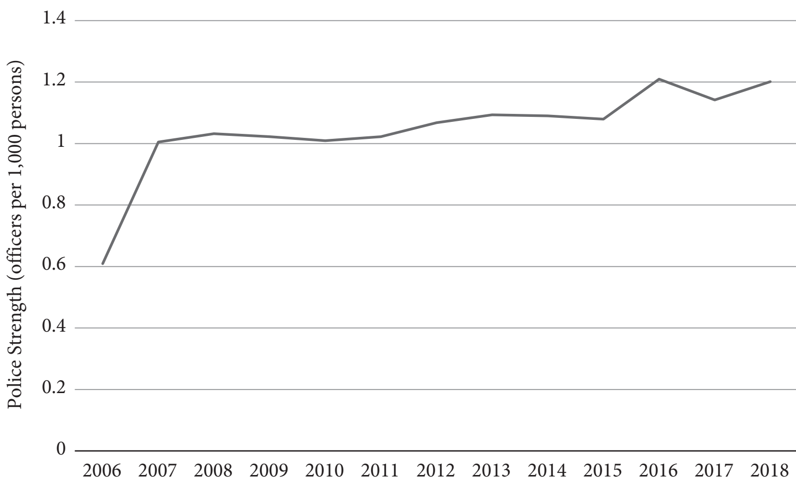

Figure 11.2 Police-to-Population Ratio in India (2007–18)

Source: BPRD, Government of India (multiple years); Population projections based on Census of India (2001; 2011).

Note: Calculated using the combined actual strength of the Civil Police force and District Armed Reserve.

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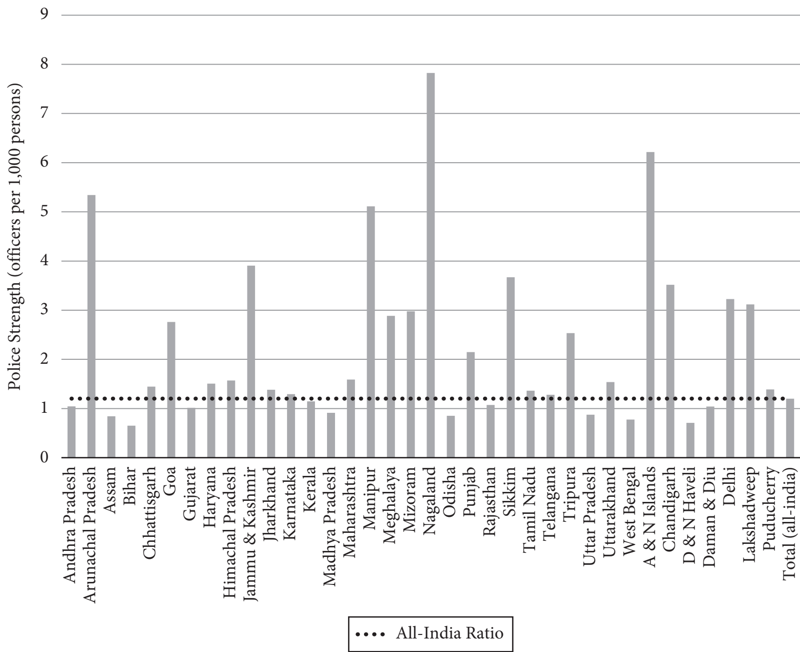

Figure 11.3 Police-to-Population Ratio across Indian States and Union Territories

Source: BPRD, Government of India (2018); Population projections based on Census of India (2011).

Note: Calculated using the combined actual strength of the Civil Police force and District Armed Reserve.

The personnel shortage is also evident in the police's vacancy rate. One-quarter of officially sanctioned posts are unfilled. Among constables, 20 per cent of sanctioned posts are vacant. For middle and senior officers, it is even higher—nearly 30 per cent.[23] Personnel shortfalls among investigating officers have a cascading impact on vital law enforcement duties, such as registering and investigating crimes, as well as important managerial functions like heading police stations and supervising subordinate officers.

The persistence of police vacancies presents a paradox given chronic personnel shortages and the large numbers of aspirants applying for such posts. One possible reason for the shortfall is that state governments may not have the fiscal resources to commit to so many permanent jobs. The

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cost of civilian police recruitment ultimately falls on the state exchequer, which must give final consent for expanding public employment. Additionally, some states exhibit a dearth of large-scale training capabilities, which can create bottleneckes for recruitment. The problem of vacancies may also be exacerbated by human resource policies. Among the police constabulary, a large proportion of constables get recruited into State Armed Reserve forces. These units typically act as a reserve force that operates on standby until called in for public order management and special operations (e.g, terrorist attacks and riots). They do not serve in police stations for routine law enforcement or assist with normal public-facing duties. Yet, the reserve forces consume a significant proportion of police posts, limiting the availability of officers to serve the public.

