

Letter from the Editor

AN AGENDA FOR POLICE REFORMS

Dear readers,

As many of you would know, Common Cause launched its second Status of Policing in India Report (SPIR) 2019 recently at the India International Centre in New Delhi. A brief presentation of the report was followed by a panel discussion on “Indian Police and the Rule of Law in Practice” with social activist Aruna Roy, former DGP Prakash Singh and human rights lawyer Vrinda Grover as the main speakers. The event was chaired by the retired Supreme Court judge, Justice Jasti Chelameswar who delivered the keynote address.

This issue of your journal is prepared especially for those of you who have interest in police reforms but who could not be present at the launch event. We summarise the findings of the SPIR 2019 and provide edited excerpts of the rich and animated discussion accompanying the launch. We hope the issue will be useful for Common Cause members and well-wishers across India whose support has been vital for the organisation’s police reforms programme continuing since the mid-nineties. In the past, Common Cause has engaged with governments and taken the lead in drafting the Model Police Act for the states of Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. It has also suggested ways to reform and modernise the force and to measure the impact of policing on the ground.

The SPIR series of studies is a continuation of that commitment. Both the SPIR 2018 and 2019 can be downloaded for free (from our website, commoncause.in) and you can also write to us if you need a printed copy, particularly for a library. Your valuable feedback is welcome.

Partnerships in Progress

The first SPIR study was launched in 2018 with the support of our philanthropic partners, the Lal Family Foundation and Tata Trusts whose consistent commitment has made the ambitious, nationwide studies possible. The SPIR 2018 was devoted to citizens’ trust and satisfaction in police and was India’s first study which combined performance with perceptions. It was conducted by Common Cause and its academic partners, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the Lokniti Network of scholars at universities and research institutions all across India. The SPIR 2019 is a study of police adequacy, attitudes and working conditions and it builds on the findings of the first report.

The idea behind bringing out a series of scientific and data-based studies on policing was to create a set of baseline documents on the state of policing and the rule of law in India. Studies like these perform three distinct functions: First, they quantify the citizens’ experiences with the criminal justice system in general and with the police in particular. Secondly, data-based studies show us how far we are from our own state’s objectives and point out to policy makers the areas where urgent action is required. Lastly, facts and figures help to fight prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in the society.

The Constitution of India – the source from which our statutes get their meaning and institutions and elected leaders derive their authority – defines in its Preamble the foundational principles of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. Together, these principles underpin a fair, harmonious and forward-looking state. But the clarity of objectives is not enough to secure the life, liberties and fundamental rights of all citizens. We need a fair and efficient criminal justice system to translate such a noble vision into reality.

And that is why we need the police to function not as the strong-arm of the rulers of the day but as a service to the people, enabling them to realise their full potential peacefully. The SPIR is an effort in that direction.

The objective of the series of studies is to make the police more efficient, humane and service-oriented. The analysis includes the community's contact with the police, their experiences and grievances, and the conditions under which an average police person works. Advanced democracies like the US, Canada, UK, Germany and France have been using surveys and data analysis to improve the functioning of their criminal justice systems for decades, mostly with the help of independent players like the civil society, think tanks or universities. Even there, crimes like domestic violence or racial attacks are under reported and surveys are needed for a clearer picture of the citizens' lived experiences and expectations.

Many Firsts in SPIR 2019

The SPIR 2019 presents, for the first time in India and South Asia, a combination of analyses of official data and the findings of an all India survey involving 21 states. The respondents were 12000 police personnel and around 11000 of their family members who were interviewed at their workplaces or inside their homes by a team of specially trained surveyors. The family members have been included to capture the stresses and vulnerabilities faced by police personnel in their line of duty.

The study covers the trying working conditions of police men and women, their infrastructure, capacities and resources for crime investigation, diversity in the forces and the attitude of police personnel towards the use of violence and torture to elicit confessions or to restore law and order. The survey was designed to draw out responses of police personnel about their daily routines, the larger society, and their capacities to fight crimes.

The study is designed to be a suitable tool for advocacy and reforms. It points out the need gaps in crucial areas of policing where immediate policy changes are required. For instance, if the data tells us that the average workload on a female police officer is several times more than her male counterpart, and rising, it calls for more recruitment of women without losing time. Similarly, when the data tells us that only 6.4 percent police personnel got any in-service training at a time when policing is becoming more of a mental rather than physical exercise, it calls for a whole new level of training and technical capacities.

We also know that the real challenge, in a democracy, is to constantly train and sensitise our police personnel and build their capacities without compromising privacy and dignity of citizens and with minimum intrusion and illegal surveillance. We hope that the data presented in the SPIR will provide fresh insights to the police and political leaderships and will be useful for carrying out effective police reforms in India.

We at Common Cause treat the SPIR as a continuous process rather than as isolated reports. Work has already started on the third round of data collection to be released next year. The process of finalising the framework and the areas to be covered is currently on and we will keep you informed about the progress. Like always we will wait for your comments or suggestions, please write to us at commoncauseindia@gmail.com.

Vipul Mudgal
Editor