Along with aggregate shortfalls in staff, the recruitment of socially disadvantaged groups remains a challenge for India's police forces. State governments have approved the reservation of police posts for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes—three historically underrepresented groups. The allotted quotas differ widely across the states, partly as a consequence of their varying social demographics. With the notable exception of Karnataka, however, most states are far from meeting their official reservation quotas.[24]

The recruitment of women likewise merits attention. India's police forces are overwhelmingly comprised of men (Figure 11.4). The MHA has, on multiple occasions, issued advisories to state governments to increase women's recruitment. In 2013, the MHA stipulated that a quota of 33 per cent of posts be reserved for women, issuing guidelines that encouraged State Police Services to post female officers to police stations. Although many states have adopted these policy guidelines, only some have fully committed to to recruiting more women in line with quotas. Nevertheless, between 2004 and 2018, the overall number of women in the police more than quadrupled, from just under 40,000 to nearly 186,000. However, the proportion of women, while growing, remains low at just 9 per cent (Figure 11.5). There is a significant gap in instituting policies for the integration of women into the workplace and different job roles, limiting their career opportunities.[25] Even with greater female officer recruitment, the organizational culture of policing continues to be male-dominated, mirroring the patriarchal context in society more generally.

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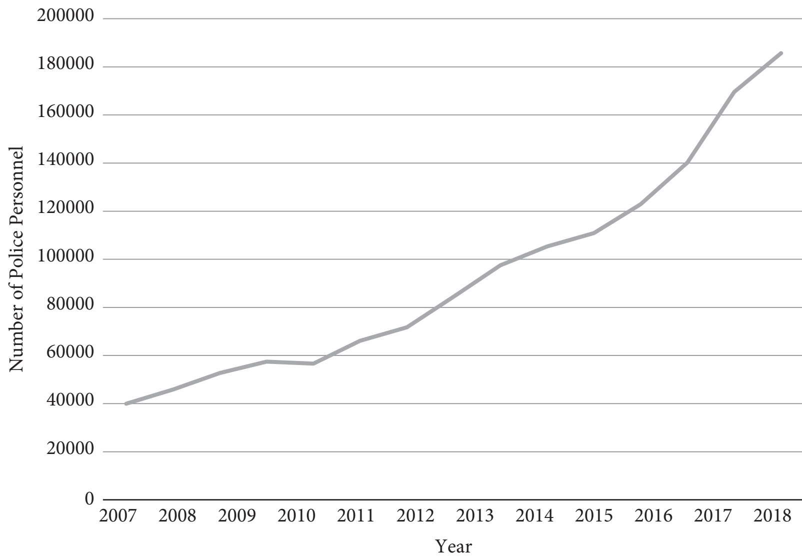

Figure 11.4 Number of Women in the Indian Police Force (2004–18)
Source: Data on Police Organizations in India, BPRD, Government of India (multiple years)

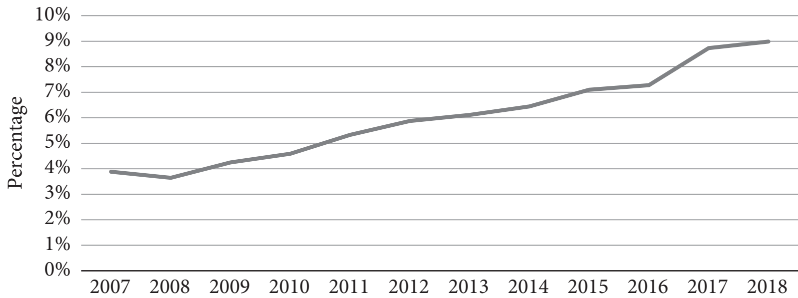

Figure 11.5 Proportion of Women in the Indian Police Force (2004–18)
Source: Data on Police Organizations in India, BPRD, Government of India (multiple years)

The inadequate provisioning of personnel impacts the police's ability to perform key functions and deliver quality services to the public. Compensating for shortfalls in staff, police officers have long workdays and erratic working hours. They have no regular days off during the week and precious few holidays to spend with their families. Station house officers are particularly overworked. Table 11.1 illustrates how station staff

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Table 11.1 Time Use of Frontline Officers in Madhya Pradesh

Category of Activity	Number of hours spent on each activity in a typical workday	
	Station staff	**Station house officer**
Office / station-based work	4.9	5.0
Law and Order / Outside Duty	4.6	6.4
Travel	1.4	1.2
Crime investigation / Case work	1.2	1.1
Other miscellaneous work activities	0.7	1.3
Personal non-work activities (includes sleep)	11.2	9.0
Total work hours	**12.8**	**15**

Source: Police Officer Survey, Madhya Pradesh (2018); N = 1,941 officers.

and the station house officer spend their time, divided into six major categories, according to our survey of frontline officers.

Qualitative observations of police stations in Madhya Pradesh shed further light on the long hours that officers work, as well as the additional strains of inadequate staffing. On a typical day, most officers were observed reporting to the station for duty by 10:30 a.m., soon after which the morning roll call (*gadna*) took place. The head constable moharir, who works in consultation with the station house officer, assigned officers to their daily duties. Officer task assignments varied considerably depending on rank and responsibilities. For example, while many constables were placed on law-and-order duty, others were assigned to clerical work such as documentation or data entry. There was no fixed time for lunch; officers were observed eating at widely different times and locations. Evening roll call happened at approximately 6:00 p.m. Officers typically completed their duties and left for home by 11 p.m., having their dinner by midnight, just one indication of the immense strain the job poses on rank-and-file personnel.

The station house officer's hours were longer and even less predictable. After the morning roll call, the station house officer performed a series of administrative tasks, such as documenting case diaries for court, maintaining various station diaries and account books, liaising with senior officers, and giving guidance to sub-inspectors. After the evening

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roll call, the station house officer attended to cases reported to the station. He then typically left the station to patrol the catchment area, stopping at various outposts and beat checkpoints. Vehicle and alcohol checks, along with other law-and-order duties, made up the rest of the evening until midnight. Twice a week, the station house officer performed night duties, lasting from midnight until 5:00 a.m. These duties usually involved patrolling the catchment area or the police circle, an administrative area beyond the station. On more demanding days, there was little to no time for the station house officer to take proper rest.

Along with lengthy hours, the lack of personnel creates an uncertain and stressful work environment for officers.[26] Officers would get pulled into various tasks based on the immediate needs of the hour. If law-and-order duty called, they had to drop what they were doing at a moment's notice. When asked to escort politicians and other dignitaries, officers were required to spend long hours standing, often without food or water.

Field research verifies the deleterious effects of these excessively long workdays. In an open-ended survey question, frontline officers were asked to identify the worst aspects of police work. The most frequent responses mentioned having no days off, long hours on duty, and difficulty balancing work with family demands (Table 11.2). An understaffed and overworked police force is unlikely meet the everyday needs of citizens, with adverse effects on security provision. When officers are not available to hear citizen complaints or investigate crimes, it can diminish citizen expectations and deter them from reporting cases in the first place.

Poor human resource management is matched by inadequate physical infrastructure and equipment. State governments on average allocate 3 per cent of their annual budgets towards policing, of which the overwhelming majority (90 per cent) is spent on officer salaries and other

Table 11.2 Officer Perceptions on the Worst Aspects of Police Work

Officer Responses	Frequency of Response
'No day off'	54%
'Long working hours'	52 %
"Difficult to balance work with family demands"	33 %

Source: Police Officer Survey, Madhya Pradesh (2018); N = 1,941 officers.

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fixed costs. Funding for infrastructure, technology, equipment, and other capital investments is extremely limited. Official data and reports suggest that most of India's 16,833 police stations are well equipped with vehicles, telephones, and wireless devices.[27] However, available studies of police stations, including our research in Madhya Pradesh, paint a very different picture. The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a New Delhi–based research institute, surveyed police in 21 states about the availability of physical infrastructure in their police stations. Contrary to official claims, 12 per cent of the officers surveyed said that their police stations had no drinking water, 18 per cent reported having no clean toilets, and 14 per cent reported having no public seating area.[28]

To supplement state police budgets, the central government introduced the Modernization of State Police Forces (MPF) scheme in 1969. Administered by the MHA, the MPF scheme aims to improve policing infrastructure to meet emerging challenges. Earmarked funds are used to upgrade police stations and outposts, as well as to provide computers and communication equipment, modern weaponry, traffic-control equipment, and forensic laboratories.[29]

The MPF scheme also supports the adoption of India's Crime and Criminal Tracking Networks and System (CCTNS). Initiated a year after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, the CCTNS is an ambitious programme to enable real-time information sharing and coordination through a sophisticated digital interface that tracks crime, warrants, arrests, missing persons, and other security information. CCTNS has become widely used by police forces across India—by April 2021, 15 out of 28 states (plus the Union Territory of Delhi) had adopted nearly all aspects of the CCTNS database, infrastructure, and technical personnel. In Madhya Pradesh, 90 per cent of the 180 police stations we surveyed reported having functioning Internet, and constables were frequently busy with CCTNS data entry.

Despite these improvements in technology, however, the MPF scheme remains highly underutilized. Comptroller and Auditor General reports over a five-year period revealed that more than 50 per cent of MPF funds went unused in 13 of the 22 states studied.[30]

In qualitative interviews, officers reported the perennial difficulties they experienced at work as a result of scarce resources (Figure 11.6). Many reported using their own private vehicles for beat patrols and other

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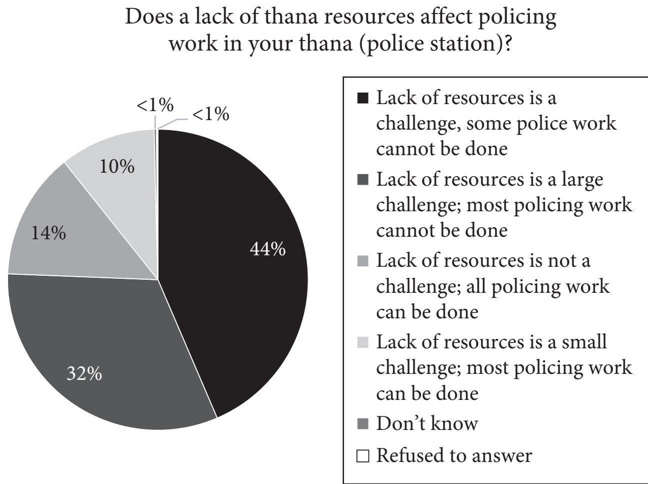

Figure 11.6 Officer Perceptions on the Impact of Resource Constraints on Police Work
Source: Police Officer Survey (2020), Madhya Pradesh

police work, while paying out of pocket for fuel expenses. Although officers can get reimbursed, many said that the reimbursement process was too lengthy and cumbersome to bother with. The inadequate availability of vehicles impeded critical tasks, such as investigating crimes or supporting victims in need of urgent medical attention. These observations were corroborated in the survey of frontline officers in Madhya Pradesh. When asked how the availability of resources impacted their work, more than three-quarters of officers reported that the lack of resources is a major challenge that restricts their ability to carry out some or all police work. Only 14 per cent of officers surveyed stated that resource provision was not a problem.

The Organizational Culture of Policing

The formal administrative structures and capacities of the Indian police exist alongside informal mechanisms of organizational culture—this includes the collective beliefs, norms, and values within an agency. Organizational culture conditions the behaviour of an agency's members

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in different ways.[31] Numerous studies show that norms in police agencies, what criminology professor Robert Reiner refers to as 'cop cultures', shape how officers understand their social environment, as well as their roles and responsibilities.[32] The organizational culture of police agencies is also closely connected to the occupational mandate of law enforcement. The potential use of force on the job makes police work unpredictable and dangerous.[33] According to Reiner, organizational culture provides officers with coping mechanisms, 'adaptive rules, recipes, rhetoric, and rites' for managing these daily tensions.[34] Police organizational culture may also help foster solidarity and the embrace of a common mission, while at the same time distancing the police organization from societal 'outsiders'.[35]

The culture of police agencies is hardly monolithic and may differ depending on the sociopolitical context. Police leadership and individual officers may respond in different ways to work-related tensions and uphold divergent priorities and styles of policing.[36] Frontline officers may experience diverse pressures at the local level and develop different subcultures in response to societal demands. The organizational norms of policing may vary across agencies, especially given the distinct political histories across Indian states.[37] Nevertheless, India's police agencies also share some common features, owing to the persistence of colonial institutional legacies of policing. Under the British Raj, the police were established to preserve order and stability rather than serve the public. As such, the police upheld a quasi-militaristic arrangement with highly centralized authority mechanisms and a culture that paid obeisance to hierarchy and status distinction between ranks.[38] A paternalistic orientation towards society encouraged officers to maintain their distance from ordinary citizens.[39] Likewise, social distance was preserved between officer cadres and the constables; the latter were deemed too close to society and therefore untrustworthy.

From the early stages of their careers, police officers are socialized into a highly stratified organizational hierarchy, which amplifies differences in social status and decision-making authority across ranks. Subordinates customarily salute senior officers and stand at attention until signalled to be at ease. Senior officers in the elite IPS corps receive heightened recognition, their superior status made palpable in organizational rituals and social practices. For example, senior officers have separate dining

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facilities and more generous housing allotments for their district field postings. During police training and other collective activities, senior officers normally take their meals separately and maintain minimal social interaction with subordinate officers.

At the other end of the organizational ranks, constables enjoy a lesser status within the police force. As criminology professor Beatrice Jauregui observes, squeezing labour out of constables while paying minimal attention to their welfare is an institutionally entrenched practice—one that reinforces the stark differences based on caste and socio-economic background.[40] Poor working conditions, inadequate housing, and the paucity of social welfare measures are material indicators of their lower status. Along with material differences, social distinctions between ranks are demarcated in duty assignments as well as mundane interactions and communication practices. Constables may be asked to serve as drivers and peons for senior officers; some get assigned to perform menial tasks unrelated to policing that go uncompensated, such as personal house cleaning and childcare.[41]

During our research in Madhya Pradesh, it was not uncommon to hear officers use the term 'constable' (*arakshak*) in a pejorative sense. Reflecting on her experience as a police trainee in Madhya Pradesh, a newly minted deputy superintendent of police remarked, 'The instructors here talk so roughly. It feels like we are some constables and not DSPs. They never give us any respect.'[42] Statements like these demonstrate that disrespecting constables is a normal, accepted practice within the police organization. Such behaviours expand the social distance between the elite senior officer corps and the subaltern rank-and-file officers, who typically have less formal education and lower socio-economic status. These status distinctions are salient among lower-ranked officers as well. The station house officer normally has a separate office with its own bathroom. Constables act as the station house officer's attendants, standing ready to fulfil their requests.

Related to the performance of hierarchy, the culture of police agencies in India puts a premium on discipline and compliance with orders and rules.[43] Officers are expected to arrive to duty sites punctually, irrespective of the time of day; failure to do so is taken as a sign of indiscipline. In our survey of police in Madhya Pradesh, frontline officers were asked to identify the three most important indicators of good police

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performance. Most officers (61 per cent) stated that 'arriving to work on time' came first, topping the list by a significant margin.

The importance ascribed to discipline and order is also evident from routine communication between officers and across organizational subdivisions of the police. Communication is a one-way street flowing from senior officers, who are empowered to give commands, to subordinates posted on the front lines, who are expected to obey commands. Subordinates rarely have the opportunity to express their thoughts. Pre-service training firmly establishes the norm of keeping silent, and any breach is perceived as a sign of poor discipline. Police academies have a formal curriculum on human rights, which in theory upholds freedom of thought and expression. However, this gets superseded by the informal, 'hidden curriculum', which restricts self-expression and discourages trainees from speaking, especially in the presence of senior officers.[44] These practices gain salience in officer field postings as well. In our field research, we observed the daily attendance and briefing sessions (*ganana*) held in police stations across multiple districts. Subordinate officers would line up and listen to the station house officer, who instructed them on the daily tasks requiring their immediate attention. At the end of the briefing, officers would be asked if they had any doubts—'Koi shaq?'—to which they were dutifully expected to reply, 'No, sir'.[45] In a similar vein, the sizable social distance between the IPS and front-line officers lends itself to gaps in communication and information exchange.[46]

Another feature of police organizational culture is the normalization of violence as a mode of policing. An institutional hangover from colonial policing, violence is commonly used to control society and extract confessions, particularly against poor citizens.[47] Police training, for example, affords more time to weapons and combat skills than conflict resolution or interpersonal skills.[48] The content of police training also departs from models of community policing, which encourage working partnerships between officers and the local populations they serve.[49] Police training is often haphazard and out of step with practical realities in the field. This is particularly the case for constables and other subordinate officers. After they receive mandatory pre-service training for 10 months, subordinate officers rarely receive any further structured training. By contrast, IPS officers are given high-quality professional training through the National

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Police Academy in Hyderabad. This includes various kinds of pre-service training as well as in-service courses delivered by professional experts.

Institutional Performance, Accountability, and Reform Proposals

To evaluate the police's performance requires one to first define the objectives and standards of policing, which itself raises fundamental normative and political questions. As professors Mark H. Moore and Anthony Braga suggest, 'One has to have an idea of the "good" or the "right" as it applies to police operations.'[50] One must also identify the stakeholders who get to define the objectives of the police, as well as processes for reaching collective judgements. Under a democracy, the purpose of policing (and public administration more generally) is ultimately for citizens and their elected representatives to decide.

Policing is conventionally associated with the maintenance of public order, law enforcement, and the prevention and control of crime. The last of these—crime management—receives heightened attention in performance evaluations, which often rely on indicators such as the crime rate, arrests made by the police, and the rate of prosecution. Yet criminologists and practitioners have questioned whether these performance indicators are useful or accurate.[51] Many crimes go unreported by citizens. The police may (or may not) register cases for strategic reasons, due to administrative incentives and political pressures to show a favourable crime rate. There are also various confounding factors, both socioeconomic and political, that impact criminal activity, making it difficult to draw causal inferences based on crime statistics.[52] These difficulties are likely compounded in India due to the inadequacy of data gathered through state police forces.[53] Further, it should be noted that police agencies engage in a multitude of other activities, such as patrolling neighbourhoods, resolving local disputes, facilitating traffic movement, and assisting citizens in distress.[54] These activities are complex, difficult to measure, and may not be readily tied to specific outcomes, even though the mode by which they are implemented matters to the public. As retired police officer David M. Gorby suggests, traditional performance measures tend to rely on a reactionary model of policing and fail to

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represent the bulk of officer behaviours, including broader public service functions.[55]

With these caveats in mind, it is worthwhile, nevertheless, to explore crime statistics and related indicators, since these data are regularly collected by the Indian government and shape the public discourse around policing and citizen safety. Tables 11.3 and 11.4 present official data on crime and the associated performance indicators for 2011 to 2020, based on the *Crime in India* reports published annually by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). The data are divided under two sets of criminal statutes, the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Special and Local Laws (SLL). After declining between 2011 and 2014, the overall crime rate increased to previous levels by 2020. IPC crimes took on a much larger share of overall crimes, driven largely by property-related offences. The large jump in IPC crimes between 2019 and 2020 reflects violations of the government's COVID-19 lockdown policies.

The police are required by law to hear citizen complaints and record cognizable offences in a first information report (FIR). In practice, however, the police exercise considerable discretion when choosing whether to record FIRs. They may dissuade citizens from filing the FIR or even

Table 11.3 Crime Incidence and Rate (2011–20)

Year	Crime Incidence			Crime Rate (per 100,000 pop.)			IPC crimes as a share of overall crimes (%)
	IPC	SLL	Total	IPC	SLL	Total	
2011	2,325,575	3,927,154	6,252,729	192.2	324.5	516.7	37.2
2012	2,387,188	3,654,371	6,041,559	196.7	301.2	497.9	39.5
2013	2,647,722	3,992,656	6,640,378	215.5	324.9	540.4	39.9
2014	2,851,563	1,720,100	4,571,663	229.2	138.3	367.5	62.4
2015	2,949,400	1,761,276	4,710,676	234.2	139.9	374.1	62.6
2016	2,975,711	1,855,804	4,831,515	233.6	145.7	379.3	61.6
2017	3,062,579	1,944,465	5,007,044	237.7	150.9	388.6	61.2
2018	3,132,954	1,941,680	5,074,634	236.7	146.7	383.5	61.7
2019	3,225,701	1,930,471	5,156,172	241.2	144.3	385.5	62.6
2020	4,254,356	2,346,929	6,601,285	314.3	173.4	487.8	64.4

Source: Crime in India Report (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019), NCRB, Government of India; Census of India (2011) and *Estimated Mid-Year Population*, Registrar General of India.

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Table 11.4 Charge-Sheeting and Cases Pending (2011–20)

Year	Share of criminal cases charge-sheeted (%)		Share of Criminal Cases Pending Police Action (%)	
	IPC	SLL	IPC	SLL
2011	78.8	93.4	27.2	6
2012	78.8	93.4	26.1	6.6
2013	79.5	94.3	27.2	6.7
2014	79.6	98.4	28	6
2015	77.7	98.1	28.4	6.5
2016	72.9	94.5	30.2	16.4
2017	70.7	92.8	29.1	18.7
2018	68.1	92.2	28.3	17.1
2019	67.2	93.3	29.3	18
2020	75.8	93.8	38.2	25.1

Source: Crime in India Report (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019), NCRB, Government of India

extract bribes.[56] These practices, which go against both official procedure and the law, likely result in the under-reporting of crimes.[57] After filing a FIR, the police are obligated to conduct an investigation, on the basis of which they produce a charge-sheet. As shown in Table 11.4, the share of cases that result in charge-sheeting has hovered between 68 and 78 per cent, meaning that more than one-fifth of cases each year result in no charges. In addition, a growing percentage of criminal cases lie pending each year, illustrating the uphill battle that aggrieved citizens (and accused parties) experience in seeking justice.

At the same time, it is important to situate police (in)action on criminal cases within the broader context of India's criminal justice system, which includes the prosecutor's office, judiciary, and penal system. As of 2021, India has a staggering 38.2 million cases pending in district courts and 5.8 million pending in high courts, adding almost 1 million cases annually over the past 15 years.[58] The backlog of court cases and long delays in judicial processes point to systemic weaknesses in the Indian justice system, of which the police are but one part.[59] Given these judicial pain points, in conjunction with the severe police personnel shortages, the

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Table 11.5 Crimes against Women in India (2011–20)

Year	Incidence of Crimes Against Women			Rate of Crimes Against Women (per 100,000 female pop.)		
	IPC	SLL	Total	IPC	SLL	Total
2011			228,650			39.0
2012			244,270			41.7
2013			309,546			52.2
2014			337,922			56.3
2015			327,394			53.9
2016	325,652	13,302	338,954	53.0	2.2	55.2
2017	315,215	44,634	359,849	50.7	7.2	57.9
2018	323,345	54,932	378,277	50.3	8.5	58.8
2019	343,177	62,684	405,861	52.8	9.6	62.4
2020	311,354	60,149	371,503	47.3	9.1	56.5

Source: Crime in India Report (2015, 2017, 2018, 2019), NCRB, Government of India; and Census of India (2011) and *Estimated Mid-Year Population*, Registrar General of India.

police are likely to ration their time and may give less attention to more complex cases that trigger a protracted legal process.

Handling crimes perpetrated against women is an important part of police work. Table 11.5 shows the growing incidence and rate of crimes against women in India. These figures, however, likely grossly underestimate the true extent of the problem. A comparison of women's responses to national household surveys in India with the NCRB register suggests that 99 per cent of sexual violence cases go unregistered.[60] To be clear, under-reporting gender-based violence is a global problem.[61] In India, patriarchal norms, social barriers, and low trust in the police all likely prevent women from reporting crimes.[62] Growing public scrutiny regarding crimes against women has compelled India's central and state governments to adopt reforms meant to improve police responsiveness to women. Parliament enacted the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, for the first time recognizing domestic violence—including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse—in law. The act also provided civil remedies for those affected by domestic violence and identified the police's role in helping aggrieved persons gain access to social services.

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State police forces have also adopted so-called Crimes Against Women cells, which oversee various gender-targeted initiatives. These include patrolling hot spots in police vehicles, establishing helplines for women, and forming all-women police stations (*mahila thanas*). The efficacy of these interventions demands careful study, and limited evidence available thus far points in multiple directions. A study based in Uttar Pradesh found that the introduction of all-women stations led to no improvement in crime registration, and may have even had the perverse effect of making it more difficult for women to file cases at regular stations.[63] Other research, conducted in Tamil Nadu, showed that all-women stations provided safe spaces where women felt more comfortable reporting cases and seeking resolution in family disputes, even if the stations were still less effective in registering crimes.[64] In Madhya Pradesh, the state govenment introduced the URJA program, an intervention that provided dedicated help desks for women's cases in police stations. A field-based study found that the UJRA women's help desk had a demonstrable impact on police registration of crimes against women, particularly when female officers were placed in charge of the desks.[65] In addition, police departments in several states have adopted quotas for the recruitment of women. Whether or not it improves the police's efficacy in handling crimes against women, improving gender representation within the police is a worthy objective itself. As noted earlier in the chapter, women account for less than 10 per cent of police personnel in India. Concerted efforts to recruit women will allow police agencies to draw from a wider talent pool and fill critical gaps in skills.

The ongoing struggle for women's security calls attention to how police agencies respond to structural inequalities in Indian society, which along with gender include caste, class, and religious differences. Although many state governments have introduced reforms to improve citizen access to justice, inequalities in police service delivery continue to surface, undermining public trust. These persistent inequalities have wider implications for citizen–state relations as well. Regular and systematic data on citizen perceptions of crime and police efficacy are unavailable at the national level. Nevertheless, surveys report low levels of public trust in the police, as well as an expectation that bribes are often necessary for police attention.[66] Low-income citizens in particular report experiencing heavy-handed police tactics.[67] Calls to enhance police responsiveness in

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India highlight the need to reform internal processes and reshape how officers interact with women, landless labourers, lower castes, and other vulnerable groups.[68] In this regard, greater investment in police training is urgently needed. The 1971 report of the Gore Committee on Police Training highlighted the need to emphasize the social context of discrimination in India and to focus police training on communication, conflict resolution, and other so-called 'soft skills'.[69] Subsequently, two high-level committees recommended substantial structural and training related reforms to improve the democratic orientation, service delivery focus, and professionalism in police practice. These recommendations were picked up by BPRD, which has provided guidelines and strategies to strengthen police practices through improved training methodologies. Yet, efforts to adopt these guidelines are uneven. Some states have been more active than others in addressing the gap in 'soft skills' training, adopting victim-centric approaches and developing specialized services for marginalized sections of society, most notably to tackle crimes against women and children.

In the past two decades, certain states and the national institutes have intiated training reforms to address gaps in soft skills, community orientation, human rights, and ethics training. However, the pace has been slow and piecemeal in most endeavours. More recently, the National Police Academy and some states (e.g., Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, among a few others) have conducted a training needs analysis to address these issues and incorporate citizen-centric approaches and soft skills training.[70] These efforts are supported by BPRD, which has a committee dedicated to supporting the systematic adoption of training needs analysis across states and curricular changes in police training.

Beyond officer training, the National Police Commission produced eight reports on police reform in the 1970s, as well as a draft Model Police Act. However, none of the major recommendations were implemented by India's central or state governments. Echoing the work of previous commissions, the Malimath Committee's 2000 report recommended strengthening crime investigation capacity and separating it from the police's law-and-order functions. In 2006, the Supreme Court of India ruled in *Prakash Singh v. Union of India* that the state needed to replace the 1861 Police Act with new legislation to improve police accountability.

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The court also issued seven legally binding directives, requiring the central and state governments to implement:

1. a State Security Commission to outline police performance criteria and shield officers from political interference;
2. a process of transparent, merit-based selection of the director general of police;
3. tenure (a minimum of two years) for superintendents of police, station house officers, and other operational posts;
4. the separation of crime investigation functions from law-and-order duties;
5. a Police Establishment Board to oversee transfers and promotions for field officers (below the rank of deputy superintendent);
6. a Police Complaints Authority to hear complaints against senior officers and address misconduct; and
7. a National Security Commission to oversee the selection of central police organization chiefs and to regularly review police effectiveness, capacity building, and personnel service conditions.

Likewise, the MHA drafted a Model Police Act in 2006, which aimed to improve police accountability and autonomy. A version of the act was subsequently adopted by several state legislatures, but core elements of the Supreme Court directives were diluted. In sum, numerous policy documents by the central and state governments have flagged the need for the police to incorporate good governance principles of transparency, accountability, and citizen responsiveness. However, their impact on day-to-day police practices is highly mixed and leaves vast scope for improvement.

Conclusion

An effective police force is a critical ingredient for citizen security in any functioning democracy.[71] This chapter has offered an appraisal of the Indian police's mandate and administrative capacity, along with its formal and informal organizational structures. It detailed the institutional barriers the police face to effective performance, particularly the

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lack of adequate personnel and resources, along with gaps in training and intra-organizational communications. It also outlined several proposals for police reform, many of which are promising.

India's incomplete efforts to fully implement police reforms points to underlying political and bureaucratic impediments. The political class in India has vested interests in maintaining control over public institutions, with potentially deleterious effects on overall governance and policy implementation. As the major coercive arm of the state, the police may be more vulnerable to such political meddling.[72] Politicians are often alleged to interfere in routine police work and encourage the selective implementation of the law, which provides them with a ready source of rents and political support. The growing criminalization of politicians in India likely makes matters worse, since the political and economic stakes for controlling the police are even higher.[73] Further, electoral strategies may foment social divisions and violence between groups, with the police being directed to turn a blind eye or even act as a co-conspirator.[74] A police force that operates independently and is responsive to citizen needs may pose a threat to politicians, their electoral strategies and networks. 'If there is one principle that unites Indian politicians,' Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav contend, 'it is that a competent, autonomous police force is a threat to their common interests'.[75] Notwithstanding these constraints, the Indian police also has a demonstrated capacity for securing the public interest, notably in the maintence of order, prevention of collective violence, and not least of all, the administration of large-scale elections. Indeed, the stability and overall functioning of democracy in India, while far from perfect, is remarkable in comparison to other postcolonial settings, and the police have played an important role in this regard.[76]

However, the police also exhibit acute deficiencies and there an in urgent need for improvement in areas such as crime investigation and the treatment of marginalized social groups. The culpability for these deficiencies does not entirely lie with political actors. The police have a role to play as well and there is an urgent need to bring the voices of officers into the reform process, including constables, subinspectors, and others who serve on the front lines. The senior brass of the police administration in India possesses immense authority and status, and it is well positioned to press for institutional changes. Therefore, top officials must also share some responsibility for deficiencies in reform. While senior officers

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have closely guarded their superior status and employment benefits, the welfare shortcomings and inhumane work conditions faced by constables and other front-line staff are on open display. Indian citizens and civil society have good reason to demand more responsive and accountable policing. Public pressure to address crimes against women is an instructive example of the possibilities for reforms to gain tangible shape. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic brought officers in closer contact with the public. Police officers expanded their roles in the realm of service provision, often taking personal risks to assist citizens in need. There are some early indications that police efforts during the pandemic were received favourably by some in the public.[77] By capitalizing on these developments, Indian policymakers may have an unparalleled opportunity to finally make police reform a reality.

Notes

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21, no. 2 (1998): 354–67.; The design of colonial policing in India was at odds with the prevailing approach of the Metropolitan Police in London, which aimed to work with local communities and build trust by responding to their needs.

